

Few Nobel Laureates and few Fellows of the Royal Society receive the highest honours to which a scientist can aspire: The Order Pour le mérite and the Order of Merit. Membership of both, regardless of race, sex, creed or nationality, is severely restricted and awarded only to the highest aristocracy of the arts and the intellect. Among them the greatest scientists of the last 150 years have taken their honoured place.

In 1983 the Chancellor of the Order Pour le mérite was Professor Heinz Maier-Leibnitz, a member of the ISR Editorial Board, and he suggested to me that I might like to write about the German Order, as he would gladly make historical material available to me. My article entitled *The Chosen Few* was published in September 1983.

Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-1786), wanted to reward exceptional valour in face of the enemy, among his officers and therefore in 1740e founded the Military Order pour le mérite. As Frederick's knowledge of the German language was only rudimentary, and as all his important writings were in French, then the language of the aristocracy and of the intelligentsia, his new order's name was also in French.

He was a monarch of enlightenment and of benevolent autocracy, who not only bestowed the order on his officers, but also on Voltaire and in 1747 on Maupertius, the first scientist to be so honoured. The last recipients of the Military Order pour le mérite were 687 German officers of World War I, as in 1919 the Weimar Republic terminated all military honours. Only one of these is remembered today, although for a different reason, Hermann Göring.

In 1842, another King of Prussia, Frederick William IV (1795-1861) equally enlightened, artistically highly gifted, but politically ultra-conservative, added a civil class, the 'Order pour le mérite for the sciences and the arts' to the existing Order. Among the Founder Members were Arago, Bessel, Berzelius, Faraday, and Gauss. Alexander von Humboldt became the first Chancellor of the civil order. Its Statutes from 1842 on, unchanged today, limit the membership to 30 Germans and 30 non-Germans and any vacancy is filled by election from its peers.

The Order survived the Weimar Republic by becoming a 'Free Association' and in 1929 elected its first woman, Käthe Kollwitz, considered 'the foremost graphic artist of social protest in the 20th century'. No new members were elected during the Nazi Period, and in 1950 Theodor Heuss, then the first President of the New Federal Republic of Germany, re-established the Order together with the other two surviving members. With very minor changes, the Order has flourished ever since.