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## Reflections on my period as Head of Zoology 1985-1990

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### PREAMBLE

I was always planning to follow a career as a biologist, and early in my time at Manchester Grammar School it was to be in marine biology. But, in the sixth form, our biology teacher directed us to the 1959 Reith Lectures on the radio (and published in the now defunct *The Listener*) by Peter Medawar on “The Future of Man”. Medawar was an immunologist and shared the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine with MacFarlane Burnett in 1960. Marine biology was ditched for Immunology and, noting that Medawar was the Jodrell Professor in Zoology at University College London, I applied to UCL to study Zoology, and was fortunate to pass the entrance exam. Medawar left at the end of my first year to become the Director of the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) at Mill Hill, which is now the Francis Crick Institute. One of my teachers at UCL was Keith Vickerman who later became the Regius Professor of Zoology in Glasgow and, when I was appointed Head of Zoology in 1985, I took over from Keith. Fast forward after UCL and a PhD in Cambridge, I was given my first job at NIMR (the letter from Medawar offering me a job is a prized possession) in the Division of Parasitology, Head of the Division being Frank Hawking, Stephen Hawking’s father. Five years into my time at NIMR I was alerted (by Keith Vickerman) to the fact that there was a lectureship to be filled in Glasgow. I applied and was appointed in 1972 and joined the strong Parasitology group in the department. Colleagues down south, when I told them we were moving to Scotland, assumed we were moving to Edinburgh! No one of sound mind would move to Glasgow, whose reputation was based on the novel *No Mean City* by A. McArthur and H. Kingsley Long, and Billy Connolly.

I read in Haynes (2013) that John Graham Kerr, the first Regius Professor of Zoology from 1902 (the chair of Natural History being divided into chairs of Geology and Zoology) when the department inhabited the dark and damp basement below the Hunterian Museum, had agreed for his new building in 1914, but the Great War put a stop to all building. He was, we read, an exacting client who demanded minor faults in the finished building were rectified immediately. As a protozoologist myself it was of interest to read that the teaching of natural history had an emphasis on

microscope work, at a time when microscopes used natural daylight to illuminate the object of investigation: a good situation with available daylight for the main teaching laboratory was essential.

In the 1970s the parasitological strength in the department of Robert Bruce, Adrian Hopkins and Keith Vickerman, was added to by the recruitment of Derek Wakelin and myself, and later Graham Coombs and Anne Lackie. This led in the mid-1970s to the establishment of a new degree in Parasitology, which became and continues to be a very successful nursery of parasitological expertise in the U.K. and beyond. The teaching on this new degree was supplemented by parasitological colleagues in the Veterinary School and the department of Pathology. The appointment of David Crompton in 1985 to the newly established Graham Kerr Chair added to the parasitological strength of the department. In the middle 1980’s Derek Wakelin left for a chair in Nottingham and Adrian Hopkins retired which left the Wellcome Parasitology Laboratories vacant. The Wellcome Parasitology Laboratories at the Bearsden Garscube Campus were one of several outstations of the Zoology Department. Malcolm Kennedy and I were asked to relocate there from the Graham Kerr Building with our research groups. My research group never returned to the GKB.

During my time as Head of Zoology (1985-1990) and then as Dean of Science (1990-94), I had an office in the GKB. I cycled many miles between Garscube and Gilmorehill over those nine years. In 1994, the Life Sciences were “rationalised” with the formation of IBLS (the Institute of Biochemical and Life Sciences). The rationalisers thought it appropriate to remove the “parasitological” staff members, apart from the holders of the two appointed Chairs in the Zoology department, both parasitologists, into a new “department” of “Infection and Immunity” which also included the departments of Cell Biology and Microbiology. I was asked to become Head of Infection and Immunity in 1995 for five years. We were told to vacate the Wellcome Laboratories at Garscube and we transferred back to the main campus and were housed in the Joseph Black (Chemistry) Building. Later I and my group moved again into the Graham Davies Building. Why the appointed Chairs were not transferred into “Infection and Immunity” was never explained. This clarifies why I was only a “full time” resident of the GKB from 1972 to 1985, and from 1994 banished from the home where my heart was.

