

Mordechai Feingold

## Writing the History of the Royal Society, London, in Berlin



Mordechai Feingold was born in Haifa, Israel. Having completed his undergraduate and masters studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he continued his studies at Oxford, receiving his D. Phil. in History in 1980. A year later he was elected Junior Fellow at the Society of Fellows, Harvard University, and after completing the three years' term there he accepted a position at Boston University. Since 1988, he has been teaching at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, where he holds the position of Professor of Science Studies. He has been a Fellow of the Doherty Institute, MIT, and is currently a co-recipient of a Sloane Foundation Grant. His publications include *The Mathematicians' Apprenticeship: Science, Universities, and Society in England, 1560-1640* (1984); (ed.), *Before Newton: The Life and Times of Isaac Barrow* (1990); *The Oxford Curriculum in the Seventeenth Century* (in volume four of *The History of Oxford University*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke) (1997). — Address: Graduate Program in Science and Technology Studies, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061-0247, USA.

Few Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg or, for that matter, of any such institute for advanced study manage to accomplish all that they set out to accomplish. At least this is the perennial complaint of past and present Fellows, and my experience is no exception. Unlike some of my predecessors, however, I cannot pretend to grieve those pages still left unwritten, as the profit I reaped from spending a year at the Kolleg will, for years to come, far outweigh any loss.

I arrived in Berlin confident that I pretty much had in hand the material necessary for writing the first volume of my projected History of the Royal Society, 1660-1850. I brought along a suitcase of microfilms, comprising some 80% of the Society's archives, and the superb staff of the Kolleg's library provided me with almost all the published material I needed. The outline of the volume was more or less laid down as well. The Society was founded in 1660, shortly after the Restoration of

Charles II to the English throne, when a handful of enthusiasts who had regularly gathered during the previous decade both at Oxford and in London to discuss scientific matters resolved to form a voluntary association of individuals interested in the study of 'Physico-Mathematical Learning'. This initiative led to the foundation of a new institution that, with its incorporation under Royal Charter on 15 July 1662, became known as 'The Royal Society for the promotion of experimental learning'. The establishment of the Royal Society has always been viewed as the embodiment of the Scientific Revolution, its pronounced purpose a symbol of the triumph of the new scientific spirit, while the Society's institutionalization has been attributed with generating the new ethos of science: the promotion of cooperative experimental research, the Baconian emphasis on the practical value of scientific research, and the new form of scientific publications.

However, the special place accorded to the Royal Society was never translated into a comprehensive study and it was my intention to attempt just such a task: to provide the first modern synthesis of the corporate, as well as intellectual, life of the Royal Society. I thought to reevaluate the origins of the Society within the context of growing attempts both in England and on the Continent to institutionalize scientific activity. This was to be followed by reflection on the significance of the new mode of organized scientific inquiry on research, publication, and the behavior of the scientists. I intended to analyze the work carried out by the members of the Society, both at its weekly meetings and elsewhere in England, and appraise whether such work could be considered an integral part of the Society's corporate identity, or whether its role was restricted to the replication, validation, and dissemination of such work. Likewise, I believed it was essential to investigate the exchange between the Royal Society and other scientists and societies on the Continent, the emergence of scientific journals, and the resolution of priority disputes and other controversies. Finally, I intended to embed such a comprehensive history of the Royal Society firmly within the social and cultural context of the period.

My perspective on the project did not so much change as a result of my stay at the Kolleg as become more ambitious. Listening to other Fellows discuss their interests and undertakings and conversing with them about mine tended to fortify a lingering perception that the history of the Royal Society actually offered a perfect case study of a broader project I've entertained for some years: the fundamental shift in European culture between c. 1500-1900 from a predominantly religious, humanistic, and homogeneous culture to a secular, scientific-technological, and fragmented one at the turn of the twentieth century. It became clear

to me in the course of the year that the debate surrounding the foundation of the Society unleashed a host of conflicting views concerning the kind of knowledge most worth having, the role of science in transforming long-cherished religious, moral, and aesthetic values, and the mixed consequences of scientific and technological contribution for the betterment of society. These debates have lost little of their relevance and potency over the centuries and thus I came to the conclusion that by devoting greater scope to chronicling their evolution, I would be able to shed greater light not only on the context within which the Royal Society evolved but also on the background necessary for an evaluation of contemporary issues relating to the place of science in our culture.

Regretably, my progress with the German language was not as propitious as my other studies — and not for lack of encouragement from the ever-patient Eva Hund. The problem lay, rather, with my rediscovery of my "mother tongue" — Hungarian. Some forty years after I had last used the language, I found myself picking up where I had left off, urged on by my good friends Péter Esterhazy and György Granasztói, who no doubt enjoyed hearing the babbling of a four-year old emerge from a middle-aged scholar. I wish to thank the staff of the Kolleg, and my fellow Fellows, for their (bemused) understanding.