

# FOREWORD

More than ever before, the true stories of scientific discoveries are lost by the restricted space and style of the widely read journals and the hurried pace of reporting. There is no means of knowing either the personalities or the artistic qualities in the pursuit of understanding nature. Scientists look to the future rather than the past; they abhor writing and do it poorly. Autobiographical accounts are rare and the memoirs of the deceased in the volumes of the National Academy of Science (U.S.) and the Royal Society are commonly dull and impersonal. There is an important need to know about the people responsible for the progress of science as much as about those in politics, business, the military and the arts.

Oral histories can supply these much-needed accounts of how discoveries were made as told by those who made them. The success of this kind of historiography is attested by the enthusiastic reviews of István Hargittai's first volume, *Candid Science: Conversations with Famous Chemists*. This second volume, devoted to thirty-six biologically oriented chemists and chemically oriented biologists, is just as good. There is a fluency and intimacy, and hence readability, in the responses to questions from a knowledgeable colleague who had done his homework on both the scientist and the subject.

Hargittai poses questions that might not have been considered in an autobiography and that might have been frustratingly impossible for the author of an obituary memoir. Fascinating revelations emerge in the responses to questions that range from descriptions of the research subject, family background, inclinations to do science, religious beliefs and appraisals of other scientists, dead or alive. Even though I know many of the scientists,

some rather well, I learned things about each that were instructive and gratifying.

Among oral histories, there are book-length volumes, such as the current series on biotechnology conducted by the Bancroft Library of the University of California, designed exclusively for archival use. By contrast, this volume is a selection of *hors d'oeuvres* to be enjoyed by a wide readership. There are of course limitations to such brief oral histories. Leo Szilard once referred to “my version of the facts”; other versions would be helpful for clarifying the record.

All told, these unique volumes, and more that have been promised, are exceedingly worthwhile and can be enjoyed by all, young and old.

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