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The last Society symposium devoted exclusively to the genetics of micro-organisms was held twenty-one years ago (Hayes & Clowes, 1960). It is not surprising, therefore, that that symposium concentrated, in large measure, on the elucidation of genetic mechanisms in micro-organisms since the previous decade 1950-60 witnessed many important milestones in bacterial genetics including the discovery of genetic transduction and conjugation in bacteria and the description of a new class of genetic elements - the episomes (Jacob, Schaeffer & Wollman, 1960).

Twenty-one years later our understanding of these phenomena is, in many respects, almost complete. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that this symposium concentrates on the application of genetics as a tool, an indispensable tool, in the analysis of many fundamental aspects of microbiology.

Those who edit books and organise symposia are faced with the formidable task of selection. Our aim has been to choose topics of wide interest and fundamental importance in which the application of genetic methods has led to rapid progress and new insights in recent years. The reader will judge how far this symposium achieves that aim. The limitations of time and of printed space have inevitably led to the exclusion of many interesting topics and it is our hope that these may be included in some future symposium of our Society.

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