

Compte rendu

Ouvrage recensé :

Biological Sciences at the National Research Council of Canada: The Early Years to 1952. Norman T. Gridgeman. Waterloo, Wilfried Laurier University Press, 1979. Pp. xxi, 153, index

par Peter J. Bowler

HSTC Bulletin: Journal of the History of Canadian Science, Technology and Medicine / HSTC Bulletin : revue d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine au Canada, vol. 5, n° 1, (17) 1981, p. 53-54.

Pour citer ce compte rendu, utiliser l'adresse suivante :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800097ar>

DOI: 10.7202/800097ar

Note : les règles d'écriture des références bibliographiques peuvent varier selon les différents domaines du savoir.

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter à l'URI <https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. Érudit offre des services d'édition numérique de documents scientifiques depuis 1998.

Pour communiquer avec les responsables d'Érudit : info@erudit.org

Biological Sciences at the National Research Council of Canada: the Early Years to 1952. Norman T. Gridgeman. Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1979. Pp. xxi, 153, index.

In this short book, N. T. Gridgeman surveys the work of the NRC's Biological Division from its creation in 1928 to 1952. He divides his narrative into three sections: (1) to 1939, (2) the war years 1939-45, and (3) 1945-52. Appendixes give extracts from a number of relevant documents, while appendix five is a valuable thirty-five page list of publications derived from the division's work.

One of the greatest problems facing the author of such a work is the balancing of a number of topics which must be confronted. These include descriptions of the actual work performed, of the internal developments of the organisation and its relation to external influences, and of wide issues such as the role of pure versus applied research within a government-financed institution. The difficulty of providing a balanced account will be compounded, as in the present case, when the overall length of the work is severely restricted. Gridgeman has done his best to describe the research projects in which the division was engaged, his book being divided into a host of appropriate subsections. Some of these are substantial--there is a ten-page section on the problems of supplying bacon and eggs to wartime Britain which is fascinating and at times hilarious. But all too many of the sections are only a page or two long, barely enough to give an outline of what was done. Many of the topics probably contain the seeds of a good PhD dissertation,

although the lack of documentation (apart from the bibliography) will not give much of a start to the aspiring student.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on sections devoted to individual projects pushes any discussion of wider issues into the background. Gridgeman is certainly aware of such issues, but lack of space and appropriate organisation mean that his discussion is fragmentary and rarely adequate. Both the internal development of the division and its involvement with pure research are indicated as important topics. The end point of 1952 was chosen because it corresponds (1) to the appointment of a new director and (2) to the inception of a new phase of relatively 'pure' research inspired by Watson and Crick's work on DNA. Yet the body of the book seldom has such discussions in depth. We are told (p. 38) of W. H. Cook's dissatisfaction with the rigidity of NRC after the appointment of A. G. McNaughton as president, but no elaboration of the theme is given. The question of the division's involvement with pure research is raised on several occasions (including changes in its title), but there is no comprehensive discussion of the delicate problem of how deeply a government organisation should involve itself with work that is not immediately 'useful.' There are a couple of references to the growing use of theoretical developments such as genetics to solve practical problems, but again no details.

All in all, Gridgeman's book is a useful if frustratingly restricted introduction to an important topic in the history of Canadian science. One can only hope that more substantial works concentrating on the key issues raised in this outline will appear in future.

Peter J. Bowler
Queen's University, Belfast