



Kent Academic Repository

Williams, George T., Sedgwick, Adam C., Sen, S., Gwynne, Lauren, Gardiner, Jordan E., Brewster, James T., Hiscock, Jennifer R., James, Tony D., Jenkins, A. Toby A. and Sessler, Jonathan L. (2020) *Boronate ester cross-linked PVA hydrogels for the capture and H₂O₂-mediated release of active fluorophores*. Chemical Communications, 56 . pp. 5516-5519. ISSN 1359-7345.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/80786/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1039/D0CC01904F>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY (Attribution)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).


 Cite this: *Chem. Commun.*, 2020, 56, 5516

 Received 12th March 2020,
 Accepted 6th April 2020

DOI: 10.1039/d0cc01904f

rsc.li/chemcomm

Boronate ester cross-linked PVA hydrogels for the capture and H₂O₂-mediated release of active fluorophores†

 George T. Williams,[‡] Adam C. Sedgwick,[‡] Sajal Sen,[‡] Lauren Gwynne,[‡] Jordan E. Gardiner,^a James T. Brewster II,[‡] Jennifer R. Hiscock,[‡] Tony D. James,[‡] A. Toby A. Jenkins[‡] and Jonathan L. Sessler[‡]

A new set of PVA hydrogels were formed using the boronate ester fluorescent probe PF1 and the novel boronate fluorescent probe PT1 as the covalent crosslinkers. Treatment with aqueous H₂O₂ allowed triggered release of the fluorescent dye accompanied by complete dissolution of the hydrogel.

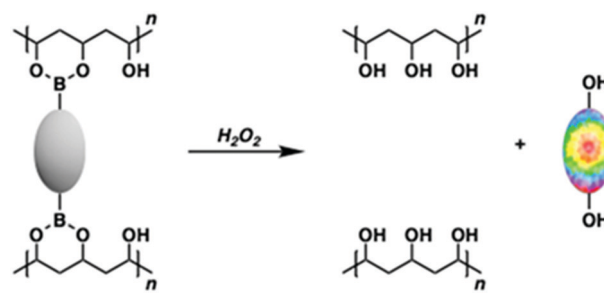
Functional hydrogels have generated widespread interest as so-called intelligent devices wherein a specific stimulus can yield a macroscopic change to the self-supporting material.^{1,2} Such constructs offer promise in the area of drug delivery and design of “smart” wound dressings.^{3–6} In addition, these functional hydrogels have demonstrated great potential as fluorescent probes for live cell imaging, disease diagnosis and sensing applications with the controlled release of a fluorophore.⁷ These constructs have utilised non-covalent interactions such as aromatic–aromatic, hydrogen bonding, and hydrophobic interactions. Unfortunately, these interactions can result in the unwanted leaching of the active molecule from the hydrogel matrix. Next generation systems comprised of a pro-molecule backbone covalently linked to the hydrogel may address these issues by providing a higher local dose and sustained/controlled release of the bioactive molecule.⁸ Here, we demonstrate a new set of controlled release materials wherein hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) is used as a stimulus to release fluorophores from polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) boronate hydrogels.

Boronic acid and boronate esters have found widespread application in material-based applications, in part because of their propensity to bind reversibly with 1,2- and 1,3-diols.^{9–19}

Such chemistry has been demonstrated *inter alia* using commercially available PVA and diboronic acid crosslinkers

to afford functional PVA–boronate hydrogels.^{20–25} Boronic acids and boronate esters are well-known to undergo H₂O₂-mediated oxidative transformations to afford their corresponding phenol functionalities.^{26–28} We envisaged that the use of bis-boronate-based pro-molecules as cross-linkers would afford a H₂O₂-responsive hydrogel platform that would allow the controlled and localised release of an active molecule, such as a fluorophore (Scheme 1). It is important to note the boronate functionality is commonly used to mask active therapeutics.^{29,30} Currently, there is considerable interest in functionalized hydrogels wherein a specific stimulus can yield a macroscopic change to the self-supporting material, including for the stimulus-based release of specific payloads.^{31–34} However, new approaches to achieving such overarching objectives are still needed.

