Presidential addresses of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene: 1907–2013

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Presidents have been required to give an inaugural address on commencing office at the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (RSTMH) since its foundation in 1907. All presidential addresses were identified, sourced and assembled into an annotated bibliography. The majority of presidential addresses have been published in Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. Unpublished and in some cases ‘lost’ contributions have now been sourced where possible and archived at the RSTMH. This unique, rich and rewarding archive provides a vista into the development of the RSTMH and the discipline of tropical medicine. The archive is freely available to all.

Keywords: Inaugural address, Tropical medicine, RSTMH, STMH

Introduction

The Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene was founded in 1907 by Sir James Cantlie and Dr George Carmichael Low and received permission to be designated a Royal Society in 1920. The current Royal Patron is Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The 106-year history of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (RSTMH; 1907–2013) has seen 53 biennial presidential terms overseen by 51 presidents; two presidents having served two terms (Table 1).

The role and remit of the president has shifted at different stages of the Society’s development. An independent external expert review of all governance structures, processes and roles was undertaken in 2010 on the recommendation of the recently appointed Chief Executive (Gerri M. McHugh). The role of President now focuses on the leadership of the Board of Trustees in developing a strategic vision and strategy for the Society, while ensuring the highest standards of governance, in partnership with the Chief Executive. On assuming office each president is required to give an inaugural address. These presidential addresses are traditionally given at the start of each presidential term, when the baton of office is passed from one president to the next.

A search for the entire back archive of these inaugural addresses was non-trivial and a proportion of the more recent ones have not been published. The main objectives of this review were to make accessible some of the rich history of the RSTMH by providing: (i) a complete annotated bibliography of all presidential addresses for reference; (ii) sourcing and archiving all unpublished addresses; and (iii) arranging for all published presidential addresses to be made available on open access. This review is not intended to be a scholarly discourse on the origins of tropical medicine or on the history of the RSTMH; these have been lucidly documented elsewhere by past president Prof. Gordon C. Cook.

Materials and methods

All previous presidential addresses were searched on the Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene website (http://trstmh.oxfordjournals.org). Those addresses that were not formally published were requested by direct communication with past presidents. Additional sources and archives were consulted to provide ancillary biographical information on past presidents. Each address was then read and short notes made on its contents and summarised in Table 1.

Results

There have been 51 presidents of which only one, Prof. Hazel M. Dockrell, has been female. Almost all (46/51) have been medically qualified. There has been one Noble Laureate, Sir Ronald Ross (1857–1932), who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in 1902; the first ever Briton to receive the prize. Almost a third (15/51) were also elected Fellows of the Royal Society. They enjoy a constellation of Royal and Military honours, too numerous to catalogue fully. As such, each presidential address gives an important window into the zeitgeist of tropical medicine at the time and the series together provides an insight into the evolution of the discipline of tropical medicine over the last century.
| President, name (lifespan) | Term | Subject of address |
|---------------------------|------|-------------------|
| Sir Patrick Manson FRS (1844 – 1922) | 1907–1909 | Survey of tropical medicine to 1907
| Sir Ronald Ross FRS (1857 – 1932) | 1909–1911 | History of infectious disease and sanitation
| Sir William B. Leishman FRS (1865 – 1926) | 1911–1913 | The future of the STSMH
| Sir R. Havelock Charles (1858 – 1934) | 1913–1915 | ‘Neurasthenia’
| Dr Fleming M. Sandwith (1853 – 1918) | 1915–1917 | Pellagra: a disease of inefficient nutrition
| Sir David Bruce FRS (1855 – 1931) | 1917–1919 | Tetanus in wounded British soldiers (1914–1917)
| Sir William J.R. Simpson (1855 – 1931) | 1919–1921 | Preventable diseases
| Sir James Cantlie (1851 – 1926) | 1921–1923 | Life insurance in the tropics
| Sir Percy W. Bassett-Smith (1861 – 1927) | 1923–1925 | Food supply in relation to disease in the tropics
| Sir Andrew Balfour (1873 – 1931) | 1925–1927 | Pioneers of tropical medicine
| Prof. John W.W. Stephens FRS (1865 – 1946) | 1927–1929 | Functions of the spleen
| Dr G. Carmichael Low (1872 – 1952) | 1929–1933 | Tropical medicine from 1894 to 1914
| Sir Leonard Rogers FRS (1868 – 1962) | 1933–1935 | Forecasting cholera, smallpox and plague incidence
| Sir Arthur Bagshawe (1871 – 1950) | 1935–1937 | Disease in some small tropical islands
| Dr Sydney Price James FRS (1870 – 1946) | 1937–1939 | Post-war advances in malariology
| Sir S. Rickard Christophers FRS (1873 – 1978) | 1939–1943 | Malaria in wartime
| Sir H. Harold Scott (1874 – 1956) | 1943–1945 | Slave-trade and the spread of tropical disease
| Dr C. Morley Wenyon FRS (1878 – 1948) | 1945–1947 | Tropical medicine in war and peace
| Sir Philip Manson-Bahr (1881 – 1966) | 1947–1949 | Clinical practice of tropical medicine
| Prof. Henry E. Shortt FRS (1887 – 1987) | 1949–1951 | Tropical medicine as a career
| Sir Neil Hamilton Fairley FRS (1891 – 1966) | 1951–1953 | History, biology and reflection on schistosomiasis
| Prof. George MacDonald (1903 – 1967) | 1953–1955 | Personal retrospective of his career
| Prof. Percy C.C. Garnham (1901 – 1994) | 1955–1957 | Filariasis host-parasite relationship
| Dr Charles Wilcocks (1896 – 1977) | 1957–1959 | Personal experiences of dysentery
| Sir Robert Drew (1897 – 1991) | 1959–1961 | Pestsilences of the post
| Prof. Brian Moagraith (1907 – 1989) | 1961–1963 | Transition from Empire to Commonwealth
| Prof. Charles Wilcock (1896 – 1977) | 1963–1965 | History of preventive, social and occupational medicine
| Prof. George MacDonald (1903 – 1967) | 1965–1967 | Scientific basis of tropical hygiene
| Prof. Percy C.C. Garnham (1901 – 1994) | 1967–1969 | Early researches into malaria
| Prof. Brian Moagraith (1907 – 1989) | 1969–1971 | The meaning of tropical medicine ‘today’
| Sir Robert Drew (1907 – 1991) | 1971–1973 | Do we effect change with our rich tropical medicine heritage
| Prof. Alan W. Woodruff (1916 – 1992) | 1973–1975 | The clinical unit in tropical medicine and epidemiology
| Dr C.E. Gordon Smith (1924 – 1991) | 1975–1977 | An interdisciplinary approach to tropical medicine
| Dr Stanley G. Browne (1907 – 1986) | 1977–1979 | Balancing cost and goals in tropical medicine
| Dr Leonard G. Goodwin FRS (1915 – 2008) | 1979–1981 | Ensuring effective medicines for diseases of the tropics
| Dr Anthony J. Duggan (1920 – 2004) | 1981–1983 | The role of the physician in tropical countries
| Sir Ion A. McGregor FRS (1922 – 2007) | 1983–1985 | Malaria research
| Prof. Herbert M. Gilles (b. 1903) | 1985–1987 | Clinical epidemiology in the tropics
| Prof. Wallace Peters (b. 1924) | 1987–1989 | Cutaneous and visceral leishmaniasis in Arabia
| Prof. George S. Nelson (b. 1923) | 1989–1991 | Filariasis, trichinosis, hydatidosis and schistosomiasis
| Dr Peter O. Williams (b. 1925) | 1991–1993 | The development of the tropical medicine discipline

