

editorial

Committing ourselves to study the past

In April the Council of The American Physical Society approved in principle the formation of a new professional division—the Division of History of Physics. This action, together with the recent creation of the Division of Historical Astronomy in the American Astronomical Society, reflects the marked increase in interest of late on the part of physicists and astronomers in the history of their disciplines. This interest is a welcome sign of maturity on the part of these disciplines in the sense that as individuals mature they typically show greater interest in their personal family and cultural histories.

The petition to the APS Council for the new division cited three specific reasons that physicists are interested in history: scientific, cultural and pedagogical. The first of these motivations may not be as obvious to some physicists as the latter two. The scientific value of research in the history of physics relates to our need to understand more about how good physics is done. Research in the physical sciences has evolved into an enormously successful (and recently enormously expensive) human activity. However it remains to some extent a craft occupation—the art of doing physics passed down from master to apprentice. The first step in obtaining a more rational understanding of this art is to have as much information as we can about how good physics has been done in the past.

Happily, numbers of highly esteemed physicists and astronomers are turning to this problem and are doing serious historical research in addition to their usual physics research. The new APS and AAS divisions will provide these “professional historians of physics” outlets for the presentation of their research results, which are often too technical in the physics sense to be appropriate for, say, the History of Science Society. At the same time a steady flow of historical findings will be assured for physicists and astronomers who are “consumers” of history—teachers who find this material helpful in their classrooms or working physicists and astronomers who seek to satisfy their personal cultural interests. The history divisions are also expected to complement and support in important ways the work of the AIP Center for History of Physics.

Although the new APS division will not formally come into being until the APS Council approves the required by-laws for the division at its next meeting in November, members of APS who are either producers or consumers of history should be aware that they will soon have the opportunity—perhaps by the end of the year—to become charter members of the new division (and at no extra dues charge, as membership in all APS divisions is, for the present, gratis). The organizers of the new division (Laurie Brown, Stephen Brush, Max Dresden, Gerald Holton, Martin Klein, Gertrude Scharff-Goldhaber, Roger Steuwer and K. C. Wali) are few in number and would welcome hearing from potential members who have ideas for organizing the functions of the division and who could contribute time and energy to getting it started.

It is satisfying to realize that future historians of science will record the year 1980 as the date when American physicists and astronomers committed themselves to the serious, ongoing investigation of their past.

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