

Parnassus in the living room

John W. Galloway

Houses for Science: A Pictorial History of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. By Elizabeth L. Watson. *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press: 1992. Pp. 352. \$75.*

THIS must be a first. It is certainly the first coffee-table book about a scientific institution that has come my way, and a good thing too. Coffee-tables apart, *Houses for Science* is rather difficult to pigeonhole, which is no bad thing either. It looks like a labour of love by Elizabeth Watson, who works on the preservation of historic buildings, including those at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. James D. Watson happens to be her husband, and for nearly a quarter of a century he has been the director there.

The laboratory's contributions to genetics and molecular biology are not disputed. Its corporate intellect has been, and I dare say still is, formidable — Delbrück, Hershey, Luria and McClintock all worked there. But the main charm of the place is the combination of its beautiful situation on Long Island's north shore and its buildings. As with other institutions — and like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* — it seems to have 'just growned'; but whereas the architecture of many institutions resembles nothing so much as a termites' nest, at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory there has been plenty of space and money for building, at least for some of the time. This has led to an agreeable mixture of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century vernacular architecture and fairly self-contained purpose-built laboratories, lecture theatres and so on.

Some of the buildings were once the houses of the affluent who used to live there. Others are greatly restored derelict buildings that were the remnants of the site's industrial past. Cold Spring Harbor was a whaling station until the discovery of petroleum saved the whale — and sank the whalers. Before the Yankee whalers arrived, Indians of the Matinecock tribe had encamped at the head of the harbour; the infinitely attractive quartz heads of their arrows and spears still litter the site. Matinecock homes, being rather more biodegradable than those that came later, do not now house laboratories, although these early settlers' long but all too easily loosened tenure of the land is nodded to in the Wawepex building, which takes its name from an Algonquian word meaning "at the good little water-place".

The book is not only a history of the laboratory seen through its buildings,

but also an architectural primer, containing a short pictorial glossary illustrated with examples from Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. We are also taught architectural history, for instance about the Palladian roots of the Georgian style. And we learn that Sammis Hall of residence was closely modelled on Palladio's Villa Poania at Vicenza. To find information such as this is a pleasant surprise, and occasionally thought-provoking. After all, a considerable period separated sixteenth-century Palladian architecture from the eighteenth-century Georgian era; yet John Summer-son's 'Georgian London' confirms the influence of the one on the other.

The history of the laboratory's build-

ford invited him to visit the Cold Spring Harbor fish hatchery. A local businessman and landowner, John Divine Jones, offered them buildings on the sea front (dare we say that Divine intervention played a part?), and in 1890 the biological laboratory was launched. Later, the Carnegie Institution built a genetics laboratory on the site, Woods Hole having resisted their blandishments. And much later the two merged to become the laboratory as it is today.

The story told in the book is helped by the inclusion of a potted history of the main movements in modern molecular biology and genetics, presented in the form of short essays by James Watson. The writing of such essays is a difficult



Panoramic view of Cold Spring Harbor painted by Edward Lange in the 1880s. Bungtown Barrel Factory can be seen on the western shore (left) and the grist mill is visible on the eastern shore (right).

ings is interspersed with the history of its science, as well as some of its politics. It is always reassuring to discover that the great in science are no different from the rest of us, having the same clay feet but just happening to be better scientists. Take, for example, the Nobel prize-winner Edward Tatum, for a while the laboratory's chairman, who brought it to the brink of financial disaster in the early 1960s until John Cairns became director.

As with much of history, the birth of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory can be put down to chance, overfishing being the ultimate reason that the laboratory is around today. In response to overfishing came conservation and its practical arm, fish farming. Eugene Blackford, who sat on the board of the New York Fisheries Commission, also sat on the board of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. Fellow academy member and zoology professor Franklin Hooper was keen to set up a second US marine zoological station modelled on the numerous ones established in Europe — France already had six — and on the one already at Woods Hole in Massachusetts. Black-

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It is a pity to have to complain, because the book is both handsome and informative. The placing of scientists and their families into small suburban domestic and commercial buildings gives science the feel of a real enterprise carried out by real people. This is far removed from the abstract, depersonalized activity that science so often comes across as and, shamefully, at which scientists themselves traditionally connive. □

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