ROSALIND ELSIE FRANKLIN

Born: London, England, July 25, 1920

Died: London, England, April 16, 1958

Pioneer Molecular Biologist

There is probably no other woman scientist with as much controversy surrounding her life and work as Rosalind Franklin. Franklin was responsible for much of the research and discovery work that led to the understanding of the structure of deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA. The story of DNA is a tale of competition and intrigue, told one way in James Watson's book The Double Helix, and quite another in Anne Sayre's study, Rosalind Franklin and DNA. James Watson, Francis Crick, and Maurice Wilkins received a Nobel Prize for the double-helix model of DNA in 1962, four years after Franklin's death at age 37 from ovarian cancer.

Franklin excelled at science and attended one of the few girls' schools in London that taught physics and chemistry. When she was 15, she decided to become a scientist. Her father was decidedly against higher education for women and wanted Rosalind to be a social worker. Ultimately he relented, and in 1938 she enrolled at Newnham College, Cambridge, graduating in 1941. She held a graduate fellowship for a year, but quit in 1942 to work at the British Coal Utilization Research Association, where she made fundamental studies of carbon and graphite microstructures. This work was the basis of her doctorate in physical chemistry, which she earned from Cambridge University in 1945.

After Cambridge, she spent three productive years (1947-1950) in Paris at the Laboratoire Central des Services Chimiques de L'Etat, where she learned X-ray diffraction techniques. In 1951, she returned to England as a research associate in John Randall's laboratory at King's College, London.

It was in Randall's lab that she crossed paths with Maurice Wilkins. She and Wilkins led separate research groups and had separate projects, although both were concerned with DNA. When Randall gave Franklin responsibility for her DNA project, no one had worked on it for months. Wilkins was away at the time, and when he returned he misunderstood her role, behaving as though she were a technical assistant. Both scientists were actually peers. His mistake, acknowledged but never overcome, was not surprising given the climate for women at the university then. Only males were allowed in the university dining rooms, and after hours Franklin's colleagues went to men-only pubs.

But Franklin persisted on the DNA project. J. D. Bernal called her X-ray photographs of DNA, "the most beautiful X-ray photographs of any substance ever taken." Between 1951 and 1953 Rosalind Franklin came very close to solving the DNA structure. She was beaten to publication by Crick and Watson in part because of the friction between Wilkins and herself. At one point, Wilkins showed Watson one of Franklin's crystallographic portraits of DNA. When he saw the picture, the solution became apparent to him, and the results went into an article in Nature almost immediately. Franklin's work did appear as a supporting article in the same issue of the journal.

A debate about the amount of credit due to Franklin continues. What is clear is that she did have a meaningful role in learning the structure of DNA and that she was a scientist of the first rank. Franklin moved to J. D. Bernal's lab at Birkbeck College, where she did very fruitful work on the tobacco mosaic virus. She also began work on the polio virus. In the summer of 1956, Rosalind Franklin became ill with cancer. She died less than two years later.

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Brenda Maddox, **Rosalind Franklin. The Dark Lady of DNA**, HarperCollins Publishers, 2002
Brenda Maddox, ***Rosalind Franklin. La donna che scoprì la struttura del DNA,*** Mondadori, 2004 (tr.it di Cristina Serra)