To address the above need, we have now prepared a new class of H₂O₂-responsive PVA–boronate hydrogels. These systems rely on covalent cross-linking provided solely by a set of constituent H₂O₂-responsive boronate ester fluorescent probes, namely the known fluorophore **PF1**²⁶ and the novel fluorescent probe, **PT1** (Fig. 1). The resultant hydrogel constructs **Greenment (Gment)** and **Purplement (Pment)** displayed stability over 7 days in both aqueous solution and in the air; however, upon exposure to aqueous H₂O₂ the polymers were oxidised thus releasing their constituent fluorophores, fluorescein²⁶ and thionol³⁵ (Schemes S1 and S2, ESI†).



Scheme 1 Cartoon representation illustrating the boronate pro-fluorophore encapsulated within a PVA hydrogel being activated by H₂O₂ to release the active fluorophore.

^a Department of Chemistry, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK.

E-mail: t.d.james@bath.ac.uk, a.t.a.jenkins@bath.ac.uk

^b School of Physical Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NH, UK.

E-mail: J.R.Hiscock@kent.ac.uk

^c Department of Chemistry, University of Texas at Austin, 105 E 24th street A5300, Austin, TX 78712-1224, USA. E-mail: sessler@cm.utexas.edu

† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/d0cc01904f

‡ These authors contributed equally.



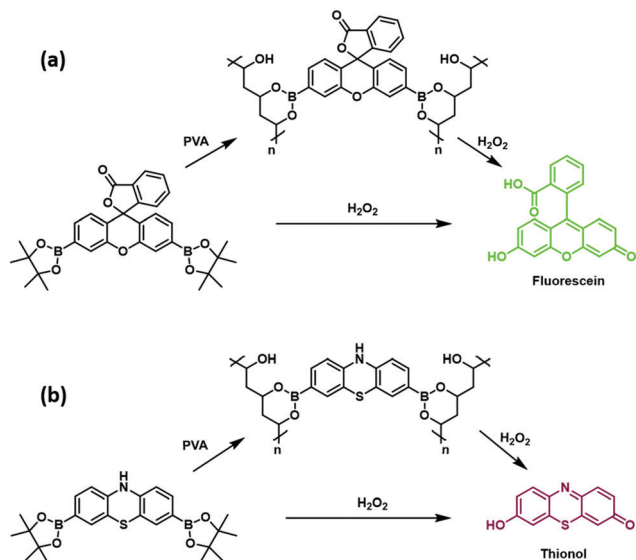


Fig. 1 (a) H_2O_2 -responsive fluorescent probe **PF1** and its corresponding H_2O_2 -responsive PVA hydrogel **Gment**. (b) H_2O_2 -responsive fluorescent probe **PT1** and its corresponding H_2O_2 -responsive PVA hydrogel **Pment**.

Complete dissolution of the hydrogel could be effected depending on the specific choice of conditions as detailed below.

PF1 was prepared following literature procedures.²⁶ The novel fluorescent probe **PT1** was synthesized through the dibromination of commercially available phenothiazine (**1**) using Br_2 (5 equiv.) in acetic acid at room temperature, giving the desired product in 74% yield. Subsequent Suzuki–Miyaura borylation using potassium acetate, bis(pinacolato)diboron, and $\text{Pd}(\text{dppf})\text{Cl}_2$ afforded **PT1** in 43% yield.

With **PF1** and **PT1** in hand, UV and fluorescence analyses were performed. Upon exposure to aqueous H_2O_2 at concentrations as low as $125 \mu\text{M}$, **PF1** exhibited a colour change from clear to green with an increase in absorption at 490 nm and an increase in fluorescence emission at 520 nm , which corresponded to the release of fluorescein (Fig. S1 and S2, ESI[†]). Whereas, exposure of **PT1** to H_2O_2 in an analogous manner led to a colour change from clear to purple and a concomitant increase in the absorption intensity at 595 nm and an increase in fluorescence emission at 610 nm . These optical changes reflected the release of free thionol as confirmed by high resolution mass spectrometry, Fig. S3–S5 (ESI[†]). It is important to note that in this work, we have focused on the use of these boronate-based hydrogels as materials whose controlled release may be triggered by H_2O_2 . However, previous reports have demonstrated the greater reactivity of boronate-based fluorescent probes towards peroxynitrite (ONOO^-).^{16,36–39} Therefore, it is likely that if used in cellular applications, both **PF1** and **PT1** could have a role to play in the fluorescence imaging of both ONOO^- and H_2O_2 , albeit not necessarily in a species specific manner.

