

The Early Days of *FEBS Letters*

The first issue of *FEBS Letters* appeared in July 1968, twenty years ago. The prime mover in persuading FEBS to start a 'letters' journal was W.J. Whelan who was Secretary-General of FEBS in 1967 and who suggested to the FEBS Council in Oslo in July 1967 that FEBS should publish a journal like *Biochemical and Biophysical Research Communications*. There was considerable opposition and the Council, at its first meeting in Oslo, in effect told Whelan that it would be impossible to collect an Editorial Board. He had two days in which to prove them wrong and succeeded in that time in enlisting the support of Hans Krebs, Fred Sanger and a number of others who were willing to serve as Editors. The first 'meeting' of Editors took place in Alex Pihl's house in Oslo, where his unfortunate lady had to provide the assembled company with only half-thawed-out smørebød to sustain them. Anyway, the Council at its second meeting in Oslo was persuaded that there might be something in the idea of a letters journal and the Secretary-General was detailed to seek the views of Constituent Societies, whose representatives at the Oslo Council Meetings had not been briefed on the idea.

Following discussions through the Summer of 1967, and at the IUB Congress in Tokyo in that year, it became apparent that there was support in FEBS for such a journal and various publishers were approached. To the FEBS Publications Sub-Committee the best proposition was from North-Holland which was run at that time by Daan Frank and Bart van Tongeren. Their suggestion was that we should deviate from the *BBRC* format and have all papers retyped, their main argument being that at that time there was not sufficient typewriter 'hardware' in Europe to make direct reproduction of typescripts generally successful.

Because Bill Whelan left Europe towards the end of 1967 to take up an appointment in the USA, the task of Managing Editor of *FEBS Letters* fell to me, a position I held from 1968 until 1985. During this time the journal increased enormously in size from 491 pages in the second half of 1968 to 5550 pages in 1985. I was, of course, greatly assisted by the Editors who helped during those years. It would be invidious to mention any by name. However, I shall make one exception of Theodor Bücher who had at heart the idea of European biochemistry despite his somewhat Prussian outlook and entered into the spirit of a European enterprise. All helped enormously, largely because they were conscious of taking part in such an enterprise – to show that *European* biochemistry was a force to be reckoned with.

In those early days one way to persuade potential Editors to join *FEBS Letters* was by using them as referees and always remembering to acknowledge their reports with well-chosen picture postcards. One potential Editor agreed to join us because I promised to send him a picture postcard for every paper he dealt with, a promise I mostly kept.

We did not confine ourselves to publishing research papers but soon included short reviews, hypotheses, and discussion papers. These became the responsibility of Henry Arnstein who continues to run this very successful part of the journal. Another suggestion by Arnstein was that *FEBS Letters* should publish an annual Index of Biochemical Reviews. The first one of these appeared in 1973, covering the years 1971–1972, and the Index has appeared annually since that time. Over the years a number of supplements have appeared, the first in 1969 on Computing Techniques in Biochemistry was based on a FEBS Advanced Course organized by J.H. Ottaway in Edinburgh. Another supplement in February 1976, edited by Freddie Gutfreund, marked the centenary of the coining of the word 'enzyme' by Kühne and in 1980 Hans Kornberg put together a supplement to mark Hans Krebs' 80th birthday.

In October 1985 Giorgio Semenza took over from me as Managing Editor and the journal continues to flourish under his guidance.

S.P. Datta
February 1988