

Michael Polanyi's Manchester Years

**BRIAN G. GOWENLOCK
and
TIBOR FRANK**

Soon after my article "Networking, Cohorting, Bonding: Michael Polanyi in Exile" was published in *Polanyiana*, 10, 2001/1-2, pp. 108-126 and *Tradition and Discovery* XXVIII, 2001-2002, No. 2, pp. 5-19, I received a most interesting letter from Professor Brian G. Gowenlock, a reputable chemist and former research student of Michael Polanyi in Manchester, now in retirement (March 6, 2002). Upon receiving my answer, Professor Gowenlock continued to supply important information on Polanyi's Manchester years (March 8, 2002). Both confirming and supplementing my article, his letters need no additional comment.

Attached please find the complete text of Professor Gowenlock's letters. I am grateful for his kind permission to publish them and for his additional efforts to collect and provide further information. Professor Gowenlock has thus contributed valuable comments on two photographs obtained from Manchester University on Michael Polanyi and his associates as well as his students.

Tibor Frank

Wed, 06 Mar 2002

Dear Professor Frank

May I introduce myself! I am a retired professor of chemistry and a former research student of Michael Polanyi. If he had not been invited to the Gifford lectureship and as a result changing his chair of physical chemistry for that of social studies in 1948 I would have been able to remain in Manchester as an assistant lecturer. Your account of the 1932 negotiations with Professor Arthur Lapworth were of considerable interest to me. I knew that MP had been approached and had turned down the offer of the chair but was unaware of the details of the offer. In particular I can never recall any mention having been made of a new building. The various buildings that were occupied by the chemistry department at that time were all 19th century and the physical chemistry research areas were all built in 1873. The major part of these where I worked were converted mathematics classrooms and not all of these rooms were provided with fume extraction cupboards. I can well understand that MP would have wished for something better. Lapworth was not in the best of health at that time, so I was told, and retired in 1935. The organic chemist who was appointed in 1933 was I M Heilbron who moved to Imperial College, London in 1938. His successor was A R Todd who moved to Cambridge in 1944 to be succeeded by E L Hirst who moved to Edinburgh in 1948. Polanyi was never the head of the department of chemistry. In his 15 years in Manchester Polanyi was a powerful influence upon his academic colleagues, co-workers and research students and I remain deeply indebted to him.

In the reference 34 of your paper you put a '?' before the name of Allmand. A J Allmand was a professor of physical chemistry in the University of London and an electrochemist of a high reputation. He was a colleague of F G Donnan, an active Roman Catholic.

Thank you again for your interesting article.

Brian G Gowenlock

Fri, 08 Mar 2002

Dear Professor Frank

Thank you for your kind reply. I now reside at 5 Roselands, Sidmouth, Devon, UK, EX10 8PB. I was a member of the Chemistry Department at the University of Manchester from 1943 to 1948 and my research under Michael Polanyi began in January 1946. The day to day supervision was provided in succession by two lecturers Charles Horrex (1946) and Ernest Warhurst (1947-8). Both of these men had been profoundly influenced by Michael Polanyi having commenced their research in 1933. From them I heard much of those pre-war years. Later in my first university post in Swansea I knew the Professor of Metallurgy, Hugh O'Neill who had been a lecturer in Manchester in the 1930's and who was a friend of Michael Polanyi. From him I learned of Polanyi's reaction to the purge of the Brownshirts in 1934. When I took up my chair in Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh in 1966 I met Professor Tom Torrance of Edinburgh University and we soon found a common interest in Polanyi's writings. In my retirement (now aged 76) I still retain that interest and find Tradition and Discovery to be full of interest.

Those who knew Michael Polanyi in the Manchester Chemistry Department are a diminishing group but I think we all retain many memories and acknowledge his profound influence on our lives.

Please feel free to quote me as you have suggested.

