

The time of the Houzeau de Lehaie brothers: the swansong of self-taught scientists (long 19th century).

In Belgium, the Houzeau de Lehaie brothers embody the figure of the gentleman/woman scientist and self-taught man/woman who made his way to university professorships or/and official positions. Although lacking a full university education, some were able to develop original approaches in their scientific fields. For the brothers and many of their peers, science was as much about elucidating “laws” as about managing society, and they took part in the liveliest philosophical, scientific and political debates of the so-called long nineteenth century (1800-1914).

The CNHS study day (spring 2025) will examine the training, practices, works, social networks, and philosophical and political views of self-made scientists, some of whom gained national or international recognition. It will scrutinize the lives and careers of these producers of theories, ideas and scientific research in a century in which sciences were becoming increasingly professionalized and specialized (in terms of tools, resources and teaching). These dynamics would ultimately lead to the gradual marginalization of self-taught scientists, an aspect which the research day aims to address.