

Review

Ocean Science and the British Cold War State.

Samuel A. Robinson, Palgrave Macmillan, 278pp, 2018, ISBN 978-3-319-73096-7, hardcover £89.99.

The National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), which subsequently became the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences (IOS), was originally established in 1949 and moved into what became its long term home in vacated Admiralty radar research accommodation at Wormley in 1953. Here it stayed until 1995 when it moved to its current location in Southampton where it is part of the National Oceanography Centre.

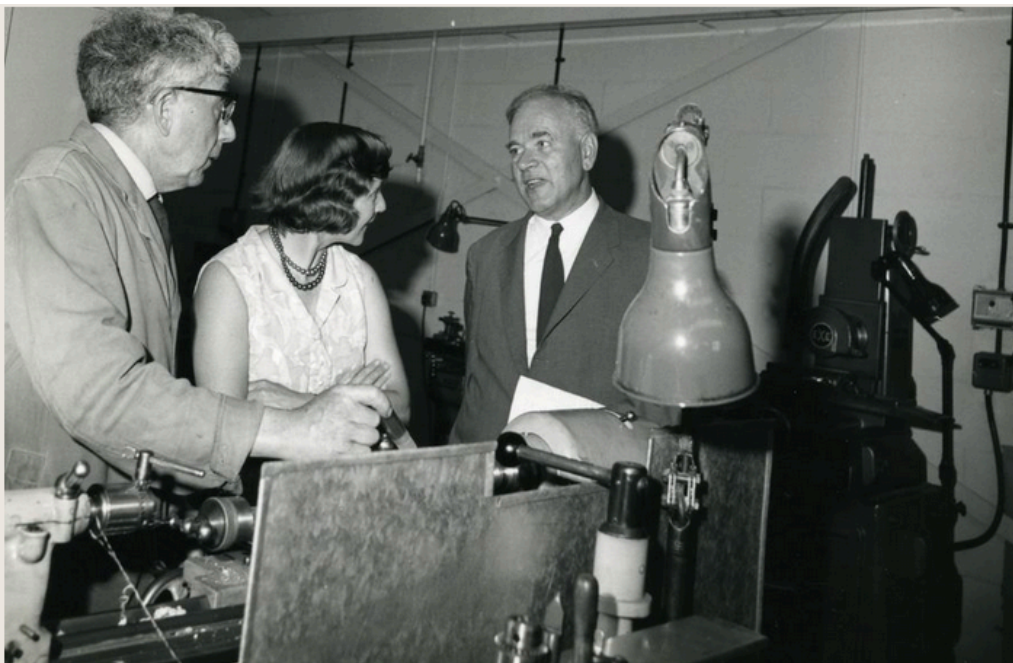
The inside story, so to speak, of the Institute's initial 22 years under the leadership of its first Director, Dr (later Sir) George Deacon, was graphically told in *Of Seas and Ships and Scientists*, edited by Tony Laughton, John Gould, 'Tom' Tucker and Howard Roe and published in 2010. A series of chapters written by ex NIO employees, and Sir George's own eminent oceanography historian daughter, Margaret, describe the origin and subsequent development of the Institute, concentrating on the science rather than politics and personalities, though both, inevitably, shine through from time to time. Indeed, one personality in particular, Sir George's, dominates the book which is dedicated to his memory. And no wonder, for the overriding message from many of the contributions is of a remarkable fondness and respect for him within the Institute based on his somewhat informal approach to recruitment coupled with his determination, as Director, to shield his staff from the irritations of science politics, leaving them free to pursue what they were most interested in and, in his view, therefore best employed doing.

As an NIO latecomer myself, having joined the staff in 1972 just after Sir George's retirement, the impression given by *Of Seas and Ships...* fits in very well with my own memories of him as a somewhat avuncular old gent (much younger then than I am now, incidentally) whose normal greeting if you met him on the Institute stairs or in the corridors was "How goes it?", closely followed by the somewhat enigmatic "Don't work too hard". But behind the easy going gentleness in retirement there was still evidence of a steely determination to face down bureaucracy if it threatened good science, and particularly if it originated from his *bête noire*, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). In fact, the very last time I spoke to him, just a few days before his death, he had popped into my office at Hambledon having already had a chat with Arthur Baker because of some stupidity emanating from Swindon and he was trying to decide whether he should get involved. Amazingly, he used to do this from time to time, possibly because he thought testing views against the simple biologist brains of Arthur and myself was likely to be less confusing than doing so against his much cleverer mathematician and physicist colleagues.

