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PNINA G. ABIR-AM and CLARK A. ELLIOTT (eds.), **Commemorative Practices in Science: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Collective Memory**. *Osiris*, 14. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000. Pp. xii + 383. ISBN 0-226-00092-3. \$39.00 (hardback); 0-226-00093-1. \$25.00 (paperback).

As someone who has studied a major scientific commemoration – the 1909 Darwin Celebration – I anticipated this book would broaden my understanding of such events. This it certainly did, but I also profited from its reading in unexpected ways. The articles in this volume provide a multi-faceted, finely textured and fascinating analysis of a broad range of different scientific commemorations, but they also examine significant historiographical questions that should interest historians of science in general.

Commemorative Practices in Science: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Collective Memory includes a preface by Charles S. Maier (a recognized pioneer in the study of commemoration), a comprehensive introduction by Pnina Abir-Am and fourteen articles covering scientific commemorations representing different scientists, institutions and disciplines. I particularly admired the authors' adroitness at penetrating their topic's multiple layers of meaning, moving beyond providing simple case studies to explore penetrating issues in how memory can be beneficial and yet also problematic for historians attempting to come to terms with past events.

Abir-Am's thirty-three-page introduction is masterful, surveying well the general literature on the relationship between history and memory and assessing its place in current scholarly discourse. Scientific commemorations, however,

have generally received scant attention. Abir-Am, too, has been a pioneer in this area, having published a number of studies on commemorations in molecular biology (most notably in *La Mise en mémoire de la science: Pour une ethnographie historique des rites commémoratifs* (Amsterdam, 1998)). To respond to this desideratum, the present volume brings together significant case studies and explores their 'comparative potential, whether crosscultural or transhistorical' to shed light 'on the *historicity* of the commemorative events under scrutiny' (pp. 4, 5). Abir-Am's introduction provides a detailed analysis of the themes of the individual contributions; indeed, it might be especially profitable to read it after reading the articles themselves.

In her own essay, Abir-Am identifies the differing agendas – social, political, institutional, disciplinary and personal – that can (with sufficient perspicuity) be recognized in the ways molecular biology was first commemorated in the United States and in France. Her piece is deliciously textured, providing a multiplicity of perspectives and meanings that few could recognize without the intense analysis and suitable methodological sophistication (drawn from anthropology and cultural studies) that she brings to the task. Other authors likewise consider the hidden agendas of the commemoration they have studied. Owen Gingerich, for example, notes that 'every commemoration endorsed by historians or scientists invariably has background agendas other than simply the increase and diffusion of knowledge' (p. 37). The various celebrations of Copernicus, he demonstrates, vividly illustrate the role that international politics can play in shaping different observances. Even so, he notes that history of science has profited from such events in the form of the texts and scholarship they foster.

Christiane Sinding, in her comparison of the various celebrations of Claude Bernard and Louis Pasteur, points out how certain groups appropriate the memory of a scientist 'to improve their status and redefine their role in society'. Similarly, politicians can evoke the memory of a great man to promote certain political aims. In the case of French politicians, both Bernard and Pasteur were appropriated 'to

unite the nation around Republican values and mobilize it against Germany' (p. 75). Joy Harvey likewise discusses the different political, intellectual and personal reasons that motivated the feminists who organized and the scientists who participated in the anniversary of Clémence Royer's birth.

The role that generational factors can play in commemorations is well illustrated by George Haddad's analysis of celebrations held to mark Robert Koch's discovery of the tubercle bacillus. Haddad scrutinizes the 'professional narratives' offered at celebrations, not to decry their frequent ahistoricity but to reveal salient 'cultural contexts and practices that eventually led to an hegemonic professional narrative'. The American commemoration of Koch in 1932, for example, provided a forum for the older generation of American physicians, the last to be trained in Germany, to become guardians 'of the commemorative version of medicine's cultural memory' and construct through professional storytelling 'a collective professional past' (pp. 133, 135). Dominique Pestre recognizes a similar function played by commemorative ceremonies in physics, in which historical narratives help enculturate the younger generation and thereby 'strengthen the community's identity' (p. 207). Mara Beller, examining the Bohr Institute for Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen, examines the role humour can play in commemorative events in providing a 'nonoffensive way' of challenging 'the official authority and the prevailing order' (p. 253). A good example of how such events can be expropriated to consolidate and reify an emerging new discipline is provided by Betty Smocovitis's analysis of the 1959 Darwin celebration held at the University of Chicago. Evolutionary biologists, she well shows, seized this occasion to reinvent Charles Darwin as the founding father of their discipline and establish natural selection as the mechanism of evolution (p. 279).

Some commemorations, such as the three-hundredth observance of the foundation of Harvard, can reveal not only 'various historical, institutional and societal goals', but also the place of science in society. As Clark Elliott points out, the absence of science in previous celebrations is notable, and its prominence in

1936 equally so. In contrast to the world fairs of the 1930s that promoted science as a means for technological advance, 'science in the Harvard context appeared less as an agent for the betterment of society than as a community seeking unity and insularity for its own functioning' (p. 172 n. 69). The same is true for history. Stanley Goldberg's posthumous piece that deconstructs the meaning of the ill-fated Smithsonian commemoration of the *Enola Gay* mission does something similar for the role of history in society. It indicates the tensions that can arise between the historical accounts generated by professional historians and those sanctioned by politicians, journalists and interested parties.

Indeed, the sometimes problematic relationship between memory and history is considered by many of the authors of the volume, resulting in a number of interesting points. Robert Seidel, comparing the golden jubilees of Lawrence Berkeley and Los Alamos National Laboratories, found that different observers employed a 'selective memory' of the past according to their professional interests, which is often at odds with the conclusions drawn by professional historians of science. A similar point is made by Pestre in her study of CERN: physicists' accounts of disciplinary developments, she notes, often mediate between paradigm changes or reverse an intellectual trend by reviving 'long-forgotten people, books, and historical events ... to be used as tools in future debates and research' (p. 204). Liliane Beaulieu likewise points out that 'any commemoration inevitably comprises a polemical, even combative, aspect, since its main functions are to honour past or present protagonists, inveigh against opponents, and edify newcomers' (pp. 223–4). Indeed, the central question of how memory and history interact, addressed by many authors in this volume, is well formulated by Sinding. 'Critical history', she writes, 'should not destroy memory, but at the same time it has the task of preventing commemorations from distorting history' (p. 85). Such important lessons certainly transcend the particular and serve to stimulate historical scholarship in general.

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