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(1991-1993)



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Swansea 1993: A Disastrous Conference Dinner never to be repeated

A normal conference dinner at an NMDG International Conference confines itself to dinner, wine, a short speech from the outgoing chairman and a welcome to the new chairman – then off to the hospitality suites; except for Swansea, when I was chairman.

A few months before the conference, I visited Swansea with John Gibson of the RSC to check out facilities and local arrangements. Whilst there, it was suggested that we invite a local senior chemist to give a speech at the conference dinner. The chemist was President-elect of the RSC and I was assured that he was a good speaker and it would be a politically astute invitation (for whom I wonder?). It also transpired that at least one senior member of the chemistry department sang in the Swansea Male Voice Choir and it was suggested that they entertain us at the end of the conference dinner. Although my

name is David Davies, I have no known family connection with Wales but, in a rash moment or a rush of ‘Welsh’ blood, I agreed to these requests. Local factors then took over without my knowledge. Even though Swansea is a city, it is relatively small and I guess the NMR International Meeting was quite a large conference for the University and so the Vice-Chancellor and his wife were invited to attend the dinner – and then somehow the Lord Mayor of Swansea got involved and he was also invited to the dinner. Perhaps those with long memories will remember the rather long top table at that dinner.

From my perspective the dinner was a disaster. All the conference participants were seated and ready to start. Unfortunately the Lord Mayor had been at another function and was at least 10 minutes late. The University had provided a sherry reception for him in an adjacent room, which then made us about 20 minutes late. The catering facilities were rather stretched for such a large number and the service was slow. During the meal I got a note to say that the Male Voice Choir had arrived and I went out to make final arrangements with them. About half-an-hour later I got another note from them to ask at what time we would need them. Of course I did not know because the service was so slow. Fortunately the Catering Manager saved an awkward situation by opening a bar for them. Just before the speeches I got another note from the Male Voice Choir; they had got fed up of waiting so long and had gone home. Most conference participants probably did not know what they had missed. But they were sure to remember the speech by the RSC President-elect. Although a good speaker, he did go over his allotted time considerably and he also talked all about IR and ‘the war’ – and this was 1993 and we had over twenty people from Germany at the conference! After all that, the rest of the dinner was a blur and I handed over the Chairmanship to John Lindon as quickly as possible – and hit the hospitality suites. At least all other Chairmen have wisely kept the Conference Dinner just for the NMR community.

And another thing: at least the NMRDG never stooped to publish its conference proceedings. During the return train journey with John Gibson from the preliminary visit to Swansea, we had a few beers at the bar and talked about general RSC matters, including the publication policy. I had recently been invited by Chemistry in Britain to

review a book on Biological Spectroscopy published by the RSC. It was the summary of presentations at an international spectroscopy conference, one of a series like the NMRDG. The conference was mainly on optical spectroscopy and there was only one major contribution using NMR! In the review I panned the book and said that it had little scientific value because the contributions were trivial and had not been properly refereed. I said to John Gibson that the RSC demeaned itself by publishing such work. He replied that the two editors were his very good friends and that they always had a re-union dinner together each year. The rest of the journey was somewhat subdued.

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