WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

BY SIR GEORGE PORTER, P.R.S.

IT is my pleasant duty to welcome you all most warmly to this meeting, which is one of the many events stimulated by the advisory committee of the William and Mary Trust on Science and Technology and Medicine, under the Chairmanship of Sir Arnold Burgen, the immediate past Foreign Secretary of the Royal Society.

This is a joint meeting of the Royal Society and the British Academy, whose President, Sir Randolph Quirk, will be Chairman this afternoon, and it covers Science and Civilization under William and Mary, presumably with the intention that the Society would cover Science if the Academy would cover Civilization.

The meeting has been organized by Professor Rupert Hall, a Fellow of the Academy and also well known to the Society, who is now Emeritus Professor of the History of Science and Technology at Imperial College in the University of London; and Mr Norman Robinson, who retired in 1988 as Librarian to the Royal Society after 40 years service to the Society.

We welcome especially among those present the distinguished Dutch delegation, headed by the President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Professor de Wied, and we also welcome the Ambassador of The Netherlands, Mr Jonkman. There is a parallel meeting with this one in Amsterdam at the end of September 1988 to which the Royal Society and the British Academy will be sending a joint delegation.

The Royal Society is commemorating the William and Mary Tercentenary by offering, jointly with the Leverhulme Trust, five postdoctoral fellowships a year for five years, for British scientists and tenable in The Netherlands. This will continue and enhance the long tradition of exchanges, of information and scientists, between The Netherlands and the British Isles over the last 300 years, some of which we shall be hearing about at this meeting.

In the Exhibition in the rooms behind this lecture theatre you will see this collaboration illustrated by correspondence between the Society and Leeuwenhoek, Huygens, Swammerdam and others. A similar exhibition was held at our June soirée, at which we were honoured by the presence of H.R.H. Princess Margriet of The Netherlands.

There was a fascination, 300 years ago, with optical instruments, particularly the microscope and the telescope. Van Leeuwenhoek saw single-celled protozoans for the first time and Huygens discovered the
rings of Saturn. The nature of light became the subject of experiment and Newton, who was President of the Royal Society from 1703 to 1727, debated the merits of the corpuscular and undulatory ideas with Huygens. Huygens also had common interests with the Secretary of the Society, Robert Hooke, in time measurement, the practical aspects of which were flourishing among the clockmakers of both countries, as we shall hear this afternoon.

Sir Christopher Wren, a founder Fellow of the Royal Society, a mathematician as well as architect, designed the first Royal Observatory in Britain, Flamsteed House in Greenwich, named after the First Astronomer Royal, who was also a Fellow of this society. This evening there is a boat trip to Greenwich and a reception at the National Maritime Museum, where you will see a special exhibition on the theme of ‘The Navy and the English Succession, 1603–1689’, which embraces the period of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Charles II, our founder, who regards us all in this theatre today from his portrait on high, appointed his brother James as Lord High Admiral—this was the James who succeeded Charles to the throne and was deposed in favour of William and Mary.

Tomorrow, much of the day is devoted to Anglo-Dutch medicine. At the time of William and Mary, dissection of the human body was no longer a clandestine activity. William Harvey, who first described the circulation of the blood, gained his doctorate in Padua in 1602, and Andries van Wesel did his pioneering work there also. When this work reached Amsterdam and Leyden it became a major influence on the course of anatomical, surgical and medical development in Holland and England. Sir John Pringle, President of this Society 1772–78, studied medicine in Leyden after being impressed by a lecture of Boerhaave, and our first President, Lord Brouncker, is said to have attended Leyden in 1638.

We are now to hear authoritative accounts of these collaborations of England and The Netherlands, in the sciences and humanities, at the time of William and Mary which have continued and flourished over three centuries.

To begin this morning’s session, which covers aspects of contemporary life in William and Mary’s time, I now hand over to its Chairman, Professor Rupert Hall.