

DEXTER AWARD IN HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY TO RALPH E. OESPER

THE first presentation of the Dexter Award in the History of Chemistry was made to RALPH E. OESPER at the 130th Meeting of the A.C.S. at Atlantic City in September, 1956. This choice by the Division of the History of Chemistry for this honor comes as no surprise to friends of THIS JOURNAL. The quality and quantity of Dr. Oesper's contributions have been the delight of readers for 30 years. His advice and counsel have been the support of all of its editors. The accompanying account of Dr. Oesper's life and work incorporates the remarks by Dr. Denis I. Duveen at the time of the award presentation and portions of a paper read before the Division at the Cincinnati Meeting of the A.C.S. (spring, 1955) by Professor Robert D. Billinger of Lehigh University.

CINCINNATI is the home of one of America's industrious biographers. He is a native son, trained in her schools and university. World traveler and friend of scientists in many countries, Ralph Edward Oesper has been publishing a continuous series of papers on history of chemistry for over three decades. It is very evident that an around-the-world trip made with his family almost exactly three decades ago stimulated him especially and provided basic material that was to illuminate and delight readers of the *JOURNAL OF CHEMICAL EDUCATION* during the following years. The Oespers took the opportunity to visit numerous eminent contemporary chemists and pay homage to those who had gone before by visiting and photographing the scenes of their activities and their tombs. An unusually long paper of some 50 pages accompanied by about 60 illustrations and titled "What a Chemist May See in Europe"¹ was one of the most charming and instructive results of the journey.

The original version of this chemist's guide to Europe was referred to as "unusually long" because of the fact that the prizewinner has manifested the exceptional virtues of succinctness and brevity to an unusual degree. He has specialized in compact, yet informative and accurate biographical sketches. This is well attested by the inclusion in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 24 biographies of renowned chemists written by him. From this adept biographer we can get an excellent summary of the scientific advances made by some of the masters of the past. Among those are: Armstrong, Arrhenius, Crookes, Dumas, Fresenius, Glauber, Graham, Haber, Henry, Hofman, Kolbe, LeBel, Mitscherlich, Nernst, Nobel, Ostwald, Perkin, Priestley, Raoult, Richards, Werner, Wislicenus, Wöhler, and Wollaston.

It is axiomatic that none who has not a strictly chemical education and background can hope to contribute fruitfully to the history of our science. Ralph Oesper's main field of interest in this direction has been analytical chemistry which he taught for many years. In fact the reagent ferrous ethylene diamine sulfate, which can replace the less stable ferrous ammonium sulfate, is marketed under the name of "Oesper's Salt."²

To keep abreast of his major field, and to aid others likewise, Oesper translated from the German "Newer Methods of Volumetric Analysis"³ by Brennecke, *et al.* A much more ambitious translation was the extensive treatise (740 pages) written by Feigl, entitled "Chemistry of Specific, Selective and Sensitive Reactions."⁴ This labor cemented a friendship between author and translator which grew constantly as each valued the ability of the other. Reviewers have described these translations as "admirably done" and noted for "painstaking care."

Much of Oesper's historical work has been concerned with foreign chemists, and in a number of cases he has either translated their work or collaborated with them in the preparation of English language editions. This aspect of his labors has had a two-fold effect. It has made available to English-speaking students and scholars important material they would otherwise not have had the opportunity of consulting. A second, probably more important, effect is that it has fostered international goodwill and helped dispel the false illusion, still held in certain quarters abroad, that Americans are solely interested in things of material and not of cultural or humanistic import.

In addition to the furthering of international goodwill by his prolific writing, Oesper has been helpful in personal and material ways. Through his influence foreign students have been aided in coming to American universities; countless CARE packages have been shipped abroad, and European friends have received small stipends for technical articles or translations. In 1951, the year in which he retired from active teaching, Oesper was chosen as one of a group of American chemists to welcome and guide visiting foreign delegates who came to the International Congress of Pure and Applied Chemistry.

Dr. Oesper has served as secretary, and chairman, and trustee of his local section of the A.C.S., and also has been secretary and counselor, and active member of the Division of History of Chemistry in the national organization. He was chosen Eminent Chemist of the Cincinnati Section of A.C.S. for 1953-54.

³ BRENNECKE, E., K. FAJANS, N. H. FURMAN, R. LANG, AND H. STAMM, "Newer Methods of Volumetric Analysis," D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1938.

⁴ FEIGL, FRITZ, "Chemistry of Specific, Selective, and Sensitive Reactions," Academic Press, New York, 1949.

¹ OESPER, R. E., *J. CHEM. EDUC.*, **6**, 195 (1929).

² OESPER, R. E., AND K. P. CARAWAY, *J. CHEM. EDUC.*, **24**, 235 (1947).