While both youth and internationalism have, for many years, been seen as vital hallmarks of the interwar period by historians, studies have tended to focus on particular youth movements, youth subcultures and attempts by national governments or other agencies to organize young people. Such movements are almost always identified with strict age cohorts and leave less room for investigating the broader cultural significance of both the idea and discourse of ‘youth’ in society. The growing public role and prominence of science and technology, which provides the focus for this chapter, is another major feature of the interwar years and of studies of internationalism in this period; yet it is a topic rarely examined in the context of the history of childhood and youth. In the course of this chapter, I want to explore for what purposes, with what effects and by whom the idea and discourse of youth, rather than ‘youth’ as a narrowly defined social population, were deployed within the complex and shifting world of British science in the 1930s and early 1940s.

From its emergence in the early 1830s, the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), which provides the institutional context for this chapter, defined itself and science as both inherently youthful (in the sense of modern, forward-facing, dynamic) and international. These emphases became particularly sharp during the interwar years, when British science, along with many other areas of national life, experienced a key generational shift. The emotional, cultural, and political caesura of World War I provided the spur for a perhaps unprecedented focus in Britain upon the importance of breaking with the systems, ideas, and assumptions of the past.

While this chapter explores the importance of the idea of youthfulness as a cultural resource for the rising generation of British scientists in the 1930s and early 1940s, it also makes a case for broadening our understanding of those who ought to be included within the social category of ‘youth’. As
Hugh Cunningham and others have pointed out, historically, terms which we today translate as ‘youth’, have offered very wide chronological definitions of the social population they represent, with the Latin term, *iuventus*, for example, covering any individual between the ages of 20 and 45. With the exception perhaps of the science students at Oxford and Cambridge, there is little doubt that the scientists focused on in this chapter would not traditionally be considered as belonging to the social category of ‘youth’, being in their late 20s and even 30s. However, when we expand our conceptualization of youth to include everyone who identifies as ‘young’, who draws on the language of ‘youthfulness’, who offers an idea of ‘youth’ as key to their aims and identity, then our historical understandings of childhood and youth are themselves expanded, in particular, our appreciation of the intellectual history of youth.

This chapter seeks to contribute not only to the history of youth, but also to transnational history, or, more specifically, to the history of internationalism in the interwar period and early years of World War II. While studies of scientific, communist, and youth internationalism are fairly common for this period, they tend to be studied in isolation, when there are many productive points of contact which could be brought out. A focus on both youth and transnationalism can open up hitherto unseen connections between a wide range of other, often isolated, social categories, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and religion. Both are inherently flexible concepts, functioning as Rick Jobs has highlighted in the case of youth as ‘mediators’ between different and more bounded social and cultural categories. Thus, in this chapter, I aim to show the complex interactions, entanglements, and relationships between ideas of ‘youthfulness’, communism, and science in interwar Britain, as a way of shedding new light upon all three. These ideas, after all, have much in common, all representing (and representing themselves as) quintessential ideologies of young, future-oriented modernity.

Just as few historians have considered connections between the idea of youth and the rise of science in the 1930s and 1940s, little attention has been paid to the enormous influence which Marxist internationalism and the young scientific left in the USSR exercised upon the rising generation of British scientists (both students and young graduates) in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The importance of this influence becomes clear when we consider that the institution at the heart of this development was one of the most traditional, elite bastions of British science, the BAAS, whose entire activities during the war years were effectively taken over by an influential group of young scientists and their followers, determined to lead Britain in the direction of USSR-style scientific socialism.

While this might seem, at first glance, surprising, if we consider the crucial characteristics of both science and communism as movements or ideologies in the interwar years, it becomes clear that they had much in