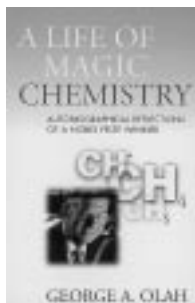


Chemical Wizardry

A Life of Magic Chemistry. Autobiographical Reflections of a Nobel Prize Winner. By *George A. Olah*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., Chichester 2001. 277 pp., hardback. £ 25.50.—ISBN 0-471-157430-0

A sign of a good book is that it can be read on several levels: the story itself, the political/historical, the biographical, essaylike, etc.—it is this multifaceted quality that excites the reader and is often the reason that a book is read and reread, and that with each reading new facets are discovered. The same is true for autobiographical works, with the prerequisite that the life described is also multifaceted and varied, and that the author can present it well.

With this in mind then no scientific autobiography should be as worth reading currently as this from George Olah, the winner of the 1984 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. The book exceeds expectations on every single front. It can be read as a brief history of organic chemistry, that concentrates on the development of the valence concept for carbon from the time of Kekulé to the hypervalent organic compounds with five and more coordinate carbon atoms, an area in which Olah made fundamental contributions. In addition, the book is a



(partial) history of physical organic chemistry that follows the development of carbocation chemistry, from the days of Meerwein, over the notorious controversy about nonclassical ions between Brown, Winstein, Schleyer (and many more) up to Olah's (genuine) carbonium ions, with $(CH_5)^+$ as the central unit. One can describe the chapters and sections in which the author introduces petrochemistry as the basis for a significant part of chemical production as a summary of industrial organic chemistry. In particular this section of the book should be highly instructional for nonchemists, as here, in plain English, the almost total dependence of our technical civilization on oil is explained. This chapter is supplemented by considerations about the future development of industrial hydrocarbon chemistry and the ecological challenges that are bound to it.

What holds this immense amount of material and thematic variation together? It is—and one can not put it any other way—the fascinating life of George Olah. Although born in Budapest in 1927, after the Austria-Hungarian empire had perished, his school life followed the classical Austro-German Gymnasium system. Following the bloody defeat of the uprising of 1956 he left Hungary as a young political refugee and, via England and Canada where he worked very successfully in the chemical industry, landed in America and began his academic career at the Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He moved to the University of Southern California in 1979 which until then was more renowned as the center of American university sports than as an academic institution, where with the Loker Hydrocarbon Research Institute he was able to build one of the most respected chemical research centers in the world. This story alone, of how through the commitment of a few people, patronage, less bureaucracy, and interference from the state—America

you really do have it better!—an institute of the Max-Planck type developed, is hopefully one which will be widely read.

To come from such a turbulent background and to live such a productive life is no easy thing, and on the final page of his book the author reveals one of the forces that has helped him to achieve this: "I have always tried to keep a healthy sense of humor, much needed in our present time. I have managed not to take myself too seriously, only my science, about which I am quite passionate".

Living and learning—in both, the reader is richly rewarded by the lessons in *A Life of Magic Chemistry*.

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Main Group Chemistry. 2nd Edition. By *Alan G. Massey*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., Chichester 2000. 534 pp., hardcover £ 75.00.—ISBN 0-471-49037-7

Chemie der Nichtmetalle. 2nd Edition. By *Ralf Steudel*. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1998. 575 pp., paperback DM 88.00.—ISBN 3-11-012322-3

In many universities, students majoring in chemistry are usually offered, in addition to the more narrowly focussed special lecture courses, a second course of lectures ranging over inorganic chemistry, to give a more thorough understanding of the subject. Some typical themes for such courses are the molecular chemistry of the Main Group elements, transition metal chemistry/coordination chemistry, organometallic chemistry, and solid-state chemistry.

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