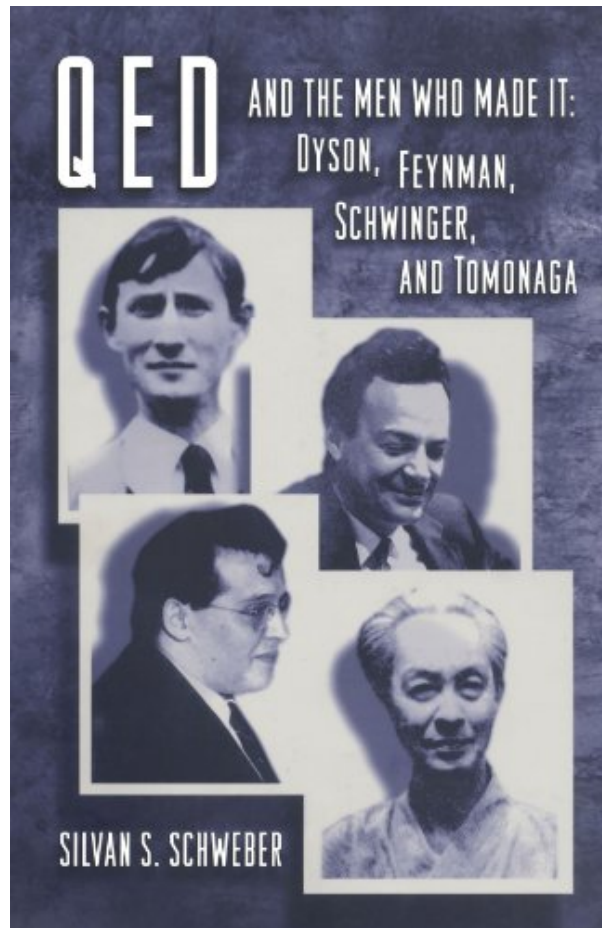


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Review

"A remarkable and exciting book. . . . Schweber brings to his efforts the tools of the professional historian . . . and the tools of a professional physicist who has himself worked on QED, a field as highly technical and abstruse as it is important."--Science

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In the 1930s, physics was in a crisis. There appeared to be no way to reconcile the new theory of quantum mechanics with Einstein's theory of relativity. Several approaches had been tried and had failed. In the post-World War II period, four eminent physicists rose to the challenge and developed a calculable version of quantum electrodynamics (QED), probably the most successful theory in physics. This formulation of QED was pioneered by Freeman Dyson, Richard Feynman, Julian Schwinger, and Sin-Itiro Tomonaga, three of whom won the Nobel Prize for their work. In this book, physicist and historian Silvan Schweber tells the story of these four physicists, blending discussions of their scientific work with fascinating biographical sketches.

Setting the achievements of these four men in context, Schweber begins with an account of the early work done by physicists such as Dirac and Jordan, and describes the gathering of eminent theorists at Shelter Island in 1947, the meeting that heralded the new era of QED. The rest of his narrative comprises individual biographies of the four physicists, discussions of their major contributions, and the story of the scientific community in which they worked. Throughout, Schweber draws on his technical expertise to offer a lively and lucid explanation of how this theory was finally established as the appropriate way to describe the atomic and subatomic realms.

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7 of 11 people found the following review helpful.
Provides physical insight into the derivation of QED
By avarma

While this is meant to be a historical account of the development of QED, it turns out to be much more than that. The actual physics described in the book - is well explained - and is typically viewed from the eyes of originator(s) of the theory. For e.g. how Dirac came up with the formulation of the relativistic wave equation or how Feynman originated his famous diagrams. That type of 'how did the theory's originator derive this..' provides a deeper understanding of the physics - than just reading the equation(s) in a textbook.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Fills in the Gaps

By Karen A. Lebens

I consider this the best biography of these four scientists going. It has the technical foundation that more popularized treatments lack but it has a great sense for the individual personality too. In particular, it has a through treatment of Freeman Dyson's work and background, something that gets slighted elsewhere. I think the insight into Feynman's personality is spot on and correctly assesses the forces that led him to behave as he did as well as achieve what he achieved. Read it for the wonderful section on Dyson if nothing else but the whole book is great.

22 of 23 people found the following review helpful.

Superb overview of the development of QED...

By Kersi Von Zerubbubbel

This book is a superb overview of the development of QED. The slant is geared towards the major personalities involved in it's development. The key players of course were: Feynman, Schwinger, Dyson, and Tomonaga. The text is quite detailed and is directed towards the academic community and assumes a cursory knowledge of quantum mechanics. That being the case, I got lost in much of the math. However, I kept at it and got much out of the book. If you are a physics major then this book will be a jewel to own. What an experience to "see" the human mind come up with ideas which at first glance seem impossible but later turn out to be perfectly true. The writing is quite turgid as is the case with books put out by Princeton, but the material is just fantastic. If the math overwhelms you, as it did me, just get the main idea down and forge on. Later, if time and patience permits re-visit the portion that got you lost and try again. I did this but still am lost in many areas. Nevertheless, a great read!!

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