

**Scientia Canadensis**

**Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine**

**Jason Sean Ridler. *Maestro of Science: Omond McKillop Solandt and Government Science in War and Hostile Peace, 1939–1956*. 246 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. \$55.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1442-6474-73**

Matthew S. Wiseman

---

Volume 39, Number 1, 2016–2017

URI: [id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041391ar](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041391ar)  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1041391ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN 0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

---

Wiseman, M. S. (2016). Jason Sean Ridler. *Maestro of Science: Omond McKillop Solandt and Government Science in War and Hostile Peace, 1939–1956*. 246 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. \$55.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1442-6474-73. *Scientia Canadensis*, 39 (1), 120–121. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041391ar>

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online. [<https://www.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>]

---



This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research. [www.erudit.org](http://www.erudit.org)

Jason Sean Ridler. *Maestro of Science: Omond McKillop Solandt and Government Science in War and Hostile Peace, 1939–1956*. 246 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. \$55.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1442-6474-73

Dr. Omond Solandt became one of Canada's most influential voices on military and science affairs during the nuclear age. He established a name in operational research in Britain during the Second World War and translated his wartime experience into postwar success as a prominent official in the Canadian defence establishment. *Maestro of Science* has a two-fold objective. Author Jason Ridler attempts to situate Solandt's contributions to government science within a growing international literature on the history of twentieth-century state science in Canada and Britain while also using Solandt's career to map significant developments in the science and defence policies of both countries during and immediately following the Second World War. In answering a wide variety of questions concerning the legacy of Solandt, Ridler traverses topics that include medical history, military science and technology, industrial engineering, and national security policy in both Canada and Britain.

While the bulk of the analysis examines Solandt's science career during and after the war, the first two chapters delve into the early developmental years of Solandt's life and offer important insights for considering his rise to prominence in the Canadian science and defence establishment. *Maestro of Science* provides a wealth of insight into other

prominent defence officials as well. By following the professional career of Solandt, Ridler's analysis touches on important and influential Canadian personalities such as Minister of National Defence Brooke Claxton, Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Charles Foulkes, Canadian Cabinet minister C.D. Howe, and President of the National Research Council C.J. Mackenzie. Ridler also describes interactions between Solandt and Sir Henry Tizard, Chief Scientific Adviser in Britain, to emphasize the development of cordial and important cross Atlantic science relations between the two governments.

Much of the book chronicles Solandt's legacy with regard to the Defence Research Board (DRB), Canada's first federal organization for military science in peacetime. As founding Chairman of the DRB, Solandt oversaw the development of the organization into an important branch of Canada's military and security establishment, and a respected component of scientific research among the nation's allies. The Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent so valued Solandt that, as Chairman he required prime ministerial permission to leave his post atop the DRB. After nearly a decade on the job, Solandt was "driven out" of government service in 1956 when, according to Ridler, "the palace for his most stunning intellectual achievements in government science had become a metaphorical prison" (237).

Ridler relies extensively on original research to examine and contextualize Solandt's contributions to science and government. Archival research

in Canada yielded insights from repositories such as Library and Archives Canada and the Department of National Defence's Directorate of History and Heritage in Ottawa, Ontario. Ridler also conducted research in Britain at the Imperial War Museum and the National Archives in London, England. Yet the bulk of his archival documentation derived specifically from the Omond McKillop Solandt fonds, which are held at the University of Toronto Archives. Along with an important collection of interview transcripts acquired through David Grenville, a former colleague and biographer of Solandt, Ridler uses these primary materials in combination with secondary source literature to weave an intricate narrative of Solandt during the nuclear age.

While Solandt certainly deserves recognition for his many accomplishments and contributions to the development of state science and national security policy in Canada, Ridler's overwhelming positive analysis leaves questions about the legacy of his subject unanswered. The author makes an important and astute statement about the limitations of biography in the introduction: "If uncritical, [biographies] become hagiography. If too critical, they become a witch hunt" (8). It is with these two extremes in mind that Ridler attempts to navigate and explain Solandt's role and influence on science policy in Canada, but his assessment is inadvertently less-balanced than the introduction suggests. For example, in his discussion of Solandt's role in chemical and biological weapons testing in Chapter 12, Ridler makes only brief reference to

public criticism for military research in Canada, opting instead to emphasize the cool and pragmatic leadership style of his subject in the midst of postwar concerns. Moreover, as Chairman of the DRB Solandt supported extensive human trials in military-related scientific research, yet the potential negative consequences of these important details extend beyond the scope of Ridler's analysis. Considering the relative youth and sparseness of historical scholarship on science policy and the Cold War Canadian state, perhaps it is too early to suggest, as Ridler proclaims in the conclusion, that: "Excelling was just part of his nature" (p. 241).

Solandt's effect on government science policy should not be ignored, but to date only a few academic publications—*Defence and Discovery* (Godefroy, 2011) and *Pathogens for War* (Avery, 2013), for instance—have probed the military and civil impact of state-sponsored defence science in Canada. A wealth of archival documentation remains unexamined and it is premature to draw definitive conclusions on the legacy of Solandt or the state policies championed during his career. Nevertheless, *Maestro of Science* makes a valuable contribution to historical scholarship on the development and implementation of state science in both Canada and Britain. The biography will serve as foundational reading for scholars interested in civil-military relations and the inner-workings of Canada's security establishment during the Second World War and early Cold War years.

Matthew S. Wiseman,  
Wilfrid Laurier University