



The Molecular Vision of Life: Caltech, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Rise of the New Biology (Monographs on the History and Philosophy of Biology)

By Lily E. Kay

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This fascinating study examines the rise of American molecular biology to disciplinary dominance, focusing on the period between 1930 and the elucidation of DNA structure in the mid 1950s. Research undertaken during this period, with its focus on genetic structure and function, endowed scientists with then unprecedented power over life. By viewing the new biology as both a scientific and cultural enterprise, Lily E. Kay shows that the growth of molecular biology was a result of systematic efforts by key scientists and their sponsors to direct the development of biological research toward a shared vision of science and society. She analyzes the motivations and mechanisms empowering this vision by focusing on two key institutions: Caltech and its sponsor, the Rockefeller Foundation. Her study explores a number of vital, sometimes controversial topics, among them the role of private power centers in shaping scientific agenda, and the political dimensions of "pure" research. It also advances a sobering argument: the cognitive and social groundwork for genetic engineering and human genome projects was laid by the American architects of molecular biology during these early decades of the project. This book will be of interest to molecular biologists, historians, sociologists, and the general reader alike.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[Kay's] description of the establishment of this biology and her analysis of its implications represent an important contribution to our understanding of the social role of science in the late twentieth century." --*The Historian*

"As a contribution to the history of the American involvement in molecular biology, Kay's book is a work of considerable value, and it is written with clarity and intelligence." --*Science*

From the Back Cover

The organizational history of Caltech is the loom on which Kay has woven an intricate fabric of the molecular vision of life.

About the Author

Lily E. Kay received a Ph.D. in the history of science from the Johns Hopkins University in 1987, and was a recipient of a Smithsonian Fellowship at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. in 1984. She was an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in bibliography at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, and has taught at the University of Chicago. Since 1989 she has been an assistant professor of history of science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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