
Preface

We often forget that the science underpinning our contemporary civilisation is not a marmoreal edifice, fixed forever in its present shape. On the contrary, at each moment as it developed over past centuries, it grew and changed by the efforts of individual people and the institutions they created. Therefore, the tapestry of disciplines that we call by the generic name ‘natural science’ does not only consist of facts uncovered about the world around us and the laws that connect them. As arguably the finest single product of the human mind, its substance and direction have been strongly conditioned (some might even say determined) by the people drawn to take part in the enterprise and both the physical and social environments in which they have worked. Having had the good fortune to be associated with numerous scientific institutions in various countries over the last forty years, I have had the chance to observe how they came to be what they are, as well as getting acquainted with some of the remarkable personalities (past and present) whose lives and characters have shaped them. In particular, as Director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain and its Davy Faraday Research Laboratory for most of the 1990s, I came to see how that unique body grew out of the preoccupations and personalities of its founding fathers, evolving continuously to meet the challenges of successive generations.

As a result of that background, and in particular the part played by the Royal Institution in what has rather pompously been called ‘public

understanding of science', from time to time I have written articles and essays on people and places connected with science, as well as the favourite topics that I have worked on myself. From the beginning, I was keenly aware of the social and historical context in which present-day science must be placed, and that provides the thread linking the topics collected here. Broadly, they divide into three categories: places, people and science. Pride of place in the first category goes to the Royal Institution, but with a side-long glance at others, especially an international laboratory in France, the Institut Laue-Langevin. The second category, people, is divided between giants of the past and some present-day practitioners whose lives I find especially remarkable. As to the third—science—I have plundered the texts of Friday Evening Discourses that I gave at the Royal Institution, as well as other popular accounts of research areas that are still developing and to which I have been able to contribute.

My thanks are due to the owners of the original copyrights on the articles reproduced here. I have edited them to a certain degree to take account of more recent happenings but inevitably (and perhaps it may even be a source of interest) they betray their origins in the times when they were written.

Peter Day

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