

Henry Edward Guerlac (1910–1982)



Henry Edward Guerlac was born in Ithaca, New York, on June 14, 1910. His father, Othon Guerlac, was a professor of languages at Cornell University. Henry learned to speak French as a second language and was always at ease with problems of scholarship. He graduated with a B.A. in chemistry from Cornell University in 1932 and received a master's degree in biochemistry from Cornell in 1933. During 1934–1935 he was an assistant in the Harvard University Fatigue Laboratory and for the next three years was a junior fellow in the Harvard Society of Fellows. (The Harvard Society of Fellows was created to encourage talented young men to pursue scholarship along lines of their interests without formal teaching or research obligations.) It was at this time that Henry Guerlac began to pursue his interest in the history of science. During 1938–1939 he held an appointment as instructor and tutor in Harvard's History Department while pursuing his doctorate.

In 1941 Henry Guerlac was awarded the Ph.D. in European history. He took several courses from George Sarton which contributed to his understanding of the history of science; his dissertation was on the engineering school of Mézières, France, under the Old Regime. The course of his research interests over the next twenty years was set during a trip to Europe in 1939 to gather material for his thesis. While in Paris, he learned of unpublished Lavoisier manuscript material and was determined to bring it to light and use it in the study of Lavoisier's work. He arrived back in New York the day after World War II began, and this work had to be deferred until after 1945.

In 1941, Guerlac took an appointment as assistant professor and chairman of the History of Science Department that had just been created at the University of Wisconsin. After two years, he took a leave-of-absence as historian at Wisconsin. For three years he was a staff member and historian with the Radiation Laboratory at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He spent the war years at MIT, where he was author-editor of the official history of the United States radar program. He published a series of papers on the subject entitled "History of Radar, Part I-III" (1943–1946) and later published a book on the subject—*Radar in World War II* (1947). Just as he was finishing his papers on radar history, Cornell offered him a position as full professor in the Department of History, with the opportunity to develop a history of science program there. He was named Goldwin Smith Professor of History of Science at Cornell in 1964, a title he held until his retirement in 1975, when he became professor emeritus. In 1970 he was made director of the Society for Humanities at Cornell, a post he held until 1977.

Guerlac built a top-ranking program in the history of science at Cornell. He was a stimulating teacher who sensed the role that history of science played in a period which stressed technical education. The Cornell program, under his direction, was well-balanced with respect to both undergraduate and graduate studies. Further, he played a significant role in the growth of history of science on the national and international level. He was president of the History of Science Society (1957–1960), and of the Academie Internationale d'Histoire des Science (1959–1965). In 1962, Cornell served as host to the International Congress for the History and Philosophy of Science, and Guerlac was responsible for arrangements and operational details.

Of particular importance is Guerlac's role in bringing the collection of Lavoisier materials collected by Denis Duveen to Cornell in 1963. The Lavoisier Collection at Cornell is the richest site for studies on Lavoisier outside of France. Guerlac had already established his supremacy as a Lavoisier scholar by his publication of *Lavoisier—the Crucial Year* (1961) as well as numerous papers dealing with Lavoisier and his contemporaries. In 1959 he was awarded the Pfizer Prize by the History of Science Society for *Lavoisier—the Crucial Year*. Some of Guerlac's other books include: *Science in Western Civilization: A Syllabus* (1952); *Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, Chemist and Revolutionary* (1975); and *Newton on the Continent* (1981). At the time of his death Guerlac was completing an annotated edition of Newton's *Opticks*, first published in 1704.

Guerlac was awarded the George Sarton Medal by the History of Science Society in 1973, was named a Guggenheim Fellow in 1978, and in 1982 was named Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur by the French government. Henry Edward Guerlac received the Dexter Award in 1972 for his extensive contributions to the history of chemistry, in particular for his book on Lavoisier and for his role in the education of numerous students now active in the field.

Professor emeritus Henry Guerlac, considered among the pioneers in the development of the academic field of the history of science, died on May 29, 1985, in Ithaca New York after a brief illness.

Sources

Most of the preceding text is taken from Eric Blackall, Milton Konvitz, and L. Pearce Williams, "Memorial Statements: Cornell University Faculty 1984–85: Henry E. Guerlac," Office of University Publications, Cornell University: 13-15, or Aaron J. Ihde, *A Quarter Century of Dexter Awards*, 1981, unpublished manuscript. Copy in the University of Pennsylvania Library, QD21 .Q8 1981a; an abridged version can be found in *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 3 (1989): 13.

M. Douglas McIlroy, "Professor Henry Guerlac," *The Cornell Engineer* (December 1952): 34–35.

For a description and guide to the Henry Guerlac papers at Cornell University, see <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/html/docs/RMA02354.html>

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