CANDIDATE’S STATEMENT FOR THE DIVISION OF THE HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY

James Walsh

It was during my graduate study at Purdue University that I was blessed to come under the influence of Derek Davenport. It was he who sensitized me to the importance of the history of chemistry and its usefulness in the teaching of chemistry at all levels. I owe Derek a great debt for this and for the many other gifts I have received from him over the years.

In my view, including aspects of the history of chemistry can add a humanizing element to any chemistry course. The ability to place discoveries and advances in an historical context can make them more meaningful for the students. Moreover, it promotes the revolutionary notion that chemists are real people, complete with the same virtues and vices, strengths and weaknesses, and subject to the same feelings of elation and dismay as the rest of humanity. I believe that this humanizing element could be a marvelous public relations tool for our profession. It is one that has been too long ignored and it is time that we got our act together. Oh, if only we had a chemist who would do for our discipline what Karl Haas has done for classical music.

The image we have of ourselves, as chemists, should be fleshed out by the history of our discipline. Where have we been and how did we get to the place we are now? Without this background knowledge, we are only two dimensional and impoverished for it. Further, I think that all teachers of chemistry have an obligation to try to convey to their students the richness of our history and how useful such knowledge can be in their present studies. Certainly, at the beginning of any research project, one does a thorough search of the literature to find out what has been done, what worked and what did not. Not to do this search would be foolish and would run the risk of wasting time and effort.

With my background then, it should be no surprise that Ludwig Boltzmann, Jacobus van’t Hoff, Walther Nernst, J. Willard Gibbs, and Wilhelm Ostwald are included in the large cast of characters who wandered in and out of my General Chemistry courses. Similarly, van’t Hoff (who is everywhere), Gilbert Lewis, F. Kekule, Christopher Ingold, Herbert Brown, Alexander Borodin, and William of Occam are among the strolling players who enlivened my Organic courses.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the special affinity that I have with Wilhelm Ostwald. In 1984, when I was doing a belated post-doctoral research stint in Leo Paquette’s research group, one of Leo’s students was Bob Ross. At this time, Bob’s bedside reading was the volume of Faraday Medal Lectures from The Chemical Society. Ostwald had received the award in 1904. Opposite the first page of the text of his address is a black and white photograph of the medallist in right profile. Bob brought the volume into my lab the next morning and put the picture in front of me with the comment, “I know that face.” I was stunned. At that age, Wilhelm and I could have been brothers, perhaps even twins. I sent a copy of the photo to my sister in New York and her response, “Now that’s spooky”, said it all. A number of other people have picked up on the resemblance. Naturally, I took Wilhelm as a hobby, researching his life and times at every opportunity. I have lectured about him, invariably beginning, “Good morning class, I am Wilhelm Friedrich Ostwald.” My fascination with him is undiminished. I find myself wondering on occasion if possibly we had a common ancestor.