

:f X/diary.nobel

This is a transcript of JL diary note for October 26, 1958.
announcement of Nobel Prize

I was not keeping a diary in those days but this particular event led me to make notes on it just at the time.

Joshua Lederberg, handwritten letter transcribed
Mon Oct 5 13:02:49 EDT 1998

Sunday, 26 Oct. (1958)

About 11:00 this a.m. I had gone to the lab to clean up the grant applications * I've been working on (to the essential exclusion of my lab work in recent weeks!). I'd gotten up rather early, had some coffee for breakfast and left, while Esther was having hers. Last night: an Australian party at home -- the Crawfords from Melbourne (history); Phyllis Rowntree; Maggie Blackwood and the Leslie Osborns (Psychiatry here). I was to work at the lab until about 12:30, then pick up Phyllis and Margaret for lunch and then see Phyllis off to her plane: --> Columbus-->Denver--> SFO-->Sydney.

At 11:30 + or - there was a call from a Mr. Lindquist of the "Tijding..." newspaper in Stockholm -- the New York correspondent. He explained his call to my astonishment that Beadle, Tatum, and I were to be the co-recipients of the Nobel prize in medicine this year. I was rather incredulous: he insisted the AP was quoting the rumors and he was quite sure it would be announced Thursday. It's no surprise, of course, that Beadle should be honored this way and it is a perceptive courtesy for Tatum but I am still quite astonished (as I was for the NAS last year) to be added on. I just had the impression that this kind of dignification in biology should go to the venerables and veterans and it is a bit of a shock to be classed that way. Of course in physics quite young men, e.g. Willis Lamb have been marked this way too. But I'm worried enough at keeping up a lab career that this kind of stigma has some dreadful connotations: I guess I just don't believe in memorializing the live and kicking. On the whole I'm a little afraid the fuss and bother more than outweigh the egotistic satisfactions, the cash and the prestige factors that might help in getting my lab going. Perhaps I'm exaggerating the fuss; I was glad enough to be off the cover of Time, however!

Anyhow I should have guessed sooner: several clues make some more sense now! -- George Klein's enigmatic correspondence (saying earlier he'd see me this year, then denying he was coming to the U.S.); Leo Goldberg's request for a photograph; a telephone interview yesterday or Friday by Dag Nystadter reporter; George's request for a bibliography last spring (I suppose it did occur to me that George did have something of the sort in his mind then, but hardly this year.) Anyhow the trouble is it is by no means certain and there must be some possibility it is a mistake; I am rather nervously awaiting the AP bulletin to be picked up locally as I'm sure I'll have no peace after that!

I do feel as much as ever that the nonsense ought to be abolished but I don't have the courage to meet it head on and I'm afraid it would raise even more fuss and perhaps affront Ed and Beadle in a rather nasty way. The best I can do is to be as inconspicuous about it as possible and make some reference to the obsolescence of personal distinction in scientific life. I could write a paper on the functions.

The functions of the N.P.: to attract public attention (and arouse its understanding and support for social achievement in science -- we (as scientists) have to suffer to solve his conscience. (Nobel). Good and bad aspects; misunderstanding in role of hero in science, no matter who must parasitize dozens of people who do not directly share in recognition but may get secondary benefits.

or allude to this. But probably the less said the better.

What a mixed list it is! The "distinction" works out to the cash and to the public fuss that somehow has grown up around it. 1908 was Ehrlich Metchnikov; Muller was 1946 and to think of it did NP give him such a fuss!??

? have to think about scheduling trip to STO in December -- by jet? I suppose just have to concede that all our plans will be upset.

... 4 lines deleted, family private

*NSF, General statement to Fred Stone for NIH;

NIH - Nossal; NIH - Training grant; NIH - transfer from U-W.