

“Historian of geomagnetism and aeronomy” Obituary – Dr. Wilfried Schröder

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Dr. Wilfried Schröder, Topical Editor of our journal, passed away on 12 April 2011.

Wilfried Schröder was born on 10 August 1941 in Bremen and received his education at schools in this German “Hansestadt”. He studied mathematics, physics, and geophysics at the Universities of Göttingen, Berlin and Münster and became a highschool teacher (Studienrat). From the very beginning of his studies he got interested in science history. Around 1960 he founded the “Geophysikalische Forschungsstation” in Bremen-Rönnebeck as a one-person business. He undertook observations on noctilucent clouds and aurora, but his main work was the publication of books and scientific articles on science history. Besides his teaching and scientific work he started a PHD course and received the doctoral degree from the University of Bremen in 1981 with the dissertation “Disziplingeschichte als wissenschaftliche

Selbstreflektion der historischen Wissenschaftsforschung”. After an early retirement from his teaching duties he could fully concentrate on his scientific interests.

These were very widespread, touching almost all fields of external geophysics history, but mainly auroral research, solar terrestrial relations, geomagnetism, upper atmospheric physics, and noctilucent clouds.

In the 1980s Schröder became involved in the Interdivisional Commission on History of IAGA (International Association on Geomagnetism and Aeronomy). According to a friend he “constructed” this Commission: “*I remember when its sessions had at most 10–20 participants, including the relatives of the speakers. After his great involvement in promoting historical studies, I found that it became eventually embarrassing (we were in Birmingham) realizing that a room with a few hundred seats was insufficient, and several people were listening the session out of the door. This was the result of Wilfried’s promotion!*”. The Interdivisional Commission on History of IAGA became the unique real active body dealing with history of Earth sciences within the entire IUGG (International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics), and not only of IAGA. He remained active in this Commission by convening sessions and other organisational work until 2005.

In order to publish and circulate scientific contributions presented at the IAGA and IUGG symposia he founded his own publishing enterprise “Science Edition – Potsdam/Bremen” financed mostly with his own money. Many well recognized books were published in this edition, like *Das Phänomen des Polarlichts*, 1984; *Noctilucent Clouds and Mesosphere: a historical Review*, 2007; *Natural science, philosophy and religion*, 2006; *Einstein und die Geophysik*, 2004; *The aurora in time*, 2000; *Emil Wiechert: (Physiker, Geophysiker, Wissenschaftsorganisator)*, 2000; *Wege zur Wissenschaft – Gelehrte erzählen aus ihrem Leben*, 2000.



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He was sometimes criticized, complaining that some contributions were eventually modest in their content, others had a poor quality (typewritten by old machines, with handwritten formulas, figures of modest quality, etc.). But his aim was to publish very cheap books, in order that they could have a great circulation, and to give many authors an opportunity to publish their work. One has also to keep in mind that Schröder never had any institutional support.

Besides in his own publishing enterprise he published numerous scientific articles in well-known peer-reviewed journals, like *Journal of Geophysical Research*, *Annales Geophysicae*, *Journal of Atmospheric and Terr. Physics*, *Planetary and Space Science*, *EOS*, and *Zeitschrift für Naturforschung*, in total more than 200 papers.

Schröder was particularly interested in the origin and development of new scientific ideas and the scientists involved. He felt an intimate fascination by the search for the intellectual steps by past scientists who left a heritage to us with their wisdom and achievements. He was very respectful of the struggle for the conquest of knowledge. He thus published several articles on well-known physicists and geophysicist, like Hermann Fritz, Alfred Wegener, Emil Wiechert, Albert Einstein, Arnold Sommerfeld, and Werner Heisenberg. He also maintained a correspondence with Sidney Chapman and with the philosopher Karl Popper.

Today science is a great business, implying rush for funds, etc. schools, lobbies, careers, competition based on the impact factor (i.e. on the “general agreement” or on “opinion” by others etc.). Before this, science was conceived in a Romantic or “poetic” way. A scientist simply believed in the progress of ideas, and science was conceived as an intellectual exercise restricted to a limited number of inspired savants for the benefit of humankind. We feel that Schröder was such a “poet” of science.

Even before the German reunification Schröder kept close contact and a vivid correspondence with important scientists of the former GDR, like Hans-Jürgen Treder (theoretical physics) and Hans Ertel (geophysical hydrodynamics). In his “Science Edition” he published several books with these colleagues and others about their work. Together with Treder he founded the “Arbeitskreis Geschichte der Geophysik und Kosmischen Physik” (German Commission on History of Geophysics and Cosmical Physics).

He was not only active in the IAGA History Commission but also member of several other scientific organizations and societies: Deutsche Geophysikalische Gesellschaft, Deutsche Physikalische Gesellschaft, Leibniz-Societät, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, American Geophysical Union, and INHIGEO (International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences).

Being a religious Christian, Schröder also practised distinct social involvements. From the 1970s on he provided his books and copies of journal articles as a gift for colleagues in countries behind the “iron curtain”, like Russia, China, Vietnam and also Cuba. For more than 25 years he sent money to the University of Technology in Hanoi/Vietnam in order to support students in need.

Schröder’s experience and international contacts were very important and valuable in establishing our journal and setting up an Editorial Board.

Unfortunately progressive ailment hindered his scientific work during the last years and brought his publication activities almost to an end. His last paper was a contribution for our journal about Georg Neumayer end of 2010.

Wilfried Schroeder will be missed by many, including the authors of this obituary and other scientists who shared his deep and abiding interest in historical matters.