

Preface

Volume 15, Number 2 (41), 1991

Building Canadian Science: The Role of the National Research Council

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037625ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/037625ar>

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Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

(1991). Preface. *Scientia Canadensis*, 15(2), v–vi.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/037625ar>

PREFACE

Canadian institutions, particularly scientific institutions, are rarely venerable institutions. The National Research Council of Canada, which celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1991, is not the oldest scientific organization in the country - the Geological Survey of Canada, founded in 1842, has that honour - but no organization, arguably even the senior universities, has had such a profound influence upon the growth of science and technology in Canada as the NRC.

The National Research Council was born in wartime, the First World War, as the Honorary Advisory Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in 1916; it attained its full measure of importance in wartime, during the Second World War, when its complement grew ten-fold and its scientific and technical reach expanded to an unforeseen extent. The NRC was an important institution before 1939; it was an essential institution after 1945 and, despite the political and fiscal vicissitudes of the ensuing four decades, it remains at the centre of Canadian scientific life.

The Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association/Association pour l'histoire de la science et de la technologie au Canada, founded in 1980, is a youngster in comparison. Its mandate is to inform Canadians about their scientific and technological heritage - a proud, if largely unknown heritage - and the Association wished to celebrate the three-quarters of a century of the contributions of the NRC to our social, intellectual and economic life. This celebration was not meant to be a mere paean of praise for the NRC's role in our history; historians of science and technology want to understand the dynamics of this institution and its place in science. This requires a critical assessment of the activities of the NRC, not just the construction of a catalogue of scientific triumphs.

Since 1978, historians of Canadian science and technology have organized the 'Kingston Conferences,' named for the venue of most of these meetings, to pursue their quest for an understanding of the place of these activities in our collective life. The Association, in cooperation with the National Research Council, decided to dedicate its seventh conference, held in Ottawa in October 1991, to the investigation of the NRC's history. The articles in this volume are a selection of papers read to that conference.

The editors, and the executive of the Association, wish to thank the National Research Council for its support, both moral and financial, to this project. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada also contributed handsomely to this endeavour. In addition to those who read papers and assisted in the conference, we would like to thank specially Dr Don Mortimer, the Senior

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Archival Officer of the NRC, Dr Michael Watson, formerly Project Manager, NRC 75th Anniversary and Mr Donald J.C. Phillipson of Ottawa, for their continuing assistance. Mr Phillipson was of particular assistance to us in drafting the introduction. Dr Philip Enros, then of the Science Council of Canada, performed a superb job of organizing the meeting. A highlight of the conference was an evening reception, in the historic Sussex Drive Laboratories, with a large number of former scientists and employees of the Council in attendance. We were honoured with opening remarks by the new president of the NRC, Dr Pierre Perron. It was fitting that many of those who contributed to Canadian science since World War II, within the walls of the Council's fine laboratories, should be remembered and saluted. This volume is dedicated to those veterans who could attend, and to those who could not. The articles in this volume, mostly prepared by the younger generation of professional historians of science, aim at understanding, within the context of the times, the variegated history of one of our most important institutions, and are offered as a contribution to the increased knowledge of our scientific and technological past.