

President's Column

JAK KELLY

The Presidents Column for this issue is in the form of a poem for the new year.

THE RHYME OF THE ANCIENT SCIENTIST

It was an ancient scientist
Who one day said to me
'I see from your computer screen you model in 3D
When I was young we did not hope such wonders ere to see
For all we had was real, not virtual, reality.'

I really didn't want to know
I'd heard it all before
From lecturers who rambled on about the days of yore,
Of log tables and slide rules and such arcane devices
And knew nothing of the joys of Tomographic slices.

I fiddled with the format
And wished he'd go away.
Alas, it was an idle hope, I saw he meant to stay.
'When I was young', he whittered on, on reminiscence bent,
'I hankered not for fame nor gold but to experiment.'

My teachers said 'The lad is bright
And quite good at debate.
You should enrol him in the law at which he'd be first rate.
He'd earn a damn good living with the muscles of his jaw.
No one makes money out of science, as you have heard before.'

But I was young and waterproof
And had made up my mind
That neither to the arts nor law was I enough inclined.
I had enjoyed in argument to see opinions swayed,
But what was that compared with how the universe was made.

He told me about where he'd been
And all the things he'd done
'The pay was marginal' he said, 'But, by God, it was fun.
We really were like amateurs, there to enjoy the game.
It mattered less who won or lost, the science was the same.'

'How could you be such dilettantes?
And let your science serve
The evil ends of powerful men, out to control the world.
We now are more responsible. We worry about things
Like, will the earth be boiling hot and balanced yang and ying.'

We are now more professional
In how our labs are run
And who would fund a grant if told 'I'm doing this for fun.'?
There is nothing wrong, of course, with feelings of elation,
Provided that they don't reduce our score in the citations.

'I read upon a gravestone once'
He smiled and looked at me,
As you are now so once was I, as I am now you'll be.
I hoped perhaps it might be true, when first I came in here.
And at the door he paused and said 'A Happier New Year'

The Royal Society of NSW – 100 Years Ago

JAK KELLY

Extract from the Presidential Address by C.O. Burge published in the Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW Volume XXXIX (1905) pp. 1–22

Yet, among the young men of our day what are the names of Kelvin, of Lodge, of Rayleigh, of Dewar, of others, beside that of a famous cricketer, or of the man who can kick a ball further or straighter than another? We may allow that mental culture cannot stand alone, it must be the outcome of sufficient physical training. The old maxim 'Mens sana in corpore sano' is ever true, but are we not overloading the latter part of the prescription? The traditional Irishman is sneered at for regarding fighting as an end, and not a means, but are not the Australians earning the reputation of confounding means and ends, in an even more absurd way? The combination is as old as Plato who laid down music and gymnastics as the twin bases of education . . . but the gymnastics were regarded as means only, for the double purpose of efficiency in war, and for the training of the body, so that it should be intellectually vigorous.

The man of science is unappreciated, because his gifts are unsought, and when conferred, are rapidly rendered commonplace by constant use, and often that use does not be-

come available for some years after the invention has left the authors brain.

It has been well said that the question is not whether a man has gone through the university, it is whether the university has gone through him. Training in habits of exact observation and intelligent inference is wanted, not that interest which is expressed by the observation of a man of unscientific temperament, who once spoke of a proposition in Euclid, as a happy ending to a mildly exciting plot.

Not withstanding the neglect, until latterly, of science in engineering, great strides have been taken, perhaps the greatest, in recent times, have been in connection with light; mechanical contrivances and energy, through the medium of electricity; and the disposal of refuse of cities. As to light, there is the question which is more one for the anatomist than the engineer, whether the human eye is developing the power to withstand, without injury, the intense brightness provided by modern electrical and gas engineers.