

Title 366
Lord Porter FRS, Nobel Laureate
1967 a Member of the ISR Editorial
Board, is Britain's most distinguished
lecturer about science, seen here at
his best at the Royal Institution,
of which he was the Director.
Courtesy Lord Porter



I attended the 16th Annual Richard Dimbleby lecture held at the Royal Institution, Albemarle Street, London, on 10 April 1989; it was founded by the BBC to commemorate Dimbleby, one of Britain's greatest communicators. In 1989 the lecture was given by Sir George Porter, an outstanding lecturer, television and radio broadcaster of highest professional standard, so seldom achieved by a great scientist. These qualities had been recognised by the award of the Kalinga Prize from UNESCO, the highest distinction for a scientist who also excels in communicating his subject to a non-scientific audience.

I knew George well and greatly admired him; I invited him soon after the foundation of the Journal in 1976 to become a Member of our Editorial Board, which he accepted. His distinction as a physical chemist was of the highest, even greater than his fame as a communicator of science. He was elected President of the Royal Society in 1985 and received the Order of Merit [see Title 320] in 1989. By 1995 he had been elected a Member of 15 Foreign Academies, received 34 honorary Doctorates from Universities, and to crown it all, had received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1967. Until the death of Lord Todd in January 1997, Lord Porter, created a Life Peer in 1990, was Britain's second most distinguished chemist, as Lord Todd had been elected a Member of the Order pour le Mérite [see Title 319] and had a pub named after him, "The Lord Todd".

The BBC which had organised the Dimbleby Lecture by Sir George Porter, as he was still to be called for another two years, had invited a most distinguished audience to the Royal Institution, of which Sir George had been the Resident Professor and Director since 1966. Known as a great admirer of Michael Faraday, his predecessor as Director at the Royal Institution in the 1830s, Porter contrasted Faraday's successful devotion to pure science with its neglect in Britain in the late 1980s, leading to a decline of applied science with dire consequences to the country as a whole.

Power comes from knowledge, and a basic knowledge of science was now needed by all. The introduction of a core curriculum in which science along with mathematics and English is taught to all children up to school-leaving age, the only recent government initiative, was welcomed by Porter. He concluded by drawing attention to the power of television, Dimbleby's, favourite medium and its role in communicating science to children and its contribution to the public understanding of science. Science had given us all a higher standard of living without servitude to others—Michael Faraday and James Watt freed more men and women from Slavery than Abraham Lincoln—Porter triumphantly concluded his outstanding address. An outstanding example of the Scientific Temper.