

RONALD GEORGE WREYFORD  
NORRISH

B.A., PH.D., SC.D., F.R.S.

NOBEL LAUREATE FOR CHEMISTRY 1967

Born 9 November 1897

Died 7 June 1978

There is a particular sense of sadness in writing of Professor Norrish's death for the Conference Issue of the Journal. Norrish would have so enjoyed our meeting, for both its social and its scientific content, and it is because of him, in any case, that so many outstanding chemists are meeting in Cambridge.

Eighty years ago, when Norrish was born, classical physics was beginning to receive the first blows to its ordered structure. Norrish devoted his scientific career to furthering the understanding of the way in which the new quantum mechanics and spectroscopy could explain how light affected chemical species. In so doing, he became one of the founders of our discipline, Photochemistry.

Ronald George Wreyford Norrish was born in Cambridge, educated at the Perse School, and won a scholarship to Emmanuel College, from there, in 1915. After war service (during which he was a prisoner of war in Germany) he took Firsts in both parts of the Natural Sciences Tripos, and then went on to research with (Sir Eric) Rideal. He was elected Research Fellow of Emmanuel College in 1925, and he was Senior Fellow of the college at his death. In 1926 he was appointed Humphrey Owen Jones lecturer in Physical Chemistry, and he succeeded Lowry as Professor of Physical Chemistry in 1937. He remained Head of the Department of Physical Chemistry until his retirement in 1965, and under his direction, the Cambridge school became world famous in gas kinetics and photochemistry. Norrish himself was an exceptionally skilled experimenter who believed in demonstrating points by simple, clear experiments carefully carried out. Although he avoided elaborate theoretical interpretations of his results, Norrish possessed a remarkable scientific intuition. He published more than 200 papers, over a period of fifty-odd years, and they have stood the test of time remarkably well.

Norrish's many honours included election to the Royal Society in 1936, and his scientific eminence was recognised

by the award of the Nobel Prize in 1967 (with Sir George Porter) for the work on flash photolysis. Norrish himself used to believe that the distinctions gained by his former collaborators and students were his best reward and testimonial : at least ten Professors in British Universities, and five Fellows of the Royal Society, are his one-time students.

The stature of Norrish the scientist must not obscure our appreciation of Norrish the man. Behind the superficially forbidding front - associated with his strong personality and his intense devotion to the Department - was a warm and human person of great generosity and kindness. He enjoyed meeting other people, particularly those from other countries or walks of life. These visitors, and his colleagues and students, were entertained with great liberality, frequently in his home in Park Terrace. On these occasions, Norrish would talk late at night of philosophical matters, with the "Fourth" Law of Thermodynamics making an appearance from time to time. He took a keen interest in the social life of his Department, and used to offer every encouragement to events such as the Laboratory Sports Days and Christmas parties.

Norrish married, in 1926, Anne Smith, by whom he had twin daughters. For over 40 years they lived in Park Terrace, overlooking Parker's Piece at the front, and the medieval walls of Emmanuel College at the back. Norrish was a man of immense energy, who worked hard and then relaxed hard and expected others to do the same. Life will be the poorer without him.

R. P. Wayne  
Oxford, July 1978