

Visits of Overseas Speakers

Clem Robinson

Travel to and from Australia underwent a major change between 1960 and 1965 with the introduction of regular long-range jet passenger aircraft. Until 1960, air flights to Europe or USA were financially out of reach for most young scientists, postgraduate students and university staff, which meant that the usual means of travel was by ship. A trip to England and back by sea could take about eight weeks, four weeks going and four weeks coming back, a period of enforced scientific isolation in the absence of emails, mobile phones, and satellite communication. Such trips could not be undertaken on the spur of the moment, especially since bookings had usually to be made well in advance to ensure a berth.

The jet plane revolutionised overseas travel, but even so the cost of travel was a serious obstacle. Even as late as the 1970s, a return economy air ticket to Europe cost more than 10% of a university lecturer's annual salary (compared to less than 5% today), and subsidies from universities and granting bodies were few and far between. Because of these constraints, overseas trips were infrequent and when undertaken, were usually of rather long duration – in contrast to these days when the cost of living overseas comprises the main expense of travel.

When the Australian Biochemical Society first became involved in arranging for distinguished overseas speakers to attend its annual meetings, there were far fewer overseas speakers involved; a consequence of the mindset about the old days of expensive travel. I became involved with these arrangements as ABS Secretary in 1978, and over the following years became familiar with many of the problems associated with the arrangements needed for international visitors. In those days, the Society usually invited just three international visitors to its annual meeting. In addition to speaking at the meeting, the invited visitors were expected to visit as many of the different states as possible, and to deliver lectures at each venue. The Society paid these visitors a generous honorarium towards their fares and accommodation during their sojourn in Australia, but even so, they were faced with a gruelling trip of three weeks or more. Needless to say, all our invited speakers were well-known scientists, all of whom found it difficult to commit even three weeks from a busy scientific career. This fact alone was a cause of many difficulties.

For many years the Society had a special arrangement with the British Biochemical Society, initiated in 1966, under which that society generously provided an airfare for one of their members to travel to our annual meeting. This arrangement was complemented in 1979 with the establishment of a similar arrangement with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Biologische Chemie and preliminary negotiations were also commenced with the Japanese Biochemical Society for an annual Japanese visitor. At that time, members of the Society were invited to nominate overseas scientists to attend a meeting about two years in advance and Council undertook to select three nominees and to send out the official invitations.

Because the visitors were required to tour and lecture in the different states, either before or after the actual meeting, Council appointed an honorary Travel Officer to liaise with the State Representatives and arrange accommodation at each venue and an appropriate central location for each visitor's lecture. Geoffrey Kellerman set up the system and managed it for several years, later passing this on to Mick Gould. With three visitors travelling around the country over a period of five weeks, the ideal arrangement was for them to not to be in the same city at the same time, but this was not always easy to achieve, especially when visitors, themselves, were often keen to spend much of their three weeks visiting centres of biochemistry in Alice Springs and the Whitsundays. Then there were always the horror story about the visitor who pocketed his allowance and left a trail of unpaid hotel bills around the country for the Society to honour. Another visitor only realised that he needed a visa to enter Australia when he went to check in at the airport. You may add to these missing luggage, missed connections, cancelled overseas flights and in later years, a major airline pilots' strike.

In 1983 the British and German visiting schemes were withdrawn. Moreover, the situation changed to reflect the cheaper travel that was then available. Many more visitors were invited with little requirement for an extended tour around the country and a corresponding reduction on the Society's contribution to their expenses. The responsibility of inviting overseas visitors shifted from Council to the local organisers of the annual meetings. All these changes have been good.

What of the future? A number of possible situations come to mind. Yet another quantum-leap reduction in airfares (driven perhaps by a breakthrough in nuclear fusion, aircraft design, or a newer and better Richard Branson) could change our meetings even more by enabling many more overseas visitors to attend. Under such circumstances, the Society might even find it worthwhile to alter the time of our meetings to coincide with mid-winter in USA and Europe. Then the prospect of an international scientific meeting combined with a summer holiday in the antipodes might attract many overseas biochemists to attend without invitation, and thereby alter the financial basis of our meetings entirely. A more probable situation is that the inevitable rise in oil prices over the next 50 years will see a return to more expensive international travel and fewer, and better-subsidised, overseas visitors. Then again, the popularity of scientific meetings might wane and such meetings even cease altogether, as electronic communication and electronic (virtual) meetings become even more effective. Since much of the pleasure of attending a scientific meeting is gained from informal scientific discussion over a meal or a beer at the mixer, I hope that the last situation never comes about.

