

RALPH W. GERARD  
(1900-1974)

Ralph Waldo Gerard became President of the Society after the Cleveland Meeting in 1951 and served in that capacity at the Fall Meeting in Salt Lake City in 1951 and the Spring Meeting in New York in April 1952. He was born in Harvey, Illinois, October 7, 1900, and received from the University of Chicago a B.S. degree in 1919 and a Ph.D. in 1921. He then obtained the M.D. degree from Rush Medical College in 1925. He was Professor of Physiology at South Dakota University (1921–22) and had a National Research Council Fellowship in Europe from 1926 to 1927, working with Prof. A. V. Hill in London on heat production and then with Otto Meyerhof in Kiel on the oxygen consumption of stimulated nerve. Returning to the University of Chicago in 1928, he became a professor in the Physiology Department (1941–52). After three years as Professor of Neurophysiology and Physiology at the College of Medicine of the University of Illinois and a year in California, he became Professor of Neurophysiology at the Mental Health Research Institute in Ann Arbor in 1955.

Dr. Gerard is in great demand as a lecturer and consultant and has been concerned with science in human affairs as well as in creating and teaching new scientific knowledge. He has received many honors, including: medal from Charles University, in Prague; Order of the White Lion (4th class) of Czechoslovakia, honorary membership in the American Psychiatric Association and the Pan Hellenic Medical Association; membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences; a D.Sc. from the University of Maryland in 1952; and an honorary M.D. from the University of Leiden in 1962, at the time of the XXII International Congress of Physiological Sciences. [This, the second honorary M.D. ever awarded by that distinguished University in its history, is well described in *The Physiologist* (6: 49, 1963).]

His professional interests started out in nerve physiology, especially nerve metabolism and the heat production of nerve (with A. V. Hill) and ended up in the behavioral sciences, omitting nothing in between. He is perhaps most widely known for his work on steady potentials in neuron masses: his pioneer study of evoked brain potentials and the demonstration that visual, auditory, and other impulses reach many structures, such as cerebellum; his demonstration of an extended "fixation time" for establishing a memory trace; his universally used capillary microelectrode; and his integrative approach to the nervous system and behavior, so well shown in the summary chapter of the Neurophysiology Section of the *Handbook of Physiology*. Aside from his many research papers and published lectures, he is the author of *Unresting Cells* (1940), *Body Functions* (1941), *Methods in Medical Research* (1950), *Food for Life* (1952), *Mirror to Physiology* (1958), and (with Cole) *Psychopharmacology; the Problem of Evaluation* (1959). A volume reporting the Leiden symposium which he organized, on "Information Processing in the Nervous System," is in press; and one reporting an extended interdisciplinary study of schizophrenia is in preparation. *Mirror* was the report of the Survey of Physiology which Dr. Gerard initiated and for which he served as chairman. He is a liberal in his attitude and is very articulate with the right words ready for any situation. At present he is Chairman of the National Committee



(of the National Academy of Sciences) for IUPS and was chairman of the official delegation to the last General Assembly of IUPS in 1962 in Leiden.

Some of the more important events of Dr. Gerard's term of office were as follows: Dr. Chandler Brooks was appointed Chairman of a Committee on Motion Pictures; a Membership Committee was appointed with Fred Hitchcock as Chairman; the idea of associate members was further discussed; a committee was appointed, under Gerard as chairman, to carry out the Survey of Physiology and to seek funds for the purpose. Dr. Robert Gesell, at the New York meeting, created a great stir and probably some resentment by his charges of inhumanity to animals by physiological investigators. Dr. Gerard, as chairman, kept an explosive business meeting from exploding and succeeded in referring the matter to an ad hoc committee. The Society finally rejected the sweeping allegations of Dr. Gesell. At this time also Dr. Lee moved the Publications Office from the National Academy of Sciences to rented rooms in the Dupont Circle Building in Washington. Dr. Gerard was also chairman of a committee to revise the Constitution and By-Laws of the Federation. Finally, by vote of the Society, the President addressed a letter to Dr. Bronk of the National Academy of Sciences concerning problems of security, loyalty, and clearance. The letter expressed concern because of the "advancing encroachment upon the civil, academic and scientific freedoms" and hoped for some help from the National Academy.

In his address to the Society as Past-President, Dr. Gerard played the Elder Statesman and demonstrated his loyalty to the Society. "In Washington," he wrote, "our Society often is looked to as the leader in the biology group, due in large part to the quality of our representatives there. The Society has maintained interest in and exercised progressive leadership concerning problems of scientific statesmanship—witness the Survey. The Society has an inviolable tradition of democracy which is all too rare" (*Am. J. Physiol.* 171:695, 1952).

Taken from *History of the American Physiological Society - The Third Quarter Century, 1937-1962*, Wallace O. Fenn.

See also *R. W. Gerard* by Ben Libet and Orr E. Reynolds, *The Physiologist*, Vol. 17, No.2, May 1974.