

Obituary

RUPERT HALL (1920–2009)
MARIE BOAS HALL (1919–2009)

Rupert and Marie Hall, who died within three weeks of each other in February 2009, were two of the most distinguished historians of science of their generation. Their research illuminated much of Renaissance and early modern science. Rupert Hall wrote on physics and astronomy, focusing especially on the work of Newton, whilst Marie Hall was interested in chemistry and especially in the work of Robert Boyle. However, there was a great deal of overlap in what they produced. They shared a historiographical approach which saw science as a rational enterprise, and they took a sceptical approach to work that brought out the alchemical interests of Newton, or which showed the influence of the mystical side of van Helmont on Boyle's chemistry. Yet, they also praised the work of historians who took a different approach, for instance they valued Walter Pagel's studies of van Helmont, Harvey and Paracelsus, and thought highly of Frances Yates's work on the magical aspects of the Renaissance. As well as their research, the Halls, especially Rupert, helped to establish history of science as a distinct subject in British universities. In the early years of his retirement, he also played a significant role in developing the history of medicine within the Wellcome Trust.

Alfred Rupert Hall (he was always known as Rupert) was born in 1920, close to Stoke-on-Trent. He went to school at Alderman Newton's School in Leicester, and in 1938 entered Christ's College, Cambridge, to read history. Hall was of the generation whose studies were interrupted by the Second World War. He joined the army at the beginning of the war and then received his commission in the Royal Corps of Signals. He served in the Eighth Army in North Africa and Italy. Hall returned to Cambridge after the war and graduated in 1946. His choice of ballistics in seventeenth-century England for his doctoral thesis reflected his longstanding interest in the history of technology and his practical experience in the army. The thesis was published as a book in 1952.

Hall was one of the first non-scientists to work on the history of science and technology. He convinced Charles Singer, the first president of the British Society for the History of Science, that, despite Singer's early doubts, he was scientifically competent to study the science of the past. Singer, in fact, asked Hall to edit jointly with him the five-volume *History of technology*, published by Oxford University Press in 1954–58. Hall's belief in the essential rationality of science and its relative imperviousness in its theories to social factors may have been reinforced by the need to show his scientific credentials.

Hall, however, was very much a historian who saw the past on its own terms rather than seeing and judging it through the eyes of the present—the Whig view of history then prevalent amongst many scientists and, indeed, in society. In 1948 Hall was appointed the first curator of the Whipple Museum of the History of Science in Cambridge, the next year he was elected a fellow of Christ's College. In 1950 he began lecturing on the history of science as an assistant lecturer. From 1953 to 1959 he held the post of lecturer in the history of science and, together with Joseph Needham, helped to

get the subject established in Cambridge. 1954 saw the publication of *The scientific revolution*, the book and the title has served as an influential point of reference for historians of science.

In the early 1950s, Hall met Marie Boas, who had come to work in England on Robert Boyle's papers. This led to a life-long partnership. Marie Boas was born in New England in 1919, she went in 1936 to Radcliffe College to study chemistry, and graduated in 1940. Both her parents were college professors of English, their collaborative research influenced Marie Boas's later work with Rupert Hall, and it also brought a humanistic element into her studies. After the USA entered the war in 1941, Marie Boas worked on research into radio, and then in 1944 worked with Henry Guerlac in writing the history of the Radiation Laboratory at MIT. She then chose to write her doctoral thesis on Robert Boyle and the mechanical philosophy under Guerlac's supervision at Cornell. Marie Boas completed it in 1949, and it was published in *Osiris* in 1952. She had already been appointed to teaching posts at the University of Massachusetts and then at Brandeis University when, in 1951, she came to England and there met Rupert Hall.

Their careers and lives became intertwined. Marie Boas, went to UCLA in 1957, Rupert Hall, whose marriage in 1942 had ended in divorce, joined her in the US two years later, when they married. In 1961 they went to Indiana University. In 1962, they edited a collection of Newton's unpublished scientific papers, and Marie Hall published *The scientific renaissance 1450–1630*. In 1963, Rupert Hall was appointed the first professor of the history of science at Imperial College, London, and Marie Hall was appointed senior lecturer and later reader. The Halls retired from Imperial in 1980. Their time at Imperial was highly productive. Their longest running project was the thirteen-volume edition of the correspondence of Henry Oldenburg, the secretary of the early Royal Society, which brought to life not only the Society's international links but also the day to day communication with budding natural philosophers, *virtuosi* and observers of odd happenings in natural history, physics, chemistry and medicine.

At Imperial, the Halls supervised a flourishing group of doctoral students. They were exemplary supervisors, allowing their students to develop their own approaches. The research seminars for graduate students were deliberately kept closed, and, although some of their students objected, it meant that the Imperial history of science department, as it then was, was kept free of the sometimes vicious personal attacks that formed part of intellectual argument in the history of science community in the 1970s.

After Rupert Hall retired, he became the history of medicine adviser for four years to the Wellcome Trust. He and Peter Williams, the Director of the Trust, expanded the history of medicine programme, and supported the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine (comprising the Wellcome History of Medicine Library and the Academic Unit of the History of Medicine) to the extent that it became a world centre for the subject. In addition, they ensured that the Trust spread its support to other universities in England and Scotland.

The Halls retired to the village of Tackley near Oxford. They both contributed to the life of the village, especially to the local history group. At the same time, they both continued to research and publish. Rupert Hall wrote a book on the Newton–Leibnitz controversy, *Philosophers at war* (1980), and biographies of Henry More (1990) and Newton (1992). Marie Hall published in 1984 *All scientists now*, a study of the Royal Society

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in the nineteenth century, and in 1991 she elucidated the Society's early years with *Promoting experimental learning: experiment and the Royal Society 1660–1727*. Her last book was a biography of Oldenburg, *Henry Oldenburg: shaping the Royal Society* (2002), which drew on the monumental edition of his correspondence.

Rupert Hall was elected to the British Academy in 1978, Marie Hall in 1994, and they were jointly awarded the Sarton Medal of History of Science Society 1981. They are buried side by side in Tackley churchyard.

Andrew Wear