



## Editorial

### *Biography and the History of Physics*

This issue of *Physics in Perspective* includes two biographical treatments. Danian Hu gives us a study of William Band, a British physicist who worked in China during a period of intense foment. Wolfgang Reiter tells the story of Karl Przibram, an Austrian who experienced similarly tumultuous times in his home country. These papers appear as an expanded focus on biography on the part of historians of science. It was, for instance, the subject of a roundtable discussion sponsored by the History of Science Society's Physical Sciences Forum at the 2015 annual meeting. The June 2006 issue of *Isis* devoted a focus session to "Biography as Cultural History of Science." Some of the field's most keenly anticipated, widely read, and highly lauded books of the past decade include biographies of Alexander von Humboldt (Andrea Wulf), Paul Dirac (Graham Farmello), Michale Polanyi (Mary Jo Nye), Alfred Wegener (Mott T. Green), Hermann von Helmholtz (David Cahan), and Harold C. Urey (Matthew Shindell), to name just a few.

The two biographical studies in this issue are further notable because of the characteristics of the figures they study. Both lived through extraordinary eras and so traced trajectories we might regard as distinctive or unrepresentative. Band in particular followed an unusual path for a physicist of his nationality and generation. Their contributions were notable, but did not make them household names. These features highlight some of the methodological issues with biography that have long troubled historians. Might the individual life be too narrow a window through which to view the developments of an era? Does considering the idiosyncratic experience of the one distort our sense of the collective experience of the many? Can the story of one extraordinary life tell us anything at all of more general historical interest?

These are legitimate worries. But as our colleague Charlotte Sleight once remarked in a conversation about the physicist, outsider artist, and all-around oddball Bern Porter, the stories of such characters are worth telling for their own sake because they tell us something about the outer reaches of how it is possible to exist in the world at particular times and places. Sometimes the unrepresentative life can be just as revealing as the representative one, if not more so.

We encourage readers to confront the two biographical articles herein with that in mind. Band's story might not suggest much about what it would have been like for the typical mid-twentieth-century British physicist, but it does reveal much more about the range of possibilities open to people of his training, imagination,

and sense of adventure. Przi Bram's story of exile in the face of Nazism is sadly more common. But his choice to return to Central Europe after World War II is less so, and it prompts us to think about what it meant for so many of his colleagues to remain away from their homelands permanently after the war.

For all the handwringing in our field about the methodological viability of biography, it remains alive and well. The biographical studies in this issue further suggest that is more productive to discuss what they can help us do than to fixate on what they can't. This issue provides a kind of bookend to our editorial introducing volume 20, number 3, where we wrote about the importance of studying "those scientists who fit squarely within the scientific establishment and did the type of work validated by traditional reward system." Studying both mainstream and idiosyncratic figures is necessary for understanding science as an epistemic and cultural enterprise.

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