

EVALUATING SCIENTIFIC PAPERS, AND THEIR AUTHORS, AT THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON, C.1780-1980

Aileen Fyfe, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom

Refereeing is a form of peer review that is now familiar at many points in academic life: the opinions of referees are sought on articles submitted for publication, on grant proposals, and on tenure and promotion applications, among other things. But refereeing has not always been so central to academic reputations; nor has it always functioned the way it does now. This paper will drawing upon my team's research in the archives of the Royal Society of London to explore how the practices of evaluating papers and their authors have changed over the last two centuries. The Royal Society was one of the first institutions to develop written refereeing processes, which have been used at its journal (the Philosophical Transactions) since the 1830s. The Society's unrivalled archives include referee reports, correspondence and committee minutes that shed light on the way decisions were made, and by whom. The story told here must be set against the backdrop of the increasing professionalisation of academic life in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which a list of published papers came to acquire great significance. The growth and changing social composition of the scientific community has also posed challenges for an evaluation practice that developed in the context of a closed, gentlemanly community.

History of Universities Seminar

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