



Robert A. Millikan

Physicist, Nobel Laureate (1868 – 1953)



Robert A. Millikan was an experimental physicist, and a Nobel laureate in physics for his measurement of the charge of the electron and for his work on the photoelectric effect.

Millikan was born in rural Illinois, the second son of the Reverend Silas Millikan. After working for a short time as a court reporter, he entered Oberlin College in 1886. Upon graduation in 1891, he briefly took a teaching post in elementary physics. In 1893, after obtaining his masters in physics, he was appointed Fellow in Physics at Columbia University. He received his Ph.D. in 1895 for research on the polarization of light emitted by incandescent surfaces—using for this purpose molten gold and silver at the U.S. Mint.

Millikan spent a year in Germany, at the Universities of Berlin and Göttingen, before returning to the newly established Ryerson Laboratory at the University of Chicago. He was an eminent teacher and passed through the customary grades to become a professor there in 1910, a post he retained until 1921. That year he was appointed Director of the Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics at Caltech; he was also made Chairman of the Executive Council of that institute. In 1946 he retired from this post.

Professor Millikan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1923. He was the recipient of the Comstock Prize of the National Academy of Sciences, the Edison Medal of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, and the Hughes Medal of the Royal Society of Great Britain.

Millikan made numerous discoveries, chiefly in the fields of electricity, optics, and molecular physics. Throughout his life Millikan remained a prolific author, both of books and articles in scientific journals. He was not only a foremost scientist, but his religious and philosophic nature was evident from his lectures on the reconciliation of science and religion.

Millikan died in December 1953, in San Marino, California.