

BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

Editorial

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EDITORIAL

The contributions in Volume 57 of the Royal Society's *Biographical Memoirs* once again demonstrate a remarkable breadth of scientific and personal achievement. It seems invidious to pick out just a few of the people all of whose scientific accomplishments were of the highest order, but brief details about a few illustrate the scope of their work and lives.

Two examples arise from the Science Voices conference in 2011 held at the Royal Society and organized by the Society along with Kingston University and the Natural History Museum. This sought to bring science and scientists together with historians and the public through scientists' personal voices and testimony. Malcolm Longair FRS spoke about two Fellows whose memoirs he has written for this volume. It is well worth listening to his approach entitled 'The challenges of writing Royal Society Biographical Memoirs' at <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/06/malcolm-longair-the-challenges-of-writing-royal-society-biographical-memoirs/>

The first of Malcolm's two memoirs describes the life of Vitaly Ginzburg ForMemRS. Ginzburg was one of the greatest scientists from the Soviet era who lived and worked through exceptionally turbulent times. He grew up during the worst of the Stalinist repressions after the Russian Revolution. His formal schooling only began when he was 11, but his ambition and ability enabled him to get the grounding he needed, becoming a brilliant theoretical physicist culminating in the award of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Physics for his groundbreaking research on the theory of superconductivity.

Malcolm's second memoir is for John Baldwin, a distinguished friend of his. Baldwin was an experimental astrophysicist and head of the Radio Astronomy Group of the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge University, and played a pivotal role in the development of interferometry in radio astronomy.

Peter Humble's memoir of Dr Alan Head describes his work as a mathematical physicist along with his many scientific interests and achievements. He invented a giant radio telescope and also a novel system of refrigeration—the latter developed during a holiday in the Outback when on a particularly hot day he set about a way of keeping his tomatoes cool! His memoir is particularly notable for the inclusion of several interesting excerpts from recollections by colleagues and family.

David Trentham FRS has written about Samuel Victor Perry. Perry served in World War II and spent much of it as a prisoner of war after his capture in North Africa. His several escapes became the stuff of legend. In peacetime he resumed his distinguished pioneering research on the protein biochemistry of muscle. He was a habitual gardener and spent much of his time gardening at his beautiful retreat in Dinas Cross, Pembrokeshire.

Ian McCave and Henry Elderfield FRS write on Nick Shackleton, an international scientist of great renown who fundamentally changed concepts of how Earth processes work. His work contributed greatly to our present understanding of the mechanisms and causes of global warming. In addition to his scientific success, he excelled as a skilled amateur clarinet player. He was a collector of woodwind instruments—nearly 900 in all, including 817 clarinets and basset horns. He was as highly respected by his fellow musicians as he was by the scientific world. It almost seems his career choice must have been between music and science. Last

year, during our 2010 anniversary, Shackleton's face appeared on a set of Royal Mail stamps commemorating Royal Society scientists.

A memoir I especially enjoyed is the racy account of Alec Bangham's life, work and achievements prepared by Sir Brian Heap FRS and Gregory Gregoriadis. Bangham was a very colourful individual whose development of liposomes has had a range of valuable medical applications.

Once a completed memoir has been submitted, it is sent for review to one of the Editorial Board members or to other Fellows when additional expertise is needed. Few substantial revisions have been needed, although the occasional 'hagiographic' memoir, in which it is clear that the subject's achievements and personal qualities have been exaggerated, has had to be modified.

Two particular groups I have found myself thinking about as I have read the memoirs during my editorship are the many Jewish scientists who have contributed so much and, perhaps less well known, the Quakers who have done so.

In *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* in 2004, Sir Alan Cook gave details of 72 people who left mainland Europe for the UK between 1930 and 1940, 50 of whom became Fellows and 22 Foreign Members of the Royal Society—mostly, though not all, Jewish. Thirteen won Nobel prizes. The title of the book by Jean Medawar, David Pyke and Max Perutz sums it all up very neatly: *Hitler's gift: scientists who fled Nazi Germany*.

There is some uncertainty as to whether Quakers have been over-represented as Fellows of the Society—by a factor of perhaps 40-fold over expectation. Geoffrey Cantor, writing in *Notes and Records* in 1997, concluded that the claim that Quakers are over-represented is not borne out by their numbers in relation to the whole population. However, Cantor was writing about Fellows in 1660–1750 and he himself pointed out that Quakers were then much more concerned with adverse religious pressures, including imprisonment, than with 'the contemplation of natural phenomena'. There is limited information about the Quaker contribution when more tolerant times came along. In any event, Quakers have certainly provided some very distinguished Fellows—among them John Dalton, Joseph Lister (PRS 1895–1900), Sir Arthur Eddington, Dame Kathleen Lonsdale and Lord Brain, as well as several who are still alive and active in research.

A meeting in 2008 entitled 'Writing scientific biography', attended by historians as well as Fellows, made it clear that the memoirs are a valuable source of material not only about the individuals concerned, but also about the way in which science has been viewed and has developed over the years. A suggestion at the Science Voices meeting was that lay historians and other interested observers might have a hand in writing memoirs, apart from the sections requiring specialized expertise in the Fellow's scientific work, and it would be interesting to know what readers feel about his idea.

This is my last year as Editor. My grateful thanks to all the authors who have researched and written memoirs, to those Fellows, whether or not members of the Editorial Board, who have reviewed them, and to the Publishing Group for ensuring that the whole process has gone smoothly. In particular, I want to thank Keith Moore, Buchi Okereafor and Bruce Goatly for their help and support day to day, and also Nichola Court for her help over my interest in the Jewish and Quaker Fellows. Finally, I am very grateful to my PA, Donna Davoren, whose contribution at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has also helped ensure the timely appearance of this volume.

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September 2011