Next, the **Gment** and **Pment** PVA-hydrogels were prepared by mixing a solution of either **PF1** or **PT1** (100 mM) in dimethyl-sulfoxide (DMSO) with a DMSO solution of 10% PVA (low molecular weight; purchased commercially) in a 1 : 1 ratio. This solution was then heated to induce gelation, followed by heating at $60 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ overnight in an oven. The resultant gels were washed with hexanes

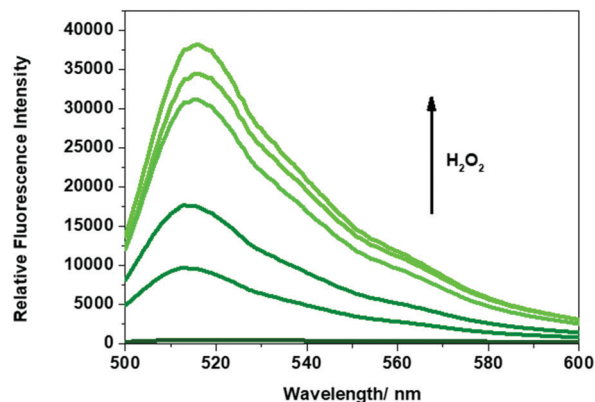


Fig. 2 Fluorescence spectra of the supernatant of **Gment**-based PVA-hydrogels exposed to various concentrations of H_2O_2 (0–1 mM) in PBS, pH 7.4. Measurements were taken after 5 min at $25 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$. $\lambda_{\text{ex}} = 472$ (bandwidth: 16 nm) on a BMG Labtech CLARIOstar[®] plate reader.

to remove the displaced pinacol and water to remove excess DMSO. These self-supporting gels proved physically robust and stable in air and could be stored in aqueous media (PBS, pH 7.4) without degradation for 7 days until used (Fig. S6–S8 (ESI[†])).

The ability of **Gment** or **Pment**-based PVA-hydrogel to release the corresponding dye in the presence of H_2O_2 was then evaluated. This was done by submerging the chosen hydrogel ($200 \pm 10 \text{ mg}$) in aqueous solutions containing different concentrations of H_2O_2 . As shown in Fig. 2, exposure of **Gment** gels to H_2O_2 (0–1 mM) led to a dose-dependent increase in the fluorescence emission intensity. The colorimetric nature of **Gment** was then tested by placing the hydrogel ($200 \pm 10 \text{ mg}$ samples) in an aqueous solution of H_2O_2 (1 mL, 1 mM). A change in colour from colourless to green ensued. Analysis of the UV-Vis absorption revealed an increase in two absorption peaks at 450 nm and 490 nm (Fig. S9, ESI[†]). The absorption peak at $\sim 450 \text{ nm}$ is tentatively assigned to the release of monoboronate **PF3**⁴⁰, while the absorption peak at 490 nm corresponds to the release of fluorescein. Based on this result, we believe that oxidation of only one boronate linkage is required to release the fluorescent cargo from the PVA-hydrogel system (Scheme S3, ESI[†]).

As shown in Fig. 3, **Pment** PVA-hydrogels exposed to various concentrations of H_2O_2 (0–1 mM) also led to a dose-dependent increase in the fluorescence intensity at the emission maximum of 610 nm . The colorimetric nature of **Pment** was then tested by placing the hydrogel ($200 \pm 10 \text{ mg}$ samples) in an aqueous solution of H_2O_2 (1 mL, 1 mM). A readily discernible change in colour was observed from colourless to purple with an increase in the absorption intensity at 595 nm (see ESI[†] – Fig. S9–S11). In comparison to one another, **Gment** was found to be more sensitive to H_2O_2 than **Pment** (Fig. S12 and S13, ESI[†]). This finding is reflected in **Gment** having a lower Limit of Detection ((LoD) – **Gment** = 0.12 mM , LoD **Pment** = 0.33 mM). However, it is important to note, these calculated LoD values are dependent upon incubation times.

