

Book review

From Coello to Inorganic Chemistry: A Lifetime of Reactions

By Fred Basolo, Profiles in Inorganic Chemistry, John P. Fackler Jr. (Series Ed.), Kluwer Academic Publishers/Plenum Press, New York, NY, Hardbound, Price: € 69.50/US\$ 59.95/GBP 42.50, ISBN 0-306-46774-7

Fred Basolo is arguably one of the most well-known inorganic chemist of the 20th century, known not just for his many important contributions to chemistry but also for the many human contacts he has made through travels and conferences during his long career. This book is an autobiography that begins with his birth in a small mining village, Coello, situated 25 miles north of Carbondale, IL, USA.

In a refreshingly frank and open style, Fred regales us with his life, from stories of his childhood, through school, to his first teaching assistantship position at the University of Illinois in 1940. Here he made the most fortunate decision to work for his Ph.D. with John Bailar, a man who impressed him greatly and became, after his parents, his second role model. It is fortunate indeed for we inorganic chemists that Fred made this decision, otherwise we might have lost him to organic chemistry—however, even at that time in his career, Fred tells us he was strongly pointing towards inorganic rather than organic chemistry.

Fred tells us how he moved on to a faculty position at Northwestern University (NU) in 1946 joining the only other inorganic professor, Pierce Selwood (of magnetochemistry fame). He describes, how, during this early period he developed methods for teaching descriptive inorganic chemistry leading ultimately to him being awarded the ACS James Flack Award for Teaching (1981) and the Pimental Award in Chemical Education (1992). He describes these very interesting years as NU moved from being a university with few inorganic chemistry graduate students to one of the top four inorganic research universities in the States today.

Much of the rest of the book describes, in a very readable fashion, Fred's research contributions, but interlaced, as is Fred's style, with the human angle of the people who carried

out the work. Fred traveled extensively to conferences to describe his work and meet people carrying out similar work. He records many international travels and the book is greatly enhanced by the many photographs of the elder statesmen and women in inorganic chemistry whom he met and often collaborated with. To this reviewer, who resides with the older group of chemists, the book is especially attractive, with the photographs bringing back memories of many famous inorganic chemists.

The next section of the book deals with Fred's contributions, inter alia, to the National Academy of Sciences, the Gordon Research Conferences (GRC) (he was involved in instigating the first inorganic GRC in 1951—not so long ago) and The American Chemical Society. As we can now expect, he humanizes these interactions by telling us of the people involved. He became the President of the ACS in 1983 with one of his major objectives to teach to lay people (who usually thought of chemicals as pollutants) how, in fact, chemistry so greatly enhanced their lives.

The final chapters entitled "Countries and Chemists Visited" and "Foreign Guests Hosted" are replete with the many prominent chemists that Fred met over his career (with many photographs—e.g. Nobel Laureates Fischer and Wilkinson dancing together!!) and including Fred's extraordinary memory in providing anecdotes about almost all of them. An appendix provides a compendium of Basolo's many awards, service to chemistry, names of graduate students, pdfs, co-authors, etc.

The book is remarkably free of typographical errors, but perhaps "Workshop" on p. 230 is intentional. It is said that to write a research paper entails 'telling a story'—this fascinating book shows that Fred is an accomplished storyteller.

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