

Schonland: Scientist and Soldier

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Schonland: Scientist and Soldier

by Dr Brian Austin, University of Liverpool, UK

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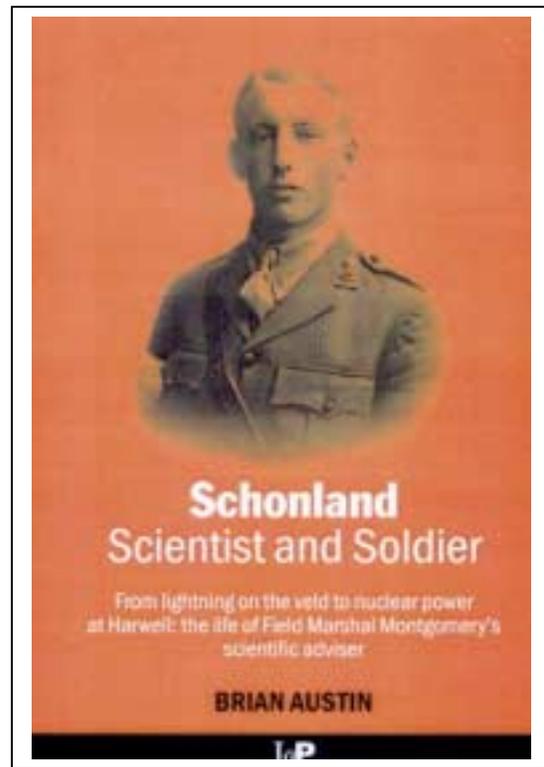
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This biography of Sir Basil Schonland FRS (1896-1972) will be of great interest to scientists and engineers, military, political and diplomatic historians, and anyone interested in the development of South African science.

Schonland was a major contributor to 20th century science, both in peace and war. Brian Austin has written not just a scientific biography, but a biography which tells much of a highly placed scientist and administrator, of the increasing engagement between science and the military, and of changing military and diplomatic relationships between Britain and South Africa. He has drawn on a profusion of primary and secondary source material, from both South African and British archives, to produce a fine biography which is very readable.

Schonland was born in South Africa of German and British stock and educated always ahead of his years, in the eastern Cape - that crucible of the pioneer. From Rhodes University College he ventured to Cambridge and then interrupted the Tripos to serve in the First world War. This Royal Engineers subaltern would become a brigadier in another war, in between, he cut his scientific teeth at the very epicentre of physics in the years when Rutherford's Cavendish Laboratory was unsurpassed. But it was *Umpundulo*, the lightning of the Zulus, that made his scientific name. With an ingenious camera he seemingly stopped lightning

in its tracks and mapped its every detail; he was undoubtedly the new Franklin.

When Hitler's *blitzkrieg* began to roll through Europe, Schonland was soon admitted to the secret of radar and turned his lightning observatory over to the development of this wartime miracle. In uniform again, he took his elementary radar to war and then himself to England to offer his services once more. They asked him to stay and his Army Operational Research Group, though unsung as heroes, made contributions beyond measure. Come D-Day, Brigadier Schonland was scientific adviser to Montgomery's 21st Army Group and advanced with it into the heart of occupied Europe. No long-haired boffin, he had the ear and the confidence of all the General's Mess and was as much at ease with these fighting men as they were with him.

Then General Smuts called him home to set up the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. That done, in a politically corrosive South Africa, he returned to his Institute and lightning, but not for long. In 1954 John Cockcroft beckoned and Schonland joined him at Harwell. Four years later he succeeded his great friend as Director as the drama of ZETA and the anguish of Windscale unfolded around him. Schonland was a life in science that had service writ large across it. He was indeed both scientist and soldier.

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