Brian G Gowenlock



Probably early summer 1939

TWO PHOTOGRAPHS OF PROFESSOR MICHAEL POLANYI'S COLLEAGUES AND STUDENTS

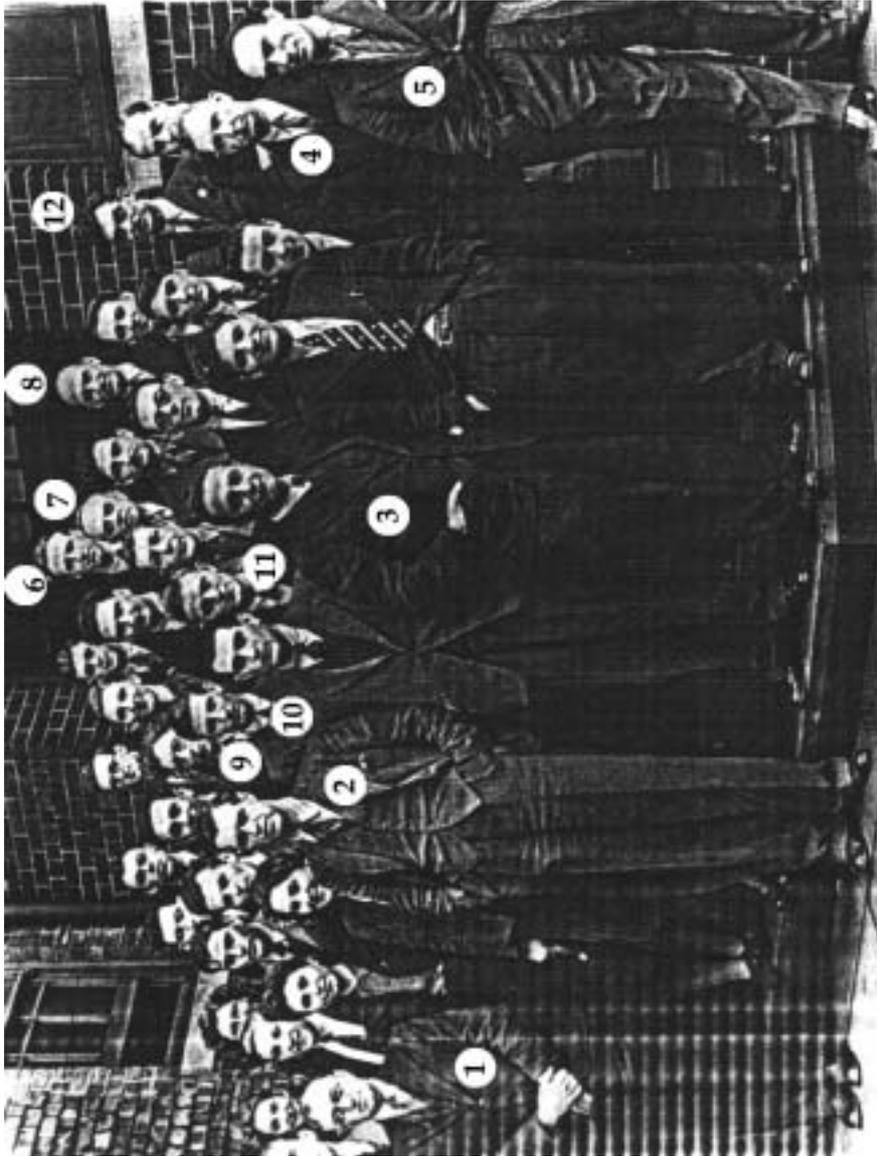
Obtained by Dr. Éva Gábor, courtesy of the University of Manchester,
with comments by Professor Brian G. Gowenlock

*Members of staff and students graduating B.Sc. (Honours in
Chemistry), University of Manchester*

I Probably early summer 1939

I cannot identify Michael Polanyi on this photograph. I feel reasonably certain in dating it as early summer 1939.

- 1 Dr. H. T. OPENSHAW Lecturer in Organic Chemistry who later became Senior Lecturer in Organic Chemistry in the University of St Andrews and then became Director of Research at Burroughs Welcome
- 2 Dr. F. S. SPRING
- 3 Dr. C. CAMPBELL
- 4 Prof. A. R. TODD was appointed to the Chair of Organic Chemistry in 1938
- 5 Dr. F. FAIRBROTHER
- 6 Mr. D. C. HENRY (all of whom appear on the 1942 potograph)
- 7 Mr. E. C. BAUGHAN Lecturer in Physical Chemistry who became Professor of Chemistry in the Royal Military College, Shrivenham (around 1941)
- 8 Mr. J. B. M. HERBERT
- 9 is the only student I can possibly identify – Frank STANSFIELD, who returned after war service in 1946 to study for a Ph.D. in organic chemistry
- 10 Dr. B. LYTHGOE (see 1942 photograph)
- 11 Dr. G. N. BURKHARDT Senior Lecturer in Organic Chemistry
- 12 Dr. A. G. EVANS Assistant Lecturer in Physical Chemistry. From 1939 – 42 at Kings College, London, 1942 – 51 Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester, Professor, University of Wales, Cardiff 1951 until retirement
- 13 Dr. E. WARHURST – Assistant Lecturer in Physical Chemistry. Moved to Heriot-Watt College, Edinburgh 1942 to University of Glasgow 1944, returned to Manchester 1946. Subsequently Reader in Chemistry



March 1942

II March 1942

I have labelled 12 of those whose identity is known to me.

- 1 Dr. F. FAIRBROTHER later Professor of Inorganic Chemistry, Manchester
- 2 Prof. A. R. TODD, FRS moved to Cambridge 1944 as Professor of Organic Chemistry, Nobel Laureate
- 3 Prof. M. POLANYI
- 4 Mr. J. B. M. HERBERT Lecturer in Physical Chemistry
- 5 Dr. B. LYTHGOE Lecturer in Organic Chemistry, moved to Cambridge with Todd in 1944. Subsequently Professor of Organic Chemistry, University of Leeds, FRS
- 6 Dr. C. HORREX - Assistant Lecturer in Physical Chemistry (moved to Sheffield in 1946 and to St Andrews in 1947 where he was Senior Lecturer)
- 7 Dr. C. CAMPBELL – Senior Lecturer and Assistant Director of the Laboratories
- 8 Dr. F. S. SPRING – Senior Lecturer in Organic Chemistry (moved to Royal College of Technology, Glasgow in 1946 as Professor - this then became University of Strathclyde. FRS, later took an industrial post.)
- 9, 10, 11 are students who graduated B.Sc. in 1942
- 9 FELTON 3 years Prof. Gowenlock's senior in school
- 10 G. A. HOWARD later obtained PhD with Todd
- 11 G. T. NEWBOLD later obtained PhD with Spring
- 12 Mr. D. C. HENRY Lecturer in Chemistry and Reader in Colloid Science

Of the academic staff in the two photographs there are currently only two survivors:

Professor A. G. EVANS (who is in very poor health) and Professor B. LYTHGOE, FRS. Both are aged about 90.