So now we have a new study, of essentially the same topic and period as that covered in *Of Seas and ships...*, but this time from the point of view of an outsider, a historian, not a scientist. *Ocean Science and the Cold War State* apparently began life as a PhD thesis, which

probably explains the first few pages, what I found to be a rather tedious historian-speak polemic about how to “do” history. But once past this short section, the book is a good read and, at times, quite pacy. In contrast to *Of Seas and Ships...*, science itself is a minor player in Robinson’s book where the main focus is on the background politics and personalities, with the key personality again being George Deacon. But this George Deacon is a quite different one from that described in *Of Seas and Ships...* Robinson’s Deacon is a politically astute and almost Machiavellian wheeler dealer constantly trying to manoeuvre himself into the centre of a scientifico-political network giving him access to support, particularly financial, for his beloved Institute and its staff.

To tell the story Robinson has delved deeply into the available literature, published and unpublished. The published stuff includes numerous sources of socio-political information that are totally unfamiliar to the average jobbing scientist – or, at least to this one. And the unpublished material is equally fascinating, particularly Sir George’s own archive held at Southampton, some of which, amazingly, is still classified and therefore inaccessible. From this raw material Robinson weaves a tale of alliances and rivalries involving George Deacon and NIO from the early post war years when the funding was essentially from the Navy and largely sheltered from the scrutiny directed at non defence budgets, through the turbulent years of the late fifties and early sixties which saw university and government scientists competing for decreasing funds and different political philosophies, via increasing pressures for political control of government science and the rise of environmentalism to, horror of horror, the founding of the research councils and the centralising of control of the scientific purse strings.



*NIO Director, George Deacon, with Rt Hon Shirley Williams (Secretary of State for Education and Science) when she visited the Wormley laboratory in 1968.
(National Oceanographic Archives, Southampton)*

The result is an absorbing story of high level shenanigans in which George Deacon fought for funding against rival claimants from the military, the universities or other government departments, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so. And amidst it all there are lots of fascinating sub plots; here are a couple that particularly tickled me.

As a biologist, I am particularly interested in how biology became included, with George Deacon's support, in an organisation that, in its origins, had a strong bias towards physics, chemistry and geology. I had always assumed that an important factor was Deacon's empathy towards marine biology based on his pre-war experiences in the Discovery Investigations. After reading Robinson's book I am less sure; it seems at least possible that his motive for supporting the NIO biology programme was more pragmatic, Deacon viewing it simply as another string to the Institute's bow, so to speak, potentially useful in the unending battle for funding.

A second revelation concerns the relationship between Sir George and his successor as director of the Institute, Henry Charnock. I was, of course, well aware that there was a degree of antipathy between the two great men, but assumed that it was fairly shallow and based on simple personality differences or possibly even heartfelt scientific differences; after all, Henry wrote Sir George's obituary for the Royal Society and his wife, Mary, painted George's celebratory portrait. But according to Robinson (p 258), the root of the problem was the bolshie Charnock's attempt to introduce trades unionism to the Institute in the mid sixties. At that time I would have been firmly in the Charnock camp, having been chairman of the Natural History Museum's branch of the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS). Did this have any bearing when Henry recruited me to the, then IOS, staff six years later? Who knows?

Finally, an amusing quote; nothing to do directly with the NIO story, but illustrating the strength of feeling that can exist in high level political circles. When Harold Macmillan became Prime Minister in 1957 he appointed Duncan Sandys as Minister of Defence, specifically with instructions to reduce defence expenditure. Unsurprisingly, this didn't go down well with the military and one of them, Sir Gerald Templar (Chief of the General Staff) is quoted by Robinson as having informed Sandys (p. 219, note 54) "Duncan you're so bloody crooked, that if you swallowed a nail, you'd shit a corkscrew."

So do I recommend the book? Absolutely, even at its ridiculously high price. And I can't wait until Samuel Robinson gives the next 25 years of the NIO/IOS story the same treatment, so that we can read about the turmoil that was going on above our heads when we thought all was sweetness and light at the laboratory bench in rural Surrey.

Tony Rice

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