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Superconductivity: Anatomy of a Discovery

PETER PESIC, St. John's College

The discovery of superconductivity in 1911 by Heike Kamerlingh Onnes and his collaborators, though unexpected, rested on thirty years of prior work perfecting and applying the techniques of low temperature physics. His achievements reflected both his experimental skill and his close study of theory. The comparison with his competitors (especially James Dewar) reveals the effects of personal style, awareness of human nature, and organizational skill. That the actual first detection of superconductivity was made by a young assistant, Gilles Holst, raise deep questions of authorship, priority, and recognition.