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THEN AND NOW

Recollections of Geoffrey Kellerman, first ABS honorary Travel Officer ~1965-1975:

"I was the contact for the Society with the overseas visitors, organising their itineraries, making sure they had hotel bookings and that someone was there to meet them at the airport. Everything was done to smooth their path so all they had to do was land in Australia. We used to begin about six or nine months ahead, as soon as we knew their names I used to start writing and organising various itineraries and finding out what interests they had apart from science and trying to organise that. I really was a travel agent. We got to the stage where we were using a telephone instead of letters as it was quicker – it cost a little more but who cared? I think the people who came out here enjoyed it because we had everything organised that was possible to fit in with what they wanted to do. I used to see each one of them at some stage and get feedback for the next year as to anything else they thought we might have done. It had the reward that I got to know them and I used to be able to visit them overseas as well. It was an important role because it meant that when people got an invitation to come to Australia from the ABS, the grapevine overseas said, 'Oh yes, they look after you'.

"Now, this system has ended. I feel that it's a terrible pity for someone to come all the way to Australia, sit in an aeroplane for 24 hours each way and see nothing but a room full of people talking about their specialty. But I think the pressure is such now that very few people feel that they can afford a month's holiday. They used to come out here for three weeks or so, visit each of the departments in the capital cities, give a local lecture there and give their major lecture at the conference. They'd talk to a lot of people and had a few days to see things here and there. But it was a long time off work. I don't think that the current pressure to perform and get your grants and those things will permit people to take those sorts of holiday. We wanted people in their 40s who were really leaders in their field, and those people can't afford to take more than five minutes off before somebody catches them.

"They were all interesting. Stanford Moore was one of the people I really enjoyed talking to, and Arthur Kornberg was a very pleasant man to get on with. They were all very good. The Germans were also interesting, there was Helmut Holtzer and Karl Decker both from Freiberg, I still see Decker when I go over to Germany.

"There were a couple of visitors who nearly died because they went out on a helicopter to Heron Island and the helicopter came down in the drink! But they were rescued. One was a Nobel Prize winner! It would have been a tragedy if anything had gone wrong.

"We had one man from Baghdad who worked in America, but he'd gone back to visit his family in Baghdad. I had to contact him but couldn't because the telephones were controlled so severely that there was just no way of getting on to him. So we didn't know what he was doing until he landed in Australia!"

"The people who came out here enjoyed it because we had everything organised that was possible to fit in with what they wanted to do"



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SUMMARY OF REFUSALS TO INVITATIONS BY ABS TO ATTEND ANNUAL MEETINGS

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| 1968 | Koshland | Could not spare three weeks in 1968 due to commitments. Agreed to come in 1969. |
| 1969 | Racker | Teaching commitments prevented acceptance. |
| | Cleland | No information in files. |
| | Gutfreund | Expressed interest in attending Adelaide "Enzyme" meeting but eventually commitments prevented attendance. Trentham came instead. |
| | Popjak | Invited both in 1968 and 1969. Arrangements through the Biochemical Society (U.K.) and ABS caused some friction with Popjak and he may have resented having to take his own application to the Royal Society for travel funds. |
| 1970 | Northcote | Refused on grounds of "family reasons". |
| | Porter | Commitments prevented his acceptance for 1970 but is here for 1971. |
| 1972 | Harris | Refused politely because of previous commitments. |
| | Yanofsky | Expressed a wish to visit Australia but could not do so in 1971 because of commitments. He may be willing to come for less than three weeks. |
| 1972 | Harris | Agreed to come if the fares of his wife and family were paid. Conditions unacceptable to ABS. |
| | Brenner | Blunt refusal; no reason given. |
| 1973 | Yanofsky | Always has commitments in the period April to June due to a lecture course in that quarter. Refused politely. |
| | Perutz | Regrets being unable to leave the lab for a "long period". |
| | Northcote | "Tried hard" to fix his arrangements in but could not. Took six months to make up his mind. |
| | Phillips | Becoming department chairman and can not leave. |
| | Pardee | Other commitments - hopes there will be another opportunity. |
| | Pastan | Too many commitments - hopes to be kept in mind for future meetings. |
| 1974 | Pastan | Cannot arrange to bring his family - would not at the moment like to go without them. |