Notably, subjecting the hydrogels to an aqueous solution of H_2O_2 (100 mM) resulted in the complete dissolution of the hydrogels into solution, as shown in Fig. 4. Of note is that



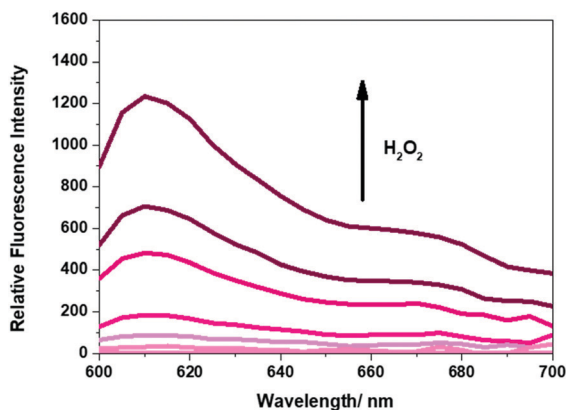


Fig. 3 Fluorescence spectra of the supernatant of **Pment**-based PVA-hydrogels exposed to various concentrations of H_2O_2 (0–1 mM) in PBS, pH 7.4. Measurements were taken after 5 min at 25 °C. $\lambda_{\text{ex}} = 570$ (bandwidth: 16 nm) on a BMG Labtech CLARIOstar[®] plate reader.

commercially available 3% H_2O_2 sold for consumer use is approximately 980 mM. The present work thus demonstrates the potential utility of boronate-based PVA polymers as a smart material for the masking and facile release of easy-to-visualise fluorophores using a readily accessible trigger. Lastly, an MTT assay with A549 cells was carried out using the **Gment** gel. At concentrations up to $50 \mu\text{g mL}^{-1}$ (note – PVA mw 13 000 – 23 000 kDa), A549 cells displayed at least 80% viability, thus demonstrating minimal acute cytotoxicity in this well-studied cell line (Fig. S14, ESI[†]). We believe these findings provide further support for the suggestion that the present approach may prove useful in achieving the controlled delivery of fluorescence-based diagnostics and active pharmacophores.²⁹

In conclusion, we report here the synthesis of a new H_2O_2 -responsive bis-boronate fluorescent probe, **PT1**, and the synthesis of the previously reported H_2O_2 -responsive fluorescent probe **PF1**. Both **PT1** and **PF1** were successfully used as diboronic acid crosslinkers to form air and aqueous stable PVA-based hydrogels. Exposure of these initially colourless and non-fluorescent systems to aqueous solutions of H_2O_2 allowed for the controlled release and activation of the encapsulated fluorophore. We believe these systems serve to illustrate a masking and delivery

strategy that has the potential to achieve the controlled and localised release of boronic acid-based sensors and pro-drugs.²⁹

The authors would like to thank the EPSRC for grant EP/R003556/1. G. T. W. would like to thank the EPSRC and Public Health England. G. T. W. and J. R. H. would like to thank the global challenges doctoral centre at the University of Kent for funding. A. C. S. and A. T. A. J. wish to thank the EPSRC for funding on smart-wound plasma – EP/R003939/1. This work was supported in part by grant MR/N0137941/1 for the GW4 BIOMED DTP, awarded to the Universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter from the Medical Research Council (MRC)/UKRI. T. D. J. wishes to thank the Royal Society for a Wolfson Research Merit Award. The work in Austin was supported by the National Institutes of Health (R01 GM103790 to J. L. S.) and the Robert A. Welch Foundation (F-0018 to J. L. S.). A. C. S. would also like to acknowledge use of a Bruker AVIII HD 500 with Prodigy liquid nitrogen cryoprobe supported by NIH grant 1 S10 OD021508. All data supporting this study are provided as ESI[†] accompanying this paper.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Notes and references

