

Book Review

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A philatelic ramble through chemistry

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This is a paperback reprint of the work first published in hardback in 1997. Yes, the authors do reproduce Rutherford's comment on science and stamp collecting, but I won't quote it here.

The work features postage stamps issued with a chemist or chemistry as the theme. Chemists traditionally complain about being at the margins of mainstream culture, but at least here we seem to be quite well represented; the authors quote at least 3000 different chemistry-oriented stamps. Space does not allow all of these to be shown or discussed in this book.

The stamps are well illustrated in colour and some have been shown larger than life size. The reproduction is of high quality and some fine details show up well under the magnifying glass. This is an interesting and well produced book which should not only be of interests to philatelists, as the text constitutes a useful summary and discussions on historical aspects of chemistry itself. It is debatable

whether or not this is a book for the desk (although it might well be consulted in moments of distraction when regular chemistry is not going too well), but it is certainly a book for the Christmas stocking.

Where does organometallic chemistry come into this? Well, I counted 31 references to organometallic chemists or themes, so at least we are there! What everyone wants to know of course is who's in and who's out ... the reviewer here treads carefully as he considers this contentious matter and takes care to make no judgements!

Stamps have been issued on behalf of the following organometallic chemists (the term being applied in the very loosest sense!); Haber and Bosch, Grignard and Sabatier, Hodgkin, Nesmejanov, Ehrlich, and Ziegler and Natta. Not all that many really, nothing about ferrocene for example. Recent organometallic Nobel Prize winners seem to have lost out I'm afraid. Perhaps the postal authorities are even more cautious than the Nobel committees on such matters!

It is interesting that the chemists honoured on stamps are by no means done so only by the country of their birth; other countries often join in, sometimes

bizarrely so. Sweden, the home of the Nobel Prizes, obviously gets a good choice of people to honour.

The authors also include a selection of chemistry howlers on postage stamps, a section which I am sure could have been a good deal longer. Benzene features a lot in this section. Several examples unimaginable even to undergraduates are shown. The authors' favourite example comes from the Comores; of five chemistry Nobel Prize winners shown in a set, three got theirs for a subject other than chemistry. That's the sort of thing chemists have to live with. It's not only the students who get it wrong.

This reviewer's favourite should also be an encouragement to students. On page 37 a Russian stamp shows a worried looking Mendeleyev brooding over his notes, pen in hand puzzling over gallium and indium. If it was difficult for him, then what's it like for the rest of us!

An excellent book, it should be in every chemist's library!

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