Strasser, Bruno: **La fabrique d'une nouvelle science**. La biologie moléculaire à l'âge atomique (1945–1964). Firenze, Leo S. Olschki, 2006. XXXIII, 450 p. Ill. (Bibliothèque d'histoire des sciences, 8). Fr. 48.–. ISBN 88-222-5496-1.

Strasser sets out to explain how molecular biology came to take the place of atomic physics at the centre of scientific and popular attention after World War II. He approaches the topic from the perspective of a social micro-history, focusing on the emergence of molecular biology at the University of Geneva, in Switzerland, where the first Swiss institute was installed in 1963. Strasser is interested in the scientific material culture that was a driving force in the shifts in social and intellectual practices accompanying the establishment of the new field. He shows how scientific subject identities were the outcome rather than the starting point of negotiations that reconstituted the boundaries of disciplinary territories. These approaches, guiding his investigation of the history of one particular laboratory, are discussed in the opening chapter in the context of a history of Science and Technology Studies and the historiography of molecular biology. As Strasser points out, the physicists of his study were on no global crusade for the establishment of molecular biology. Rather, the formation of their new identity as molecular biologists was closely associated with the practices related to a new instrument: the electronic microscope.

Jean Weigle illustrates the integration of the “marginal” Geneva laboratory and the larger picture of the molecularisation of biology that Strasser aims at. After having been instrumental in the development of an electronic microscope with a company in Zurich, Weigle left his professorship of physics at the University of Geneva for the United States in 1948. The change in location was, as was not uncommon for European “émigrés”, associated with a shift in research focus from physics to biology (the genetics of viruses). This led to a know-how transfer from the Caltech to Geneva. When the image of physics was jeopardised in the aftermath of the human catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, physicists turned to atomic energy and the promises it held for peace times. They also turned to life. Those Genevan physicists who had been involved in the perfecting of the electronic microscope now combined efforts to introduce the new technology into the life sciences. Successfully resisting a reduction to the social role of “mere” technicians, they emerged as “biophysicists” of the first hour. Their practices associated with the electronic microscope were therefore no longer about technological skills only; they were introducing novel epistemologies and modes of representation into the study of life. When molecular biology was institutionalised at the University of Geneva, the phage research remained that part of the field organised around the electronic microscope and associated techniques.

In the absence of a comprehensive archival body, Strasser draws on an amalgam of sources from printed material, correspondence, laboratory notes and administrative documents. The resulting work should be welcomed in Switzerland as a contribution to local history for which there has recently been a public call. The book is based on Strasser's Ph.D. thesis, and with its introductory chapter, it is accessible to non-specialists with a general interest in history of science and science studies. It is a well-written, carefully and beautifully produced book that constitutes an important addition to the library of any scholar of twentieth-century science and technology.

Marianne Sommer, Zurich