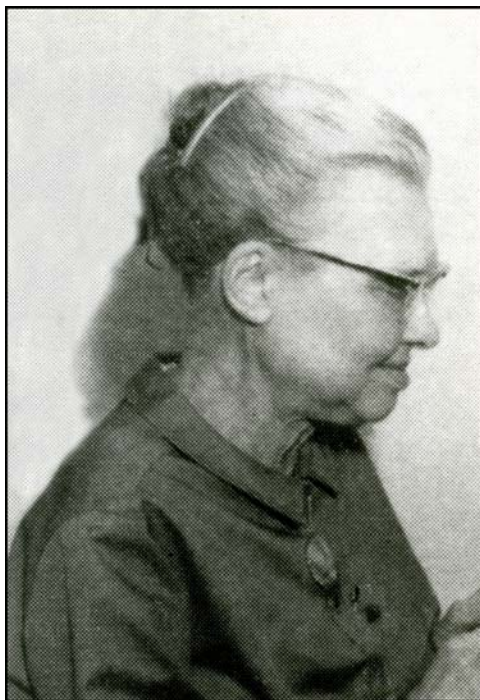


Mary Elvira Weeks (1892–1975)



Mary Elvira Weeks was born in Lyons, Wisconsin on April 10 1892. She attended Ripon College, taking her B.A. in 1913. She then worked for her master's degree at the University of Wisconsin under J. Howard Mathews who had recently completed his Ph.D. at Harvard under T.W. Richards, America's