Foreword

Ephraim Borowski
President, 2000–2003
The Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow

History is always humbling, peopled by the great men and women of the past in whose footsteps one feels unworthy to walk; but equally daunting is the road ahead, uncharted and perilous, on which one treads only with circumspection. Not for nothing did Janus require two heads, to survey both past and future, and if that is true of years, how much more so of centuries!

Thus it has been a great challenge as well as a great privilege to have been at the helm of this venerable Society at this turning point, as we too have looked both back and forward. We closed our second century with a lecture series reviewing 100 years of change, and we opened our third with a series looking to the future. It is extremely gratifying that this programme has built the Society to its strongest for more than half a century, and that it continues to flourish, as our city's motto exhorts.

It is difficult for us to imagine the world in which, as Mercury crossed the Sun on 9th November 1802, twenty-two of our fellow-citizens met in the Price of Wales Tavern to establish a 'Society for the discussion of subjects connected solely with the Arts and Sciences'. Our cities were not yet lit even by gas nor connected by railways; steam power, both in navigation and in industry, was barely in its infancy; our rivers were sewers and our water was

drawn from wells; and another forty years would pass before either anaesthesia or antisepsis came to the aid of medicine. Dalton's atomic theory was not yet fully articulated, thermodynamics had yet to be formulated, and electricity was virtually unknown.

This was truly 'no mean society', a fellowship of citizens of no mean city, indeed the proud 'Second City of the Empire'. What is perhaps most remarkable is how many advances in both theory and practice are associated with the early members of this Society. Many of these eminent individuals provided the ideas which stimulated the advances in science and engineering that were to fuel the industrial growth of Scotland and to give Glasgow its reputation as 'the workshop of the world'. The intellectual genius which inspired individuals like Graham, Kelvin, and Lister brought Scotland to pre-eminence as the source of advances in chemistry, ship-building and engineering, medicine and public

The bicentenary dinner held in November 2002 in the magnificent setting of Glasgow City Chambers.

health that were to underpin economic and social progress for future generations.

Clearly, whatever the intentions of our founders, the arts never had parity with the sciences amongst the Society's early interests, and it was not until the 20th century that literature, sociology, history, architecture, economics, and psychology became increasingly common subjects. Paradoxically, to our ear, philosophy in the modern sense almost never featured in the Society's diet, although increasingly in recent years our speakers have eschewed the technicalities of their own work to address broadly conceptual questions about their disciplines.

Where once eminent practitioners presented their latest discoveries, now equally eminent advocates of their subjects make them accessible to a wider public. It is not surprising that a professor of 'the public understanding of science', speaking in this bicentennial year, brought us our best attendance for almost a century. As knowledge has fragmented, and there are increasingly more learned societies with increasingly narrow scope, we are all lay observers of most of human endeavour. It is by adapting to this change and retaining its breadth of vision, perhaps, that the Society has survived to flourish again.

So it is with great pleasure and pride that we take our first step into our third century, on a day when Mercury retraces the path it followed on the day of our first meeting, by presenting this brief memoir of the intervening two centuries.

7 May 2003