REPORT

Papers of Sir John Robert Vane FRS (1927–2004)

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Sir John Vane’s papers were donated to the Royal Society by his widow, Lady Daphne Vane, in December 2007 and transferred to our archives through the courtesy of Roderick Flower FRS of the William Harvey Research Institute (WHRI). Vane (figure 1) founded the Research Institute, and the collection of his papers in part documents his work there. The archive is also significant in institutional terms because it was later complemented by the acquisition of papers of Professor Gustav Born FRS, a research professor at the WHRI. Professor Born is currently sorting his own papers in situ, ready for cataloguing by the archivists. However, organizational matters at the WHRI are not the only interest within the Vane papers, and a recently completed catalogue of them is now available to researchers via the Royal Society's website. This report will offer a brief overview of the life and work of Sir John Vane, as well as providing readers with a description of the contents of the collection.

SIR JOHN VANE FRS

Sir John Vane’s life was summarized in a biographical memoir by Sir Salvador Moncada FRS. Vane was born near Worcester in 1927 and educated at the University of Birmingham before going on to Oxford University, where he trained in pharmacology under (Joshua) Harold Burn FRS (1892–1981). Apart from two years (1953–55) at Yale University, Vane spent his career working in the UK, most notably at the Royal College of Surgeons (1955–73) and at the Wellcome Laboratories in Beckenham (1974–86). He founded the WHRI in 1987, where he remained, working there in an honorary capacity after his retirement (aged 70 years) in 1997. In addition to the WHRI, Vane, Erik Anggard and some of their colleagues founded Vanguard Medica. This company was set up in 1991 and specialized in picking up drug development projects that larger pharmaceutical companies were no longer pursuing.

During Vane’s time at the Royal College of Surgeons, he developed the blood-bathed superfusion bioassay technique. According to his biographical memoir this ‘could be regarded as one of his greatest scientific achievements’. He is also well known for his work on aspirin and prostaglandins, and is therefore credited with the ‘millions of lives saved each year by the use of daily low-dose aspirin to prevent heart attacks and strokes’. Vane was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1982, being

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recognized alongside Bengt Samuelsson (b. 1934) and Sune Bergström (1916–2004) for ‘their discoveries concerning prostaglandins and related biologically active substances’.\textsuperscript{4} Vane was knighted shortly after receiving the Nobel Prize, in 1984. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1974 and served on the Council of the Royal Society for two years during the 1980s.

\textbf{THE VANE PAPERS}

Sir John Vane’s personal archive collection at the Royal Society consists largely of alphabetically arranged files of correspondence between Vane and his peers, colleagues and friends, 1952–2004. In addition there are subject files (headed, for example, ‘Aspirin’) and institutional files (‘Royal College of Physicians’) with the inevitable miscellanies. Users should note that additional material can be found in the Wellcome Library’s collections. The Society’s papers are designated JRV/1–25 and may be accessed via the usual web-based archive catalogue (http://royalsociety.org/library/collections/).
The files offer interesting insights not only into Vane the scientist but also into the larger scientific networks and the relationships that he cultivated during the 52-year period, although it should be noted that by far the majority of these papers date from after the 1970s. Some of the letters reflect wider political concerns and how this could affect the work of scientists. For example, correspondence from scientists in parts of Eastern Europe highlights the difficulties that they could encounter in travelling to and maintaining working relationships with colleagues in the UK, particularly during the 1980s. Elsewhere, the collection includes a copy of a letter from Sir John to Silvio Berlusconi written in 1994, after Berlusconi’s first election win and the election of Vane’s friend, Professor Guiseppe Nisticò (b. 1941), to the Italian Senate. Researchers interested in the pharmaceutical industry will also find this collection useful. Given his time working for Wellcome and for Vanguard Medica, as well as liaising with pharmaceutical companies as Director of the WHRI, it is no surprise that Vane built up substantial correspondence within the industry.

Vane had an extensive correspondence with immediate colleagues, notably Gustav Born, Harold Burn, Roderick Flower and Salvador Moncada. Naturally, a significant number of Fellows and other senior scientists are represented, including the pharmacologists Hermann (Hugh) Blaschko FRS (1900–93) and Sir William (‘Bill’) Paton FRS (1917–93), the biologist Hans Kosterlitz (1903–96), Nature editor Sir John Maddox FRS (1925–2009) and many others. This correspondence largely covers professional matters, but it is not uncommon for letters to include more personal topics. Many of Vane’s correspondents worked with him or were taken on as students at the WHRI and maintained a correspondence with the institution. As is to be expected, many of these letters relate to recommendations for positions and for funding, once the students had moved on to other employers. Vane also maintained many contacts internationally, across various countries including Japan, Poland and the USA.

There are papers relating to the process of winning and being presented with the Nobel Prize, including copies of Vane’s Nobel lecture and banquet speech, alongside letters of congratulation from friends and colleagues. The collection also reflects the impact that becoming a Nobel laureate could have on a person’s life, whether it is from receiving invitations from Kofi Annan to consult with the UN, or answering numerous letters from autograph hunters.

Perhaps the most interesting series in the collection is a small selection of items that was entitled ‘problems and ideas’ when it arrived at the Society. The archivist has kept this title for the series, which contains notes, sketches and diagrams compiled by Vane, including everything from talking points for meetings to diagrams demonstrating scientific processes. Figure 2 shows one such diagram; it includes notes on the set-up and type of equipment that can be used. Although unlabelled and undated, the University of Sheffield address does indicate that it is from early in his career.

**CATALOGUING THE COLLECTION**

To make the collection available to researchers as quickly as possible, the decision was taken to catalogue the papers to file level as an initial step, rather than to item level (for example letter by letter), although this will be our ultimate goal for the 300 rather bulky files. This work was in addition to standard numbering of content and rehousing in acid-free files.
and boxes to ensure the long-term preservation of the papers. Work was commenced by my predecessor as archivist, Nichola Court, in 2011 and completed by me in late 2012. Recording to file level allowed us to retain Vane’s original file order (by correspondent and occasionally by the topic of correspondence) quite easily, an arrangement that should make it convenient for researchers to select the files in the collection that they are most interested in investigating further. Historians will also be able to search the catalogue online, where descriptions will pick out key topics of correspondence between Vane and his colleagues, making it possible to highlight research themes as well as people.
Naturally, because many of these individuals represented in the papers are still living, or are in some cases very recently deceased, normal restrictions of personal and archival confidentiality apply to the Vane papers; users are encouraged to liaise with the Society’s library and archive team when planning a research visit to Carlton House Terrace. For more information on this collection and others, please visit the Royal Society’s online catalogue, available via our main website (http://royalsociety.org/library/collections/).

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