

The Back Story

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I learned today that Sir Jack Baldwin, FRS died on January 4, 2020.

Jack was a force.

A hungry British lion.

Some would say that he lived to intimidate others. Some would say that he was a narcissistic SOB. Jack would say they were all right. He was those things and a lot more.

I was rather surprised when Jack was knighted. He so very loudly despised authoritative figures and anyone else who feigned authenticity. I imagined that he had burned so many bridges, not to mention metaphorical buildings of all sizes and shapes, that he was politically too hot to handle. Congratulations to the Queen and her ministers.

I studied Jack during my 1983-1984 sabbatical at Oxford's Dyson Perrins Laboratory. I personally encountered his not-always-so-whimsical imperialism when he commanded that I carry out physical organic chemical research with him—though we had agreed the previous year and he officially had stipulated on my immigration forms that I would work on penicillin biosynthesis. How could I say no to Professor Baldwin, *the* Waynflete Professor of Chemistry? Simple. I was a young, naïve American, ignorant of the power of *the* Professor at Oxford. I chose *not* and found (mostly) another area to study. True, I did work on Jack's project and, together with Laurence Harwood and Rolf Bohlmann, published a paper on olefin stereospecific isomerizations. I also published a series of papers with a then up-and-coming Steve Davies who, several decades later, would become Jack's successor as the Waynflete Professor of Chemistry.

I watched as Jack would ask questions at seminars that made visiting professors shake in their boots. However, I also realized that Jack was not trying to intimidate, he was seeking information. Jack could pluck seemingly disparate chemical information out of the air, blend the parts effortlessly, and produce great creativity. I knew

each piece of Jack's data but it was he who produced the brilliance. I watched Jack deal with his competitors; it was not a game. I watched Jack play, at times menacingly, with his junior colleagues—they were all junior to him—and we would all wince. Later, however, we would tell those tales with respect, even with admiration. Maybe not with admiration ...

Eighteen months ago, at the invitation of Tony Barrett, Jack and I participated in a celebration of Derek Barton's centenary at Imperial College. Barton was Jack's (and Tony's) professor and a friend to all of us. At the end of one evening, Jack's limo was an hour or two late (!), so he and I chatted in a corner of the bar. I had hoped, for this unexpected occasion, to review my



Jack Baldwin in a car that did not fit his oversized personality, in front of the Dyson Perrins Laboratory, 1986. Photograph courtesy J. I. Seeman

experiences of that sabbatical with Jack. I asked him, "How did you manage this paradox, of wanting the DP to be great, thereby wanting to provide resources—excellent graduate students and other resources—to the DP's staff, while wanting to succeed yourself?" In his deep growling voice, he laughed. "Simple. I took all the best students and all the space for myself."

The undeniable fact is, Jack brought life and great science into a department that, before him, was characterized by Barton as "sleepy." Jack Baldwin was an infinite source of energy and passion that invigorated the entire Dyson Perrins Laboratory. He was lightning fierce. He was lightning. And I can still feel the power that was Sir Jack Baldwin. The world is a bit dimmer and a lot less exciting without Jack.