- N. N. Ferreira, L. M. B. Ferreira, V. M. O. Cardoso, F. I. Boni, A. L. R. Souza and M. P. D. Gremiao, *Eur. Polym. J.*, 2018, **99**, 117–133.
- K. Wang, Y. T. Hao, Y. N. Wang, J. Y. Chen, L. Z. Mao, Y. D. Deng, J. L. Chen, S. J. Yuan, T. T. Zhang, J. Y. Ren and W. Z. Liao, *Int. J. Polym. Sci.*, 2019, DOI: 10.1155/2019/3160732.
- M. M. S. Ebrahimi, M. Laabei, A. T. A. Jenkins and H. Schonherr, *Macromol. Rapid Commun.*, 2015, **36**, 2123–2128.
- N. T. Thet, D. R. Alves, J. E. Bean, S. Booth, J. Nzakizwanayo, A. E. R. Young, B. V. Jones and A. T. A. Jenkins, *ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces*, 2016, **8**, 14909–14919.
- D. Huber, G. Tegl, A. Mensah, B. Beer, M. Baumann, N. Borth, C. Sygmund, R. Ludwig and G. M. Guebitz, *ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces*, 2017, **9**, 15307–15316.
- H. Liu, C. Y. Wang, C. Li, Y. G. Qin, Z. H. Wang, F. Yang, Z. H. Li and J. C. Wang, *RSC Adv.*, 2018, **8**, 7533–7549.
- N. Mehresh, X. Q. Dou, Y. Zhao and C. L. Feng, *Mater. Horiz.*, 2019, **6**, 14–44.
- S. Akkad and C. J. Serpell, *Macromol. Rapid Commun.*, 2018, **39**, DOI: 10.1002/marc.201800182.
- H. Matsumura, N. Ahmatjan, Y. Ida, R. Imai and K. Wanatabe, *Int. Wound J.*, 2013, **10**, 291–294.
- A. Matsumoto and Y. Miyahara, *Sci. Technol. Adv. Mater.*, 2017, **19**, 18–30.
- A. Matsumoto, K. Kataoka and Y. Miyahara, *Polym. J.*, 2014, **46**, 483–491.
- M. Sanjoh, Y. Miyahara, K. Kataoka and A. Matsumoto, *Anal. Sci.*, 2014, **30**, 111–117.
- A. Matsumoto, M. Tanaka, H. Matsumoto, K. Ochi, Y. Moro-oka, H. Kuwata, H. Yamada, I. Shirakawa, T. Miyazawa, H. Ishii, K. Kataoka, Y. Ogawa, Y. Miyahara and T. Suganami, *Sci. Adv.*, 2017, **3**, DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aag0723.
- A. Matsumoto, K. Yamamoto, R. Yoshida, K. Kataoka, T. Aoyagi and Y. Miyahara, *Chem. Commun.*, 2010, **46**, 2203–2205.
- W. L. A. Brooks and B. S. Sumerlin, *Chem. Rev.*, 2016, **116**, 1375–1397.
- M. L. Odyne, A. C. Sedgwick, A. H. Swan, M. Weber, T. M. S. Tang, J. E. Gardiner, M. Zhang, Y. B. Jiang, G. Kociok-Kohn, R. B. P. Elmes, S. D. Bull, X. P. He and T. D. James, *Chem. Commun.*, 2018, **54**, 8466–8469.
- E. V. Lampard, A. C. Sedgwick, T. Sombuttan, G. T. Williams, B. Wannalserse, A. T. A. Jenkins, S. D. Bull and T. D. James, *Chemistry-Open*, 2018, **7**, 266–268.

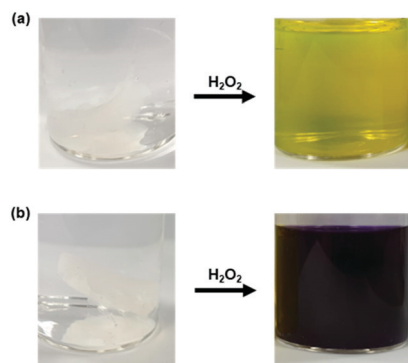


Fig. 4 (a) **Gment** and (b) **Pment** PVA-hydrogels before and after 1.5 h exposure to 100 mM H_2O_2 in PBS, pH 7.4.



