

The Case of the Poisonous Socks: Tales from Chemistry, William H. Brock, RSC Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2011, xiv + 348 pp, ISBN 978-1-84973-324-3, £19.99.

This volume of essays is a kind of a retrospective exhibition from the career of the distinguished historian of chemistry, William Brock. The 1995 winner of the Dexter Award for Outstanding Achievement in the History of Chemistry, Brock is already well known to many readers interested in the history of chemistry from his long tenure as the editor of *Ambix*, for his *Norton History of Chemistry* (1992), and for a list of other books and articles too lengthy to rehearse here. Most of the 42 chapters of the present book are revisions of essays or short articles that appeared previously in such places as the newsletter of the RSC Historical Group, *Chemistry and Industry*, *Ambix*, and this journal, among others; several others are based on lectures previously unpublished.

The variety of topics, personalities, and organizations represented among these “tales from chemistry” is impressive, ranging from such foundational figures as Liebig, Wöhler, and Avogadro, to the ephemeral London Chemical Society of 1824 and the Alchemical Society of the early 1910s to an obscure 19th-century chemist from Hanwell Asylum. Amidst the variety, however, the reader can discern the areas on which Brock has concentrated his scholarly attention and about which he displays an engaging eagerness to relate what he has learned. These areas include chemists and organizations of his native England, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The development of educational methods, philosophies, and institutions in chemistry and related fields is the subject of several chapters. Institutions of other sorts—including clubs and societies and publishing enterprises—are featured in several essays.

Brock organized the essays into six sections. The title of the first section, “Chemical Futures,” was inspired by the slogan from the recently concluded International Year of Chemistry, “Chemistry—our life, our future.” The essays of this section deal with the application of chemistry to human well-being in ways great and small. The first tale, “The Case of the Poisonous Socks,” which gives its title to the book, tells how certain 19th-century outbreaks of skin irritation were traced to ingredients in dyeing processes when a profusion of new colors and methods appeared. Other chapters in this section deal with a meat extract associated with Liebig, early efforts to understand the chemistry of taste and smell, and bequests to the Royal and Smithsonian Institutions to promote atmospheric research.

The second section, “Organizing Chemistry,” can be interpreted in two senses. The more obvious of these is the sense of organizations of chemists, such as the London Chemical Society of 1824 and the B-Club, a social club for chemists of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Essays in this section also treat organizing instruction in chemistry (one chapter focusing on laboratory instruction before and after Liebig) and in science more generally (how science was incorporated into British school curricula in the later 19th century).

Biographical essays populate the third section, entitled “A Cluster of Chemists.” Such giants of 19th-century chemistry as Liebig, Wöhler, and Kekulé are represented here. There is also an essay on Amedeo Avogadro, whose name is known to all chemists but whose work and life are much less familiar. Those acquainted with Brock’s books will not be surprised to find essays here on Henry Armstrong and Benjamin Brodie, and readers of the *Bulletin* may recognize the chapter on the chemistry career of James Partington from its appearance in this journal in 2009.

The biographical theme continues in section four, “Women Chemists.” The women treated here extend back as far as the alchemist Mary the Jewess, best known for her distillation apparatus, and as recently as Edith Hilda Usherwood, a partner in research and in marriage to Christopher Ingold. A tale of three musically talented sisters who married three chemists is also to be found in this section.

Essays on “Chemical Books and Journals” comprise section five. The section’s first chapter, on eponymous chemistry journals, invokes the names and publications of some of Europe’s leading 19th-century chemists. Readers interested by the next chapter, on the publishing house Taylor and Francis, may learn more from a book Brock wrote with Jack Meadows entitled *The Lamp of Learning*. For me, the most delightful essays in this section were the ones about books on niche topics in chemistry such as artificial seawater and “insurance chemistry.”

The final section deals with individuals who may once have had a connection to chemistry but who became, in the words of the section title, “Lost to Chemistry.” These include the British politician Sir Stafford Cripps, the artist and author George du Maurier, and the novelist C. P. Snow. Snow is well known for his concern over a growing gulf between the “two cultures” of science and literature and for being an example of a person whose interests bridged that gulf. Physics was the science I had associated with Snow, but I learned in the last chapter

of this book about some of Snow's work in physical chemistry.

"I didn't know that!" was a common and delighted reaction of mine as I read these essays. Readers interested in an idiosyncratic tour of some of the sights in the his-

tory of chemistry centered in 19th- and early 20th-century Britain can scarcely expect a more knowledgeable or engaging guide than William Brock.

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International Conference on the Periodic System, Including Scientific, Mathematical, Historical, Philosophical and Educational Aspects.

The Third International Conference on the Periodic Table, Cusco 2012, will be held from the 14th to 16th August in Peru, at the Center of Conventions of the Provincial Municipality of Cusco. The Conference is being sponsored by San Antonio Abad Tricentennial National University, the Global University of Cusco, the Chemical College of Peru-Cusco, and Academy of Sciences of Cusco.

The meeting in Cusco, Peru, will be only the third such meeting. (The first was held in 1969 in the Vatican as a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Mendeleev's first periodic table. The second was held in Banff, Canada, in 2003.) Articles will be published either as a book or as a special issue of the journal *Foundations of Chemistry*.

The conference will be to honor the memory of Dr. Oswaldo Baca Mendoza (Cusco, 1908-1962), author of a remarkable study and mathematical interpretation of the Periodic System (1953).

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