

Bernard Jaffe (1896–1986)



Bernard Jaffe was born on March 5, 1896 in New York City. He was the son of Harris and Fannie (Barnett) Jaffe. He was educated entirely in his home city, taking the B.S. *cum laude* at the City College of New York in 1916, and the M.A. in 1922 at Columbia University. In 1918, he served in the 108th Infantry, 97th Division, in Belgium and France, and rose to the rank of lieutenant. For a time he attended the Gas School conducted by the Chemical Warfare Service at Langres, France, but did not see action in that service. In September, 1918 he took part in the final drive against the Hindenberg Line. He returned to his studies after the being honorably discharged, this time to Columbia.

After completing his master's degree, he worked for a brief time in the business community, and then began his lifetime career as a chemistry teacher in New York City's school system in 1924.

In 1926, while teaching at Jamaica High School he published *Chemical Calculations*, a problem book for use in secondary schools. It became a popular book and was revised in 1947. A decade later, when he was appointed head of the Physical Sciences Department at Bushwick High School, he published *New World of Chemistry* (1935). This proved to be a popular textbook in secondary chemistry for several decades and went through new editions in 1940, 1942, and 1948. It used a strongly historical approach and was filled with pictures of famous chemists, diagrams of experiments, and pictures of chemical operations in industry and on the battlefield. Later in his career he published *Chemistry Creates a New World* (1957), a popular account of the role of chemistry in contemporary life.

His most popular work was *Crucibles: The Story of Chemistry From Ancient Alchemy to Nuclear Fission* (1930), a collection of biographies of chemists ranging from Bernard of Treves and Paracelsus, through the pioneers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to Marie Curie, J. J. Thomson, Henry Moseley, and Irving Langmuir in the twentieth. The book, written in an attractive style and depicting chemists as human beings seeking a new understanding of matter, was an instant success and best-seller. New editions were published in 1942, 1949, 1957, and 1976. The original edition received the Francis Bacon Award for Humanizing Knowledge. The award (\$7,500 prize and gold medal) sponsored by Forum Magazine and Simon and Schuster was given to Jaffe by John Dewey.

Jaffe also published additional works in a popular vein, each of which was well received, though none had the spectacular success of *Crucibles*. His books include: *Outposts of Science: A Journey to the Workshops of Our Leading Men of Research* (1935); *Men of Science in America—The Story of American Science Told Through the Lives and Achievements of Twenty Outstanding Men From Earliest Colonial Times to the Present Day* (1944, 1958); *Michelson and the Speed of Light* (1960); and *Moseley and the Numbering of the Elements* (1971).

He also contributed numerous scientific articles and book reviews to the *New York Times*, *Herald Tribune*, *New Republic*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, and elsewhere. He also published papers in the *Journal of Chemical Education*.

Bernard Jaffe, head of the Physical Science Departments in the New York City School System for many years, received the Dexter Award in 1973, not only for his promotion of history of science in secondary school science teaching, but for his popular books dealing with the lives of scientific leaders, particularly *Crucibles*. He died on November 20, 1986 in Oak Bluffs, MA.

Sources

Most of the preceding text is taken from Aaron J. Ihde, *A Quarter Century of Dexter Awards*, 1981, unpublished manuscript. Copy in the University of Pennsylvania Library, QD21 .Q8 1981a; an abridged version can be found in *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 3 (1989): 13–14. Additional information was supplied by Jaffe's son, Lionel Jaffe.

Photo courtesy of the Oesper Collections: University of Cincinnati.