- 18 X. L. Sun, M. L. Odyniec, A. C. Sedgwick, K. Lacina, S. Y. Xu, T. T. Qiang, S. D. Bull, F. Marken and T. D. James, *Org. Chem. Front.*, 2017, **4**, 1058–1062.
- 19 B. L. Patenall, G. T. Williams, L. Gwynne, L. J. Stephens, E. V. Lampard, H. J. Hathaway, N. T. Thet, A. E. Young, M. J. Sutton, R. D. Short, S. D. Bull, T. D. James, A. C. Sedgwick and A. T. A. Jenkins, *Chem. Commun.*, 2019, **55**, 15129–15132.
- 20 G. M. Peters, X. D. Chi, C. Brockman and J. L. Sessler, *Chem. Commun.*, 2018, **54**, 5407–5409.
- 21 R. Nishiyabu, S. Ushikubo, Y. Kamiya and Y. Kubo, *J. Mater. Chem. A*, 2014, **2**, 15846–15852.
- 22 R. Nishiyabu, Y. Takahashi, T. Yabuki, S. Gommori, Y. Yamamoto, H. Kitagishi and Y. Kubo, *RSC Adv.*, 2020, **10**, 86–94.
- 23 R. Nishiyabu, H. Kobayashi and Y. Kubo, *RSC Adv.*, 2012, **2**, 6555–6561.
- 24 Y. Guan and Y. J. Zhang, *Chem. Soc. Rev.*, 2013, **42**, 8106–8121.
- 25 R. W. Guo, Q. Su, J. W. Zhang, A. J. Dong, C. G. Lin and J. H. Zhang, *Biomacromolecules*, 2017, **18**, 1356–1364.
- 26 E. W. Miller, A. E. Albers, A. Pralle, E. Y. Isacoff and C. J. Chang, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2005, **127**, 16652–16659.
- 27 H. Zhu, J. L. Fan, S. L. Zhang, J. F. Cao, K. D. Song, D. Ge, H. J. Dong, J. Y. Wang and X. J. Peng, *Biomater. Sci.*, 2014, **2**, 89–97.
- 28 J. Chan, S. C. Dodani and C. J. Chang, *Nat. Chem.*, 2012, **4**, 973–984.
- 29 E. J. Kim, S. Bhuniya, H. Lee, H. M. Kim, C. Cheong, S. Maiti, K. S. Hong and J. S. Kim, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2014, **136**, 13888–13894.
- 30 M. L. Odyniec, H. H. Han, J. E. Gardiner, A. C. Sedgwick, X. P. He, S. D. Bull and T. D. James, *Front. Chem.*, 2019, **7**, DOI: 10.3389/fchem.2019.00775.
- 31 Y. Qiu and K. Park, *Adv. Drug Delivery Rev.*, 2001, **53**, 321–339.
- 32 Y. Lee, K. H. Choi, K. M. Park, J. M. Lee, B. J. Park and K. D. Park, *ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces*, 2017, **9**, 16891–16900.
- 33 C. H. Ren, L. P. Chu, F. Huang, L. J. Yang, H. R. Fan, J. F. Liu and C. H. Yang, *RSC Adv.*, 2017, **7**, 1313–1317.
- 34 F. Liu, L. B. Bai, H. L. Zhang, H. Z. Song, L. D. Hu, Y. G. Wu and X. W. Ba, *ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces*, 2017, **9**, 31626–31633.
- 35 S. Granick and L. Michaelis, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 1947, **69**, 2983–2986.
- 36 A. Sikora, J. Zielonka, M. Lopez, J. Joseph and B. Kalyanaraman, *Free Radical Biol. Med.*, 2009, **47**, 1401–1407.
- 37 A. C. Sedgwick, W. T. Dou, J. B. Jiao, L. L. Wu, G. T. Williams, A. T. A. Jenkins, S. D. Bull, J. L. Sessler, X. P. He and T. D. James, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2018, **140**, 14267–14271.
- 38 A. C. Sedgwick, H. H. Han, J. E. Gardiner, S. D. Bull, X. P. He and T. D. James, *Chem. Commun.*, 2017, **53**, 12822–12825.
- 39 H. H. Han, A. C. Sedgwick, Y. Shang, N. Li, T. T. Liu, B. H. Li, K. Q. Yu, Y. Zang, J. T. Brewster, M. L. Odyniec, M. Weber, S. D. Bull, J. Li, J. L. Sessler, T. D. James, X. P. He and H. Tian, *Chem. Sci.*, 2020, **11**, 1107–1113.
- 40 B. C. Dickinson, C. Huynh and C. J. Chang, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2010, **132**, 5906–5915.

