

## Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine  
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia  
Canadensis

*E.W.R. Steacie and Science in Canada*, M. Christine King,  
Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989. Pp 243.

Ruth Fawcett

Volume 13, Number 2 (37), Fall–Winter 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800294ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800294ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Fawcett, R. (1989). Review of [*E.W.R. Steacie and Science in Canada*, M. Christine King, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989. Pp 243.] *Scientia Canadensis*, 13(2), 130–132. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800294ar>

*E.W.R. Steacie and Science in Canada*, M. Christine King, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989. Pp 243.

The history of Science in Canada is a fascinating area of study which has only recently started to receive the attention it deserves. A most welcome contribution to the field is Christine King's recent biography of E.W.R. Steacie, the man who headed Canada's central scientific agency, the National Research Council, from 1952 to 1962. King has used the life of Steacie, whose career at the NRC spanned the critical decades of wartime and postwar expansion, as a vehicle to examine an important period in the development of science in Canada.

E.W.R. Steacie was born and raised in Montreal. After flirting briefly with a military career, Steacie enrolled in Engineering at McGill University. In 1923 he received a degree in chemical engineering with first class honours. Post-graduate work in pure chemistry led in 1928 to a doctorate and a teaching appointment in McGill's department of chemistry. Married that same year, Steacie settled easily into life as a university lecturer. A fruitful and prolific decade of teaching and research was crowned in 1939 with an offer from the NRC to direct its chemistry division. Although attached to his academic lifestyle, Steacie decided to make the move, entering the NRC at the outset of its wartime expansion.

During his first term with the NRC, Steacie led the chemistry division's contribution to the national war effort. At war's end, despite the strong temptations he still felt existed in university life, Steacie felt duty-bound to remain at the NRC. By 1950 he was placed in the newly created position of Vice President (Science) and was clearly being groomed as a successor to NRC president C.J. Mackenzie. This succession took place in 1952. Sadly, Steacie served only ten years as president before his untimely death in 1962.

King describes in some detail the remarkable administrative talents that facilitated Steacie's meteoric rise within the NRC. She portrays him as a decisive leader who had

little time for the 'red tape' usually associated with administrative positions. As division leader and later as Vice President, Steacie had a central role in shaping the postwar NRC. For example, King describes Steacie's role in promoting the postdoctoral programme which brought young scientists from other countries to Canada and helped to establish a national scientific workforce.

King is less helpful in shedding any light on what has become a perennial debate at the NRC: how much basic vs applied research should be performed? Steacie himself seems to have altered his views on this question. In a policy statement made in 1943, Steacie suggested that fundamental research should be largely performed by the universities, with only a small effort maintained at the NRC. Two years later, however, he suggested that fundamental research should be increased from a tenth to more than one-third of the NRC's workload. Clearly, Steacie at the NRC, like W.B. Lewis at Chalk River and John Cockcroft at Harwell, had difficulties in finding and maintaining the right balance between pure and applied research. This was, and remains, one of the central disputes at the NRC. It would have been interesting and useful if King had examined this dilemma in greater detail.

There are other problems with King's biography. Her examination of Steacie's involvement with atomic energy work during the war, for example, is short on detail. In other chapters, the contextual background to the problems Steacie faced is sketchy. In part, this reflects the underdeveloped state of Canadian science history, which lacks, for example, a definitive history of the NRC.

Biographies can be difficult to write and scientific biographies even more so. The author has not only to portray the scientist as a person, but also discuss his scientific work and, in this case, his career as a scientific administrator. King conveys the personality of her subject well. She spoke with many people close to him, including his wife, and through anecdotes leaves the reader with a clear sense of the man. His scientific work she largely deals with in a single chapter -- a wise decision in a book aimed at the general reader as well as the scientist. It is in covering the administrative aspects of his job that King is less helpful. At times her unstinting praise for Steacie's actions grows tiresome. In fairness to King, many of the book's flaws are contextual and might well have been dealt with during the course of the author's revisions. Sadly, Christine King was killed shortly after submitting the manuscript to the publisher.

The story of E.W.R. Steacie's role in shaping the modern NRC is an important contribution to the history of science in Canada. Thus, whatever its shortcomings, King's biography is a welcome step toward improving the state of this field. Much,

however, remains to be done; hopefully King's work will lead to further scholarly efforts in this area.

Ruth Fawcett

---

**Ruth Fawcett** works for the Science and Technology Division, Research Branch, Library of Parliament.

---