

Banquet Speech

Alan L. Hodgkin's speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1963

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

As I sat in this splendid hall I have been feeling that it is very hard to find words in which to thank you for the great honour which you have done us.

I derive some consolation by reflecting that many scientists, infinitely more distinguished than I, must have found it equally disturbing. As I cast my mind back over the long list of illustrious prizewinners I can only see one who would have spoken his mind without any hesitation or difficulty. Some of you will guess that I am thinking of [Rutherford](#) of whom Professor [Tiselius](#) spoke earlier. In his scientific work Rutherford always went straight to the heart of the matter. And he was equally direct in his private life. He usually said exactly what he thought. Some one once asked Rutherford how it was that he always managed to keep on the crest of the wave. "Well" said Rutherford "that isn't difficult. I made the wave, why shouldn't I be at the top of it."

I hasten to say that my own subject is a very minor ripple compared to Rutherford's. It may seem rather like a cyclone when Sir John Eccles arrives from Australia. But in neurophysiology we have none of those vast tidal waves of discovery which shake the world to its foundations and which have such incalculable consequences for good or evil.

Research in neurophysiology is much more like paddling a small canoe on a mountain river. The river which is fed by many distant springs carries you along all right though often in a peculiar direction. You have to paddle quite hard to keep afloat. And sooner or later some of your ideas are upset and are carried downstream like an upturned canoe. I see that I am in some danger of drifting away from what I have to say. Perhaps this doesn't matter, because you must know how deeply we all value the great honour you have done us. But I would like to tell you how much I enjoy being in Stockholm again. It is often said that a country is best known abroad from the films that it produces. In England we wait, with mixed emotions, for the next Ingmar Bergman. Of course no one believes that Sweden bears much resemblance to the strange world of Hieronymus Bosch in which that brilliant director so often sets his stage. But even in Bergman's films those of us who know Sweden can sometimes catch a glimpse of the things we most enjoy. For myself, I have been pleasantly reminded of summer days sailing with Swedish friends among the flower-covered islands of the Archipelago. And Bergman's black medieval world reminds us that the brilliance of your summer owes something to the darkness of the long winter nights. This is my first winter visit to Stockholm. Bernhard Frankenhaeuser's boat is high and dry and there will be no sailing this time. But it is an enormous pleasure to be in Stockholm again and to see your lovely city in the bright winter sunlight.

Thirty-one years ago the Nobel Prize was awarded to [Sherrington and Adrian](#), two of Britain's greatest neurophysiologists. Like your own Professor [Granit](#), Sir John Eccles is a pupil of [Sherrington](#); Andrew Huxley and I learnt physiology on Cambridge and belong to [Adrian](#)'s school. I think that Alfred Nobel would have been pleased that his prize emphasizes the continuity of science, as well as its novelties. I am sure that he would have been glad to see the flags of six countries flying with your own in the city today.

On behalf of the three neurophysiologists may I thank you again and again for your magnificent award - and for all your generous hospitality

From [Les Prix Nobel en 1963](#), Editor Göran Liljestrand, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1964

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