

Robert G. W. Anderson (1944–



Robert Geoffrey William Anderson was born on May 2, 1944 in London, England. He attended St John's College, University of Oxford, supported by a Casberd Exhibition and a State Scholarship. He received a B.A. in chemistry in 1966, followed by a B.Sc. (electrical conduction in free radical solutions) and a D.Phil. (inelastic scattering of neutrons from adsorbed molecules), in 1970. He then moved to his first job as a curator at the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, where he had responsibility for the historical chemistry and physics collections. Edinburgh was a great centre for chemistry in the 18th and 19th centuries and the collection at the museum included the chemical apparatus connected with the research and teaching of Joseph Black (1728–1799), who had identified carbon dioxide and latent heat. In 1975 he moved to the Science Museum, London, where he joined the Chemistry Department, and shortly afterwards was assigned the task of moving and displaying the Wellcome Museum of the History of Medicine. Upon completion, he returned to chemistry as

head of department. In 1976 he mounted an exhibition and organized a conference to celebrate the 250th Anniversary of the Medical Faculty, the papers of which he edited as *The Early Years of the Edinburgh Medical School*. In 1978 Anderson published a catalogue of this remarkable collection: *The Playfair Collection and the Teaching of Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh 1713-1858*.

As often happens in mid-career, he was inexorably drawn towards the running of organizations. He had acted as secretary to the Advisory Council of the Science Museum during the time when that institution was privatized and thus separated from the civil service. With that experience behind him, he was appointed director of the Royal Scottish Museum which was about to experience a similar change of governance. In 1985, the two national museums in Scotland amalgamated (the other being the National Museum of Antiquities) and Anderson became director of the National Museums of Scotland. The major task ahead was clear: to create a new building to house the Scottish collections. Funds were allocated and an architectural competition was held, the result of which was announced in 1991. Before building work was started (the Museum of Scotland was to open in 1998) he was appointed director of the oldest national museum, the British Museum in London. Again, there was a clear future agenda: to utilize the much needed space that was being vacated by the British Library as it moved to its new Euston Road site. An architectural competition was held for the Great Court. The building, designed by Lord Foster, was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 2000. Anderson left the British Museum in 2002 and spent the next year in the School of Historical Studies of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Since his return to Britain, he has lived and worked in Cambridge, holding visiting fellowships at Churchill and Corpus Christi colleges, and at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and the Humanities.

Anderson's research interests have been in the development of scientific (especially chemical) instrumentation in chemistry during the Enlightenment and in the history of museums. During 1982–1997 he was President of the Scientific Instrument Commission of the International Union

of the History and Philosophy of Science, and during 1988–1990 was president of the British Society for the History of Science. He serves on the editorial boards of *Annals of Science*, *Nuncius* and *Journal of the History of Collecting*. He has also served on the boards of a number of museums, including the Dutch national science museum, the Boerhaave Museum in Leiden, and Oxford University's Museum of the History of Science. He has also served on various university committees as an external member, including the Boards of the Warburg Institute and the School of Advanced Study, London University, and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, Edinburgh University. He has taken an interest in archaeological studies (he gained a Diploma in British Archaeology from Oxford in 1983) and has published on the archaeology of ancient chemical wares. He continues to work on Joseph Black, having published a bibliography in 1991 (with J. G. Fyffe), and is currently editing Black's correspondence for publication. He has also taken an interest in Joseph Priestley, editing *Science, Medicine and Dissent: Joseph Priestley 1733–1804* (1987). In the area of museum history, he edited *Enlightening the British: Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century* (2003). A current project, as Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow, is considering how the working classes were influenced by museums and exhibitions in 19th century Britain, America and Australia (many of the earliest collections available to workers were science collections established at mechanics institutes, lyceums and schools of arts). Altogether, Anderson has published 14 monographs and catalogues and over 50 papers and articles.

Anderson has been the recipient of a number of awards. He holds honorary D.Sc. degrees from the universities of Edinburgh and Durham, is an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford, and of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. He is a member of the International Academy of the History of Science, and has been created Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France). He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, of the Society of Antiquaries of London and of the Royal Society of Chemistry (whose Wheeler Memorial Lecture he delivered in 2004). Robert Anderson was the 1986 recipient of the Dexter Award.

Sources

Autobiographical information provided by R.G.W. Anderson.

Anon., "Robert Anderson," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*, 4 (1989): 26.

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