EDITORIAL

HISTORIANS AND THEIR SOURCES

The varied contents of this issue convey the diversity of the materials on which the work of historians rests. Correspondence, a staple for historical enquiry, allows us to answer many questions, although Charles H. Smith’s return to the long-standing debate about the propriety of Charles Darwin’s behaviour on his receipt of Alfred Russel Wallace’s essay on natural selection in 1858 points to the limitations that we often have to acknowledge, usually because of missing letters but in this case because of uncertainty about the timing of the delivery of the correspondence. Nevertheless, letters have always been prized resources, something that makes the fine edition of the correspondence of Joseph Black, edited by Jean Jones and Robert Anderson and reviewed here by John Christie, especially welcome. Although some of the 835 items in the edition’s two large volumes are well known, most are not, and they provide enticing opportunities for the study of a chemist and man of the Scottish Enlightenment of whom a major biography has yet to be written.

Manuscript sources, including letters, also inform the study by Carla Costa Vieira of Isaac de Sequeira Samuda, the Royal Society’s first Jewish Fellow, who was elected in 1723 and was one of the most important and versatile of the modern-minded estrangeirados who helped to promote science in an eighteenth-century Portugal still labouring under the influence of the Inquisition. In contrast with Samuda, the subject of Michael Hunter’s article, John Ray, has been well studied. But Hunter shows how much can still be learned about a generally familiar life from a careful reading of two recently discovered documents. These items, slim books written in Ray’s hand, record observations and visits that Ray made during his tour of Italy in the 1660s. The books add significantly to what we know from Ray’s published account of the things he saw and the people he met; they describe, for example, a visit to Athanasius Kircher’s collection in the Collegio Romano that Ray does not mention in his Observations topographical, moral, & physiological of 1673, and more generally they throw new light on what Hunter identifies as the ‘notebook culture’ of the English virtuosi of the seventeenth century.

Derek de Solla Price, the subject of Seb Falk’s article, was a historian who knew the value of manuscripts at first hand. His discovery, in 1952, of a document, seemingly in Geoffrey Chaucer’s hand, in the library at Peterhouse, Cambridge, marked a turning point in a scholarly career that had barely begun; at the time, Price was a first-year doctoral student working for his second PhD (he already had one in physics) in Cambridge. The document described an equatorium, which Price reconstructed and then displayed at a Royal Society conversazione in the form of a model, six feet in diameter. Thereafter, Price’s work bridged the traditional divide between the world of texts and objects, an approach epitomized in his ingenious reconstruction of the ‘Antikythera Mechanism’. His publications on the history of technology and the politics of science, allied to a gift for showmanship, marked him as someone with a rare openness to material culture and generally unwilling to be constrained by the narrower conventions of scholarly life.
John Fletcher Moulton, too, was someone who saw academic achievement, in his case as a mathematician and Fellow of the Royal Society, as a gateway to a public role. He moved with equal ease in the company of scientists, lawyers, and, as William Van der Kloot shows, the military and political figures whom he encountered, from 1914, as head of explosives production in the Ministry of War and then the Ministry of Munitions. His ability to tread confidently, and for many years, at the interface between the worlds of scientific advisors, and ministers and civil servants responsible for policy made him a powerful public figure.

As Sir Paul Nurse observes in his 2013 Anniversary Address, which we publish in this issue, ensuring an informed presence in exchanges between academic science and the realms of decision-making remains essential to the life of the Royal Society in our own time, as it was in Moulton’s. But it cannot be detached from the Society’s core function of recognizing scientific excellence through its elections and awards. That function is not easily fulfilled, and it requires the constant monitoring and review to which Sir Paul refers in his address. As part of an intricate reward system, elections and awards help to foster achievement and thereby to maintain the Society’s authority in public debate. The system may have its flaws, but broadly it works. I have no idea whether invitations to become a Fellow or to receive one of the Society’s medals have been declined in recent years. But such instances must be rare. Roland Jackson’s study of John Tyndall’s decision not to accept the Royal Medal that he was to receive in 1853 for his work on diamagnetism stresses the exceptional nature of such a refusal in the nineteenth century. The choice in favour of Tyndall (over his main competitor, A. W. Hofmann) had been a narrow one and, worryingly for Tyndall, doubts had been expressed in certain quarters about the originality of his work. In the circumstances, Tyndall’s stern moral code made his withdrawal inevitable. His decision, which he cannot have found easy, left Charles Darwin as the single recipient in the only year since their inauguration in 1826 in which two Royal Medals (three since 1965) have not been awarded.

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