
Historians of science

Since its earliest years, the British Academy has published extended obituaries (memoirs) of deceased Fellows of the British Academy. Collectively the biographical memoirs of the British Academy make up a chapter in the intellectual history of Britain, and are used as a source by biographers and historians.

The latest collection of memoirs, available as an open access resource via the Academy's website, includes portraits of four scholars who in their different ways were pioneers in writing the history of science. The following extracts give a flavour.

Rupert Hall (1920–2009) and Marie Boas Hall (1919–2009)

Frank James tells the transatlantic love story of Rupert Hall and Marie Boas. Their marriage proved to be a formidable scholarly partnership, but they individually earned election to the Academy's Fellowship. They died within three weeks of each other. Poignantly and uniquely, they share a biographical memoir. Frank James concludes:

As so often happens with successful pioneers, the very success obscures the magnitude of the achievement. Some of the things that we now take for granted simply did not exist when they started their careers. For the Halls, perhaps the two most significant changes they contributed to bringing about were making history of science a proper branch of history and emphasising, both by their historical writings and by their practice, the value of studying and publishing manuscripts. Both these are now

so taken for granted that it requires considerable historical imagination to understand that in the 1940s and indeed into the 1950s such views would have been generally regarded as perverse and that the Halls were both historiographically radical in their day. Both Hall and Boas would have undoubtedly enjoyed successful careers individually. But by bravely defying the prevailing social conventions, by having confidence in their joint future during the very difficult and emotional closing years of the 1950s, Hall and Boas created the formidable partnership in the history of science that has been outlined in this memoir. Their passionate love, respect and admiration for each other surely produced historical work of a quality and influence much greater than anything they might have done separately.



Rupert Hall (elected FBA 1978) and Marie Boas Hall (elected FBA 1994), at their retirement in 1980.

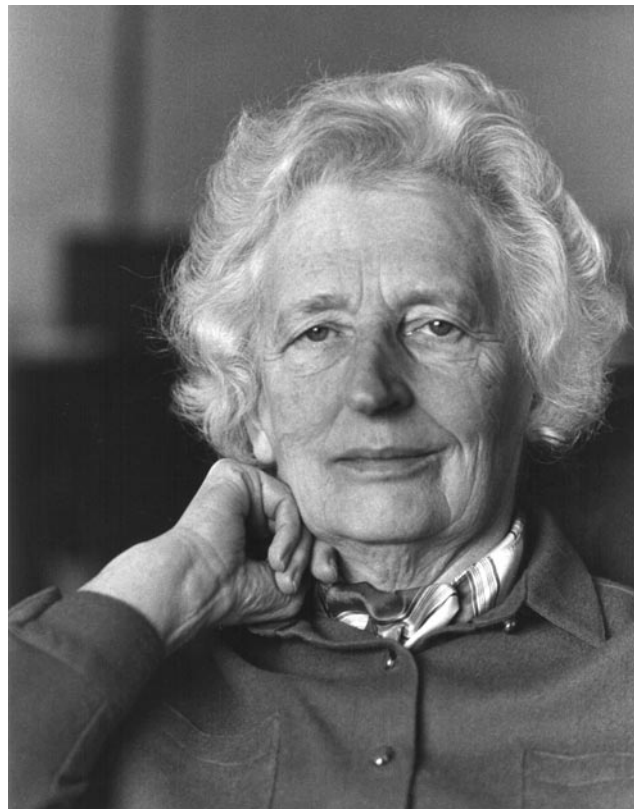
Margaret Gowing (1921–1998)

Margaret Gowing, who had the distinction of being both a Fellow of the British Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society, was the historian of the nuclear age. The following edited extract, from the lengthy appreciation by Roy MacLeod, describes how she produced her first publication as archivist and historian at the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA).

In Gowing's day, writing nuclear history meant navigating uncharted seas. As her colleague Lorna Arnold recalled, 'there was no secondary material, and the subject, which had been wrapped in wartime secrecy, was still largely secret'. Gowing also had no scientific training ('I didn't know an atom from a molecule', she liked to say). And she knew nothing of the history of science. But she did have several advantages, whose value she understood from her years at the Cabinet Office. The UKAEA would let her work with the minimum of interference. There were few strings attached – no deadlines, no designated methods of work, or periods or themes to be covered. She was given secretarial support, a salary, and she reported directly to the Chairman of the Authority. She was free to get on in her own way, at her own speed. Thanks to an early Authority agreement with the Cabinet Office, she had access to all departmental, Cabinet Office, Downing Street, and Foreign Office records, however secret, except for an undisclosed quantity of intelligence material. An advisory committee was mooted, but apparently not appointed.

All Gowing wrote, of course, would be subject to vetting, but within the Authority there was the presumption that some form of publication would ensue. Above all, she had the inestimable advantage of writing on a subject of intense national and contemporary interest, about which little was publicly known, but for which there was a growing audience, eager to learn, and likely to respond well to a lively narrative. Her only competition came from American historians, and their account of the nuclear story, in her eyes, needed a British companion.

