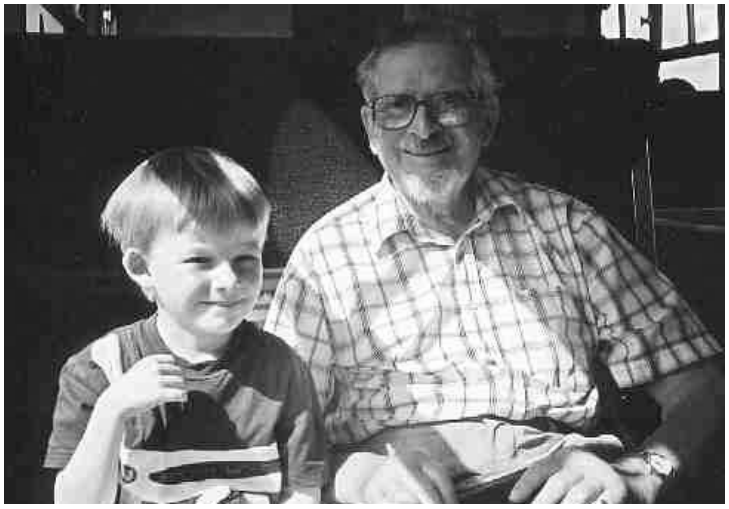
William A. Smeaton (1925–2001)



William (Bill) Arthur Smeaton was born at Broughty Ferry, just outside Dundee, Scotland, on October 24, 1925. He moved to England as a child but returned to Scotland during World War II to complete his school education at Morrison's Academy, Crieff.

In 1942, he entered Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (now Imperial College London) where he received his B.Sc. (Hons.) in chemistry in 1945. Smeaton stayed at Imperial College an additional year to do graduate work in physical chemistry. He then joined the staff at Northern Polytechnic (now London Metropolitan University) as a lecturer in inorganic chemistry. He remained there for twelve years during which he was promoted to senior lecturer (1946–1958). During his time at Northern Polytechnic, Smeaton developed a deep interest in history of science that he used in teaching to add human interest to his chemical lectures. Smeaton became a part-time student at University College, London in 1951. He obtained his M.Sc. in the history and philosophy of science (studying Guyton de Morveau) in 1953 and Ph.D. (for his study of Antoine François de Fourcroy) in 1958. Between 1954 and 1958 he published ten papers on French science, many in *Annals of Science*. It was during this period that his life's work on eighteenth and nineteenth-century French chemistry began. In 1958, he spent a post-doctoral year as a research fellow at the Centre National de la Rescherche Scientifique in the Institut d'Histoire des Sciences, University of Paris.

Smeaton returned to London in 1959 and was appointed lecturer in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at University College, London (UCL) under Douglas McKie, who had arranged for his post in Paris. In 1962, he published his thesis *Fourcroy: Chemist and Revolutionary 1755–1809* which became the standard work of this important French chemist. In 1963, Smeaton was promoted to reader and five years later was awarded a D.Sc by London University for his published works. After investigating Fourcroy, he turned to Louis Bernard Guyton de Morveau, leading him into the history of the Dijon Academy and Guyton's role in disseminating Lavoisier's ideas. He analyzed Guyton's published writings in "L.B. Guyton de Morveau (1737–1816): A Bibliographical Study," *Ambix* 6 (1957): 18–34. Another bibliographical study was undertaken with the collector Roy G. Neville, "Macquer's *Dictionnaire de Chymie*: *A bibliographical Study*," *Annales of Science* 33 (1981): 613–662.

Smeaton continued to work on chemists of the French Revolution, mapping out the territory around the famous scientist Lavoisier who was also studied by his mentors, friends, and fellow book collectors, Denis I. Duveen and Douglas McKie. Smeaton's many published papers and his book collection complemented their combined works and collecting activities. His library of books and pamphlets represented an important collection relating to the history of science and scientific education during the French Revolution, with an emphasis on Fourcroy, Guyton de Morveau and the Dijon Academy.

Smeaton remained at University College for the rest of his career. In 1982, he became an honorary research fellow and emeritus reader in the History and Philosophy of Science. Throughout his career the department was the pre-eminent British center for the history of science.

In retirement Smeaton remained physically and intellectually active. He was an enthusiastic mountain walker, enjoying hill and coastal walking holidays in various parts of England, Scotland and Europe. Smeaton was also a keen cross-country skier and spent many holidays in Austria and Switzerland. Smeaton became interested in archaeology and took courses at London University, participating in several minor "digs." Although busy, Smeaton missed the day-to-day company of colleagues at UCL, many of whom had also retired. He had lived and worked in London nearly his entire life as a bachelor. In due time, he proposed to his long-time friend Jacqueline Regester. In 1993, they were married and then moved to Ely, Cambridgeshire. Smeaton continued his interest in archaeology, attended the University of Cambridge, and took several courses on local archeology. He joined the Ely Archeological Society and conducted a survey of masons' marks of the local cathedral. He became an affiliated research scholar in Cambridge University's Department of History and Philosophy of Science. In November 1994, their son, John, was born. It was an event that brought him and his wife great happiness and a new zest for life.

With his new family and a renewed interest, Smeaton continued his research and publishing. Smeaton was considered a premier historian of science by the international community. Over a forty-six year span, he published seventy-nine important papers, a number of other publications, his book on Fourcroy, several book chapters and fourteen biographies in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. His final publication appeared shortly before his death: "The Foundation of the Metric System in France in the 1790s: The Importance of Étienne Lenoir's Platinum Measuring Instruments," *Platinum Metals Reviews* 44 (2000): 125–134.

Smeaton served the Society for the Study of Alchemy and Early Chemistry (now the Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry) for thirty-six years (1957–1993). He was treasurer (1957–1982), book reviews editor of its journal *Ambix* (1971–1986), and chairman (1986–1993). During his years of service, he demonstrated great leadership within the Society; he always exercised critical judgment and offered sound guidance to ensure the maintenance of its high standards of scholarship.

On January 22, 2001, Bill Smeaton died from a heart attack in Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge, England at the age of seventy-five. He was a renowned scholar of eighteenth and nineteenth-century French chemistry, an inspiring educator, an avid collector of scientific books, and the longest serving and most loyal member of Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry.

William A. Smeaton was posthumously honored with the Dexter Award for his outstanding achievements in the history of chemistry. The presentation was made to his wife Jacqueline and son John on August 28, 2001 at the national meeting of the American Chemical Society in Chicago.

Sources

Colin A. Russell, "William Arthur Smeaton: An Appreciation," *Ambix* 48 (2001): 53–55.

Noel Coley, "William Arthur ("Bill") Smeaton (1925–2001)," *Ambix* 49 (2002): 177–184.

Biographical information provided by Jacqueline Smeaton and William H. Brock.

Photo (Bill Smeaton with his son John) courtesy of Jacqueline Smeaton.