Source Books in Science

As long ago as 1924 I conceived a plan for the preparation and publication of source books in the history of science. The aim was to present the most significant passages from the works of outstanding men in mathematics and the physical sciences from about 1400 to 1900. Later it seemed advisable to add a volume dealing with the scientific contributions of the ancient Greeks and another for medieval science. A volume containing important selections from the same fields of science from 1900 to 1950 is now under way.

The books of this series were not intended to be textbooks, although several have been used in that way. The primary goal was to make the most important scientific material readily available for courses in the history of science. With such works at hand, any teacher could give practically as good a course as those offered at large universities where original source material is preserved. Furthermore, since the material was to be selected by experts in their respective fields, a decided advantage would attach to the "source books."

With the original idea in mind, I began search for an advisory board which, ultimately, was composed of seven eminent scientists and an equal number of prominent philosophers, including:

Joseph S. Ames, The Johns Hopkins University
Frederick Barry, Columbia University
Harold C. Brown, Stanford University
R. T. Chamberlin, University of Chicago
Morris R. Cohen, College of the City of New York
Edwin G. Conklin, Princeton University
Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Johns Hopkins University
George H. Mead, University of Chicago
William P. Montague, Columbia University
Harlow Shapley, Harvard University
Wilmon H. Sheldon, Yale University
David Eugene Smith, Columbia University
Edward G. Spaulding, Princeton University
Alfred M. Tozer, Harvard University

The suggestions given by these men collectively and individually have been invaluable. The helpful advice of the late J. McKeen Cattell and William S. Learned, of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, cannot be overestimated. The endorsements, too, of several learned societies added considerably to the momentum of the undertaking in its early stages.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York granted $10,000 as a revolving fund to help finance the project, and the McGraw-Hill Book Company undertook the publication and distribution of the entire series. The fact that approximately 18,000 copies of the several works have been sold indicates that the series is serving a useful purpose.


These volumes, now on the market, range from about 500 to 700 pages each. Initially they sold for about $5.00 but, thanks to unfortunate economic conditions, the prices of the more recent ones have risen. It is hoped that the project, which is now nearing completion, has added something of permanent value to the literature of science.

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