### THE FIRE

On Friday February 19th 1988 at about 9 p.m., I received a call from the University security office to tell me there was a fire in the Zoology Department Roof Laboratories and it was a serious fire. The alarm had been given by two nurses in the Western Infirmary, which is across from the GKB. I jumped into my car in Milngavie and I recall pulling in on Great Western Road, by Gartnavel Hospital, to allow fire engines pass, going to fight the

fire, and seeing from where I was stopped the flames reflected in the smoke billowing out into the sky above the department: a picture in my mind's eye which has lasted to this day. The fire destroyed the Roof Laboratory, and seriously affected ten adjacent offices and an Animal House. This extension had been built on the museum roof in 1966, with the animal suite added in 1969. Ten fire engines and 50 firemen took three hours to bring the fire under control. A total of 18 teachers, research students, postdoctoral workers and technical staff worked in the extension. Damage to fabric, furniture and equipment was in 1988 worth over £1 million. The laboratory was equipped mainly for physiological, behavioural and ecological research. Ironically the flat roof of the extension had leaked from when first built but two months before the fire, at some considerable expense, it had finally been made watertight!

Loss of data by academic staff and research workers was not as serious as was first feared. Two theses, at a late stage in their compilation were, by chance, in two of the offices which escaped the worst of the conflagration, suffering serious but not mortal damage from water and smoke. Everyone in the area lost something of value. The effectiveness of steel filing cabinets, providing the drawers were securely closed, in resisting heat and water was amply demonstrated. The flammable cupboards also showed their worth, with the contents found to be intact the following morning. More unexpectedly, the contents of two deep freezers were found still frozen on Saturday and some irreplaceable research material saved.

The animal suite, in spite of sharing the partition wall in which the electrical fault causing the fire is thought to have occurred, also escaped without the demise of a single fish or bird. A combination of the skill of the fireman and a steady wind blowing away from the animal suite, must have been contributory to this. It must have been touch and go at some stage because the cage labels were scorched and ceiling light fittings melted in two animal rooms. The Home Office inspector, Jon Richmond, who was responsible for the Zoology animal houses at the time, still recounts how amazed he was that no animal came to grief.

The fire was contained to the Roof Laboratory extension but its effects in the form of water damage extended into the Museum and the surrounding research and computer laboratories below on the ground floor. The water from ten fire engines pouring continuously onto the fire for three hours had to go somewhere, and this was downwards. A total catastrophe was averted by the speedy action of the firemen in rapidly covering irreplaceable exhibits, collections and equipment with plastic sheets in the museum below before the water deluged down from above. The Zoology section of the Hunterian Museum had been painstakingly refurbished over a ten-year period and had been "reopened" by David Attenborough just 22 months before the fire. Restoration of the Museum took over a year (the section on the Museum includes photographs of the fire

damage).

Members of the Zoology Department (as was!!) spent the weekend of the fire clearing and salvaging, and to good effect in that the undergraduate teaching was able to resume on time on the following Monday morning. The displaced colleagues were eventually temporarily rehoused in portacabins in the Physics car park. I asked Professor Pat Monaghan and Professor Neil Metcalfe, who are currently in the GKB and were also there in 1988, for their memories. Neil, a postdoctoral worker at the time, shared a Roof Laboratory office. Neil writes: "You phoned me that evening, telling me there was a fire, that my office was one of those affected, that there was no possibility of my doing anything that evening as the fire was not out, but that "I might like to come in in the morning" to retrieve what I could. I then spent a restless night wondering what I had lost. Early the next morning Pat and I found that virtually the entire department had turned out to help clear up. There was a real Blitz spirit. The first sight of my office was appalling – the roof completely missing, everything black and soaking – but then I realised that most of the black was soot, and that things on our desks were not actually burnt; if you peeled away the top, blackened pages then the underlying pages were readable, if soaking". In close-by offices the occupants were less fortunate with everything on desks, shelves and tables being burnt to a cinder. Neil commented on the value of the steel filing cabinets keeping their contents safe. Pat recalls that "Somebody organised a delivery of filled rolls for everybody and vegetarians were catered for. There was a real community feeling". I recall a number of Heads of Department across the university, and Aubrey Manning, Head of Zoology in Edinburgh, all contacting me and asking if there was anything they could do to help in our hour of need.

Recovery from the fire was protracted because of a combination of the GKB being a Grade 2 listed building and a lethargic Estates and Building Unit. The university's Finance Officer would calculate how much it had cost the university waiting for the Estates and Building team to arrive after the scheduled start time. The restored Roof Laboratories were formally reopened on June 29th, 1991.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Notwithstanding my research laboratories were located in the Graham Kerr Building only from 1972 to 1985, and prior to retirement I had an office there from 1972 to 1994, my heart has always been in "Zoology" as we used to call the GKB. The GKB has always had a "family" feeling amongst the occupants, and we looked out for each other. In my time as Head of Department that was amply evident in the response to the fire and afterwards. And since Dan Haydon allowed me a shared office in the GKB more than ten years ago, I see nothing has changed.

## REFERENCE

Haynes, N. (2013). *Building Knowledge: an Architectural History of the University of Glasgow*.

