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Brief Reviews of Books and Products

A History of Scientific Journals: Publishing at the Royal Society, 1665-2015

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BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

Book review: Fyfe, A., Moxham, N., McDougall-Waters, J., Mørk Røstvik, C. (2022). *A History of Scientific Journals: Publishing at the Royal Society, 1665-2015*. UCL Press. 643 pp. ISBN 9781800082328, 60.00 EUR (hardcover), 40.00 EUR (paperback).

A History of Scientific Journals tells the story of the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society journal from the events leading to its first publication in 1665 to its 350th anniversary in 2015. Despite the title, this is not a generalized history of scientific journals but the story of a single, continuous publication. The authors draw on in-depth access to the archives of the Royal Society and the history of publishing to “uncover the story of how the *Transactions* developed from the speculative commercial side-line of an entrepreneurial scholar in the late seventeenth century, to the official publication and chief business of one of the world’s oldest and most influential learned societies” (pp. 1–2).

The importance of *Philosophical Transactions* is not just a function of its age but of its close ties and eventual ownership by the Royal Society. Some of the most influential characters in British, European, and North American public history make appearances in this story, owing to their association with the Society and *Transactions*. Isaac Newton was president of the Royal Society from 1703 to 1727 and exerted considerable influence over the direction of *Transactions* through his choice of editors. *Transactions’* contributors and editors over the centuries include eminent figures such as Charles Babbage, Charles Darwin, Michael Faraday, William and Caroline Herschel, Robert Hooke, Christiaan Huygens, James Clerk Maxwell, Ernest Rutherford, Alan Turing, and Christopher Wren, among many others.

The book is organized in five parts: invention (1665–1750); maturity and institutionalization (1750–1820); the professionalization of science (1820–1890); the growth of science (1890–1950); and the business of publishing (1950–2015). The development of *Transactions* is chronicled in detail and across multiple areas, although the authors prioritize editors and developments in editorial leadership. We learn about the individuals who led the periodical in terms of their connection to the Royal Society and to the wider natural philosophical (later, scientific) enterprise at the time. This introduces us to no shortage of politicking and to competing visions of what *Transactions*, the Royal Society, and the scientific enterprise should entail. In this vein, we also learn about the development of editorial practices and policy as they respond to historical, political, and commercial circumstances, as well as the emergence of the economy of prestige and of publication as a route to a scientific career.



One of the authors' stated goals is to destabilize the origin myth that the modern, scholarly journal was created with the foundation of *Philosophical Transactions* in 1665 or with the foundation of any of the other journals that launched in Europe around that time. This is not to try to settle the old chestnut of "who invented the scientific journal" in favor of any one enterprise over any other but to show that the question oversimplifies matters.

The modern scientific journal, the authors contend, bears little resemblance to any of the publications founded in the late 17th century. Certainly, seeds of modern scholarly publishing were sown by *Transactions*' founding editor Henry Oldenburg and his continental counterparts; however, developments in publishing since then are not an "inevitable consequence" (p. 9) of those seeds. The norms of scholarly publishing we recognize today are the product of over three centuries of evolution.

The *Transactions* of 1665 bears more resemblance to modern-day science blogs and newsletters than it does to *Nature*, *PLoS One*, or even the *Transactions* of today: it differed in "structure, function, organisation, ownership, and principles of access" (p. 4). Early contributions such as "An account of a very odd monstrous calf" differ from modern articles in terms of genre, methodology, and even epistemology. *A History of the Scientific Journal* illustrates, in painstaking detail, that there have been such changes to all aspects of the journal over the course of its history and that the continuity of the title-, as well as its publishing schedule, disguises a fundamental lack of continuity of the enterprise.

As a work of history, this is a book more of interest than of utility to practitioners of scholarly communications; however, at 643 pages, it is far from a casual read. Fortunately, the introduction provides an excellent and articulate summary of the journey charted in the subsequent pages of the book.

The authors are a team of professional historians. The lead author and co-author on all chapters, Aileen Fyfe, is a professor of modern history at St. Andrew's University specializing in the history of science, technology, and publishing. She leads a team of co-authors who are also historians and who are credited with co-authoring individual chapters.

A History of the Scientific Journal is a model work of scholarship: coherent, detailed, making extensive use of citation, and featuring a massive bibliography. The writing is generally excellent and accessible, presenting complex events and relationships clearly without overwriting. It provides a valuable model for writing the history of a publication: one that, owing to its nature as such a long-running periodical with a deep archive, would be impossible for any other journal to replicate. However, the amount of detail uncovered by the authors and woven into the narrative also poses a challenge to the casual reader, who may find it overwhelming.

Beside telling a story, *A History of the Scientific Journal* centers important questions in contemporary scholarly communications and supports destabilizing the essentialist claims of modern commercial publishers, i.e., that scholarly publishing is a monolithic enterprise that has remained unchanged since the 17th Century and that large commercial publishers are the natural stewards of this enterprise, by showing the contingency of the historical development of this landmark journal as well as exposing the socioeconomic norms that underpin this development. As a librarian who supports over 50 active and inactive periodicals on a library publishing platform, the earlier chapters of the book were the most interesting to me. The early days of *Transactions* are remarkable for how the journal differs from the current norms of journal-based knowledge mobilization, as well as how familiar the concerns of early editors were to those of scholar-led publications today: How do we solicit content? What are valid forms of communication? What is the role of the reviewer? How do you ensure continuity of the enterprise beyond a single person's energy and charisma? And, perhaps more importantly, who's paying for it all?

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tomasz Mrozewski is Digital Publishing Librarian at York University Libraries, where he administers the York Digital Journals publishing program. Previously he was Data, Geographic Information Systems, and Government Documents Librarian at Laurentian University. He holds a Masters of Library and Information Science from Western University, a Masters of Philosophy from Memorial University, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Toronto.