Douglas McKie (1896–1967)

Douglas McKie was born on July 15, 1896 at Tradegar, Monmouthshire, England, the son of a Scottish soldier whose military career he planned to emulate. Educated at the Tradegar grammar school, McKie spent a few months at University College, Cardiff, before entering the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in 1915. After graduation he was commissioned with the South Wales Borderers and for the next eighteen months he served as a lieutenant in France during World War I. He was seriously injured at Passchendaele Ridge in an attack against German forces in July 1917. After many months of recuperation he returned to his regiment and served in the occupation forces in Germany. Realizing that he could never have a career in the infantry because of his injury, McKie left the army in 1920 and entered University College, London, where he specialized in chemistry.

McKie received his B.S. in Chemistry with first-class honors in 1923 and the Ramsay medal in 1925. Under the direction of F. G. Donnan, McKie studied the adsorption of gases on solids and published several papers in that area, receiving his Ph.D. in 1927. In 1925, before receiving his Ph.D., McKie obtained a dual part-time appointment as demonstrator in the Chemistry Department and assistant lecturer in the Department of the Principles, History and Methods of Science that had recently been created by Abraham Wolf. It was while working as an assistant to Wolf that he found his true calling as an historian. He left his chemistry appointment in 1934 to become a full-time lecturer in the department that in 1936 became the Department of History and Philosophy of Science.

When his department was closed after World War II began, McKie went back to the Chemistry Department as lecturer in a group that had been moved to the University College of South Wales at Bangor. After the war ended in 1945, McKie returned to his old department in London as reader. In 1957 he succeeded Herbert Dingle as professor, becoming the first head of that department trained as a physical scientist. He held this position until 1964, when he became emeritus professor. Under his leadership the department became the main center for the history of science in Britain. According to historian Aaron Ihde, “he carried heavy administrative burdens besides his teaching duties. He was responsible for numerous research students, since the history of science program attracted many chemists, though, his breadth of interests transcended many fields.”

Antoine Lavoisier occupied much of McKie’s interest and he wrote two biographies—*Antoine Lavoisier, the Father of Modern Chemistry* (1935) and *Antoine Lavoisier, Scientist, Economist, Social Reformer* (1952). He organized Lavoisier memorabilia and catalogued the Lavoisier laboratory apparatus in the possession of the comtesse de Chazelles. McKie was also associated with the Académie des Sciences de Paris committee that published the Lavoisier correspondence. Because of these activities he was appointed Chevalier of the Légion d’ Honneur in 1957.

McKie was an avid book collector and his collecting went hand in hand with his research: on Joseph Black, Robert Boyle, Joseph Priestley, Lavoisier, the phlogiston theory; and the history of the Royal Society. McKie had a long interest in Joseph Black, beginning with the 1935 publication

of *The Discovery of Specific and Latent Heat* (with N. H. de V. Heathcote). His study on Black, together with his biography of Lavoisier, resulted in his being presented a Sc.D. by the University of London in 1936. He also studied various student manuscripts of Black's lectures and published commentaries on them, culminating in his book *Thomas Cochrane's Notes from Doctor Black's Lectures on Chemistry 1767–1768* (1966) that captured much of Black's philosophy of chemistry. Among his more important papers are those with J.R. Partington published in the *Annals of Science*: "Historical Studies on the Phlogiston Theory: I. The Levity of Phlogiston" (1937); "II. The Negative Weight of Phlogiston" (1938); "III. Light and Heat in Combustion" (1938); and "IV. Last Phases of the Theory" (1939).

Annals of Science was co-founded by McKie and two others in 1936 and he served as an editor to the time of his death. He was founding treasurer of the Society for the History of Alchemy and Early Chemistry from 1937 to 1945 and served as its chairman from 1959 until just before his death in 1967. He was also one of the founders of the British Society for the History of Science. McKie was a Fellow of the Chemical Society of London and the Royal Society of Arts, where he was a Council Member (1962–1964). McKie was named Fellow of the Institute of Chemistry of Great Britain and Ireland in 1956. In 1958, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. McKie received the Dexter Award in 1963 for his numerous contributions to the history of chemistry and in particular for his studies of Lavoisier and Black.

McKie died on August 28, 1967 in London after a lengthy illness. Though he had never been in good health following his wartime injuries, he still accomplished an enormous amount of work.

Sources

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