From the early 1960s, Gowing set out to apply to Britain's nuclear history the methods she had learned from [Sir Keith] Hancock and the Cabinet Office – that is, begin at the top, and work your way through the people who actually made the history. In this, she was fortunate in writing at a time not long after the events she was describing, and could command the help of many who knew these events at first hand. She played by the rules – she produced drafts, and sent them for comment to senior officials. As during the war, she excelled at asking awkward questions of senior scientists and officials. The first time they met, Sir Christopher Hinton gave her two hours, and 'bared his soul'. Sir James Chadwick, the Nobel-Prize-winning physicist who had refused to co-operate with a Cambridge historian sent earlier by the Cabinet Office, pursued their conversation with 'a glow of warm letters'. She became good friends with the physicists Nicholas Kurti and Sir Rudolf Peierls, both now at Oxford. In France, she met Bertrand Goldschmidt, and in the United States, J. Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves. She got on so well with Nils Bohr, the distinguished Danish physicist, that he invited her to Copenhagen.



Margaret Gowing (elected FBA 1975). Photo: Billett Potter.

Within the Authority, the competing roles of archivist and historian were not always well understood, and for the latter Gowing had to fight for support. Revealing sentiments that she made more vocal over time, Gowing reflected:

I suspect that people think I collect files together and then sit down in an academic calm so enviable compared with the administrative hurly burly and, with a bit of [luck] and inspiration, write a chapter. In fact it is a gruelling intellectual job which requires intense concentration and involves very difficult problems of analysis, judgement and selection, as well as literary skill. Quite apart from this, I have had to cope with very eminent, sometimes very difficult people. If I had put a foot wrong the opprobrium on the Authority might well have been considerable.

Fortunately, Gowing's relations with the Authority improved when [in 1964] – after just two years and two months, without research assistance, and amidst difficulties at home – she researched, wrote and published her first work in nuclear history, *Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939–1945*. This was the first civil official history to appear outside the Cabinet Office series. As such, publication could not be guaranteed – certainly not if it contained footnotes, even if they were to documents that other historians could not see for the next thirty years. However, once Gowing had submitted her manuscript for vetting, few changes were suggested, and opposition melted away. The UKAEA retained copyright and, with a nod to security,

removed her footnotes. But they let the book be published by Macmillan, with an eye to a wide potential readership. It was a canny decision, profitable to publisher, agency, and author.

Conceived by Gowing as the first of three chronological volumes, *'BAE'* was a triumph. Hancock, who had read the text in draft, pronounced it 'first rate'. Its success inspired Mark Oliphant, FRS – the distinguished Australian veteran of the Manhattan Project, and Hancock's former colleague at Birmingham, now returned to Australia – to seek the appointment of an historian to work with the new Australian Academy of Science in Canberra. Stephen Toulmin, the philosopher of science, then exploring new frontiers at the Nuffield Foundation and Sussex University, thought that 'No better example of contemporary narrative history of science has yet appeared ...'. The media played a similar tune. Even the Cabinet Office was impressed, and in 1966 decided to sponsor a new series of peacetime official histories, which took Gowing's readable book as a model. To a degree unusual among academics, and remotely rare among civil servants, Gowing was suddenly launched into the limelight, and proclaimed a national treasure.

The reason was simple. *Britain and Atomic Energy* told a story that was unfamiliar to the British public, and little known even to many in senior government circles. Working from documents and interviews, Gowing charted Britain's heroic contributions in Cambridge, Manchester and Birmingham, through the Military Application of Uranium Detonation (MAUD) Committee of 1941, preparing the way for the Manhattan Project. At a time when the United States was keen to monopolise the story, Gowing reminded the world what Britain had contributed to its success. Her point was clinched by an appendix that, for the first time, reprinted the original February 1940 memo sent by Otto Frisch and Rudolf (later Sir Rudolf) Peierls to Mark Oliphant, showing that, contrary to Heisenberg's calculations, a uranium bomb was technically feasible. The story that Gowing came across this priceless paper in an old cornflakes packet may be apocryphal, but its retelling had an instant appeal that heavyweight official history could not match. Suddenly, there was an interest in the contemporary history of science, and in preserving archives on both sides of the Atlantic. In Gowing's phrase, the bomb had 'drawn a line across history'. A new age of science had begun. If scientists had 'the future in their bones', as C.P. Snow put it, the nuclear scientists were in charge of reading the auguries.

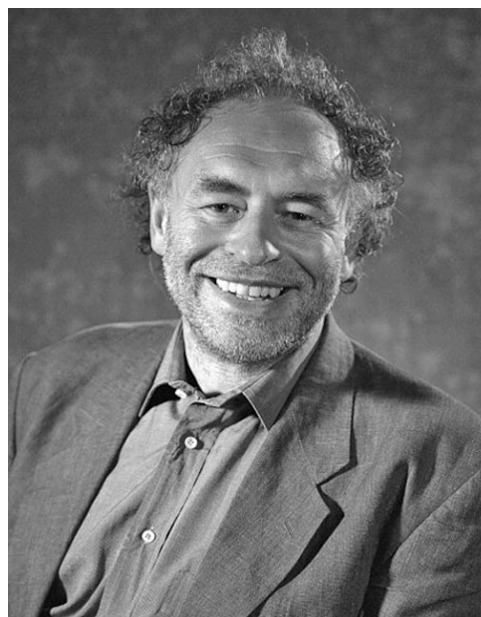
In retrospect, Gowing was both lucky and inspired in her timing. *'BAE'* appeared just as Harold Wilson's newly elected Labour Government pronounced its determination to lead a 'white hot technological revolution'. Here was a textbook showing what Britain could do. But this was not the only attraction. Amidst the grey precincts of official history, traditionally dominated by worthy accounts of transport policy and export controls, hers was possibly the most *interesting* book to trace its origins to Hancock's benevolent influence. Although she escaped becoming a

