

The Rockefeller Foundation and the History of Science

By Margaret Rossiter

The Marie Underhill Noll Professor of the History of Science,
Department of Science and Technology Studies
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

mwr4@cornell.edu

© 2012 by Margaret Rossiter

My research topic was the history of the history of science in the United States, broadly defined, especially after 1950. I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) for seven days and used several collections.

At first I looked at the files relating to the few grants given to historians of science and mathematics (but not medicine, as others have worked on that and it is quite separate). This took me as far back as the 1930s and showed a certain mellowing over the years, as Warren Weaver, at first quite negative toward funding any aspect of the history of science, became more supportive in his later years and by 1970 was quite proud of some of the ventures he supported (by then he was at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation).

Two of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) grantees were quite successful in launching new areas of study, as Otto Neugebauer, a refugee mathematician referred to in-house as “the Austrian genius,” immigrated to Brown University, where he trained others and started a department of the history of mathematics (also known as “the exact sciences in antiquity.”). Weaver had initially opposed supporting Neugebauer's move to the U.S. and subsequent work and only did so because he had been supported earlier under the RF's refugee scholar program.

Another unusually successful grantee was Don K. Price of Harvard University, who in the mid-1950s started a seminar on science and public policy that attracted a wide variety of faculty, students, and visitors and helped spawn that field as an academic specialty. His seminar eventually led to the creation of the separate John F. Kennedy School of Government and Politics there. Weaver also objected initially to Price's proposal, as it did not require a major commitment of time from full-fledged scientists on the Harvard faculty. In response Price (a former vice president of the Ford Foundation among other positions) claimed that this was actually an advantage: such persons (i.e., chemist and former presidential science adviser George Kistiakowsky) were already far too busy to be able to make a formal full—or even part-time commitment to his project, but could come occasionally. That proved to be the case for him and others and was time enough for making the acquaintance of graduate students, visitors, and various other faculty who also dropped by (Harvey Brooks, Gerald Holton, etc.) thus bringing together current scientist-administrators with former and aspiring ones.

Upon the advice of RAC archivist Lee Hiltzik I went through the personal papers of Warren Weaver and selected portions of the immense Detlev W. Bronk Papers. Both were former scientists who became statesmen of science and as such became what might be called supportive “uncles” of the emerging field in their later years. While neither man was active in the field they both served on many boards and committees where their advice was sought. In particular Bronk had supported the development of the history of science at Johns Hopkins University when he was president there and later at the Rockefeller University (RU). Weaver spent about a decade at the Sloan Foundation which made occasional forays into the history of science and mathematics, for example, support for Derek Whiteside at the Newton Mathematical Papers in the late 1960s. Bronk headed the National Science Board in the 1950s when it moved

into the area of the social sciences. Both men also wrote historical/autobiographical articles in their later years.

As a result of my research, I now plan to write two articles. One would be based on Richard H. Shryock's big project in 1945-1947 to write a comprehensive history of American science. This now seems to have been clearly based on the Office of Scientific Research and Development's end-of-the-war effort (1944-1946) to have its staff document their many discoveries and other activities. Shryock proposed a similarly comprehensive chronicle, but he planned to hire historians to write the hundred or so chapters in a four-volume work on all the sciences in America from colonial times to the recent past. This involved extensive negotiations with and the support of the governing boards of the American Council of Learned Societies of which Shryock was acting director in 1946-1947. The project's failure to obtain civilian funding (about \$60,000 from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations) probably set back the emergence of the subfield of the history of American science a decade or more, though it freed the likely junior authors to focus on writing and publishing their dissertations, which became several pioneering monographs of the 1950s.

The second possible article concerns the myriad activities of R. H. Shryock and others in the period 1955-1970, both with the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and without it; that brought together and encouraged twenty to one hundred individuals to establish many of the new departments at major universities. He hosted several meetings at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the SSRC in New York City, which assembled many would-be historians of science to consider various topics: NSF support for the history, sociology and philosophy of science; and quantification in the sciences. These inspired others to run meetings with or without the SSRC on critical issues in the history of science: the preservation of

scientific manuscripts, and the history of anthropology. Shryock also played a leading (but now forgotten) role in the development of what later became the Archives for the History of Quantum Physics and was somewhat involved in the creation of two academic departments of the history of science: one at the Homewood campus of The Johns Hopkins University and the other at the University of Pennsylvania. This story required delving into the extensive SSRC Papers at the RAC.

There should be more interest in the history of the history of science a year from now when the History of Science Society will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of its journal *Isis* with special sessions at its annual meeting in Boston. Because of my seven days at the RAC I shall be quite prepared for the meeting.

Editor's Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.