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The idea for The Cambridge History of Science originated with Alex Holzman, former editor for the history of science at Cambridge University Press. In 1993, he invited us to submit a proposal for a multivolume history of science that would join the distinguished series of Cambridge histories, launched nearly a century ago with the publication of Lord Acton’s fourteen-volume Cambridge Modern History (1902–12). Convinced of the need for a comprehensive history of science and believing that the time was auspicious, we accepted the invitation.

Although reflections on the development of what we call “science” date back to antiquity, the history of science did not emerge as a distinctive field of scholarship until well into the twentieth century. In 1912, the Belgian scientist-historian George Sarton (1884–1956), who contributed more than any other single person to the institutionalization of the history of science, began publishing Isis, an international review devoted to the history of science and its cultural influences. Twelve years later, he helped to create the History of Science Society, which by the end of the century had attracted some 4,000 individual and institutional members. In 1941, the University of Wisconsin established a department of the history of science, the first of dozens of such programs to appear worldwide.

Since the days of Sarton, historians of science have produced a small library of monographs and essays, but they have generally shied away from writing and editing broad surveys. Sarton himself, inspired in part by the Cambridge histories, planned to produce an eight-volume History of Science, but he completed only the first two installments (1952, 1959), which ended with the birth of Christianity. His mammoth three-volume Introduction to the History of Science (1927–48), more a reference work than a narrative history, never got beyond the Middle Ages. The closest predecessor to The Cambridge History of Science is the three-volume (four-book) Histoire Générale des Sciences (1957–64), edited by René Taton, which appeared in an English translation under the title General History of the Sciences (1963–4). Edited just before the late-century boom in the history of science, the Taton set quickly became dated.

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During the 1990s, Roy Porter began editing the very useful Fontana History of Science (published in the United States as the Norton History of Science), with volumes devoted to a single discipline and written by a single author.

The Cambridge History of Science comprises eight volumes, the first four arranged chronologically from antiquity through the eighteenth century and the latter four organized thematically and covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Eminent scholars from Europe and North America, who together form the editorial board for the series, edit the respective volumes:

Volume 1: Ancient Science, edited by Alexander Jones, University of Toronto, and Liba Chaia Taub, University of Cambridge
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Volume 4: Eighteenth-Century Science, edited by Roy Porter, late of Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London
Volume 5: The Modern Physical and Mathematical Sciences, edited by Mary Jo Nye, Oregon State University
Volume 6: The Modern Biological and Earth Sciences, edited by Peter J. Bowler, Queen’s University of Belfast, and John V. Pickstone, University of Manchester
Volume 7: The Modern Social Sciences, edited by Theodore M. Porter, University of California, Los Angeles, and Dorothy Ross, Johns Hopkins University
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Our collective goal is to provide an authoritative, up-to-date account of science – from the earliest literate societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt to the end of the twentieth century – that even nonspecialist readers will find engaging. Written by leading experts from every inhabited continent, the essays in The Cambridge History of Science explore the systematic investigation of nature and society, whatever it was called. (The term “science” did not acquire its present meaning until early in the nineteenth century.) Reflecting the ever-expanding range of approaches and topics in the history of science, the contributing authors explore non-Western as well as Western science, applied as well as pure science, popular as well as elite science, scientific practice as well as scientific theory, cultural context as well as intellectual content, and the dissemination and reception as well as the production of scientific knowledge. George Sarton would scarcely recognize this collaborative effort as the history of science, but we hope we have realized his vision.

David C. Lindberg
Ronald L. Numbers