'tele-don', in an age that coined the art form, her mail now included invitations to join government committees, and to write for the literary press. That her contributions relied upon a thin background in science did not diminish her influence, or her reputation, which in any case was augmented by displays of secret documentary knowledge that few, if any, could match. Overall, the response of the UKAEA was gratifyingly positive. Public acclaim had won the Authority a rare form of kudos that politicians admired and administrators understood.

Roy Porter (1946–2002)

In her appreciation of a prolific career cut short, Ludmilla Jordanova reveals Roy Porter's influential contribution to the history of medicine, and his flair for reaching out to public audiences. The following extracts give a flavour.

Roy was a brave scholar. It is hard for most of us to grasp his range or to fully appreciate his boldness. An excellent example is his massive tome *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, first published in 1997. My understanding is that he intended the main title to terminate with a question mark. Its subtitle, *A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present*, suggests a breadth of understanding that is truly formidable. He knew how to tell a story, how to paint big pictures, trace patterns and conjure up the textures of the past. He found patterns and made generalisations with enviable verve. Roy was also happy to comment, to sum up with a tinge of scepticism. As he pointed out in the last two sentences: 'Medicine has led to inflated expectations, which the public eagerly swallowed. Yet as those expectations become unlimited, they are unfulfillable: medicine will have to redefine its limits even as it extends its capabilities.'



Roy Porter (elected FBA 1994). Photo: Wellcome Images.

The volume focused on medical thinking and medical practice, about which he could be ironic and critical. Indeed much of his work was from ‘the patient’s perspective’, a notion that will be linked forever to his name. This particular enthusiasm stems from his commitment to social history, and more particularly to a form of it that does justice to the lives of so-called ordinary people. It was nurtured by his wide reading – fast, voracious, and open-minded – in all genres. In fact his interest in how patients viewed their conditions and those they employed to help them was all of a piece with his interest in every form of medical practice, no matter how kooky it appeared in retrospect. He possessed the most lively sense of the range of medical activities, of the importance for historians of being sensitive to the diversity of health-seeking behaviours. His concern with patients and with the varied practices of those from whom they sought assistance were two sides of the same coin.

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Roy delighted in reaching wide audiences, as the wonderfully readable *Blood and Guts* shows.¹ He practised public history long before the term was common in the United Kingdom. Indeed I think he saw it in moral terms. We, those of us who are privileged to work in universities, should share our knowledge and enthusiasm with anyone who is interested. This is why, early in his career when it was possible to do so, he travelled extensively to schools, associations and societies to speak about his work. His recognition of the potential of satirical prints to engage audiences and afford fresh historical insights reinforces these points.

Those encountering him for the first time could not help but be struck by his distinctive personal style, with his open shirts, rumpled trousers and jackets, gold jewellery and stubble. They would quickly be won over by his charm, erudition, and cheerfulness. I have heard it said that a distinguished American academic – a woman – considered him the sexiest man in London. No memoir of Roy would be remotely satisfactory without a discussion of sex, a subject that was, if I may put it this way, close to his heart. His writings on the history of sexuality were innovative and influential. It was a subject he could tackle

with wry humour and without a shred of prudery. In this, as in other respects, he was a liberated man. Roy genuinely liked and appreciated women, nurtured their careers, and took immense pleasure in their achievements. These qualities cannot be taken for granted, and it is greatly to his credit that he applauded all success, and did so much to ensure that others enjoyed as much of it as possible.

Everyone who knew Roy has a favourite anecdote about him. One of mine comes from the time I stayed with Roy and his first wife, the writer Sue Limb, as a despondent and somewhat lost Ph.D. student. Getting up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, I discovered Roy, hard at work at the kitchen table. This occurred 40 years ago, but I seem to remember he was reading Aristotle. His capacity for work is deservedly legendary. But so is his capacity for many kinds of fun. We can be entirely confident that he would have greatly enjoyed knowing that if, a decade after his death, you google ‘Roy Porter’, a butcher in Lancashire and an American jazz drummer also come up. What might surprise him, however, is how many of his books can still be obtained from the Amazon website, how many students read and appreciate his work, and how deeply he is missed.

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Roy MacLeod Roy MacLeod is Professor Emeritus of (Modern) History at the University of Sydney.

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The 23 obituaries in *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XI* were posted on the Academy’s website in November 2012, and can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/memoirs/

¹ Roy Porter, *Blood and Guts: A Short History of Medicine* (London, 2002).