Table 1. Presidents, presidential terms and subjects of inaugural addresses at the (Royal) Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (R)STMH
Of the 51 presidential addresses given, 44 have been formally published, 43 of these in the Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (the exception was published in International Health). The seven unpublished addresses have been sourced where possible and archived at the RSTMH. The chosen topics of the addresses are wide ranging with the historical development of the RSTMH and the subject of malaria getting most frequent attention (Table 1). We can do nothing more in this review than encourage the fellowship to indulge and perhaps relay a few highlights and thus quote our favourite opening, title and close in the discussion.

Discussion

Sir Patrick Manson (1844–1922), in the first ever address, sets a precedent that no following president has been brave enough to follow, at least in press: 'I trust that it does not augur badly for the success of the Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene that its first President has to commence his Inaugural Address with an apology. Such, unfortunately, is the case. I intended to devote some time to preparation, but having been called on unexpectedly to take part in the recent International Conference on Sleeping Sickness, I have been so occupied that I have not been able to find adequate time or to give that care to preparation that the importance of this occasion demands. I apologise in advance, and trust you will be indulgent to my shortcomings'.

The most intriguing title goes to Sir John S. K. Boyd (1891–1981) whose 'Dysentery: some personal experiences and observations' is a much more serious treatment than one might be given to expect from the title.

One of the earliest and most elegant summaries, goes to one of the most famous of all past RSTMH presidents, Sir Ronald Ross (1857–1932): 'To sum up then: the past has given us much regarding the theory of our subject, let us hope that the future will give us more regarding its practice. Above all let us pray that our profession will shortly take, more determinedly than heretofore, its appointed place in the world as the army of humanity against disease'. It is a message that should still resonate with the fellowship today.

Conclusion

The series of presidential addresses summarised provides a fascinating insight into the rich history of the RSTMH and its progress. Moreover, these presidential ‘Zonae torridae tutamen/guardians of the torrid zone’ provide a unique perspective on tropical medicine and its development over the last 106 years. We are delighted that this unique and rewarding archive is now more complete and freely available to all.

Authors’ contributions: SIH conceived and wrote the first draft of the manuscript; GMM provided information on the constitutional role of the president, helped source ancillary information on the biographic data on past presidents and arranged for open access categorisation of published addresses. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript. SIH and GMM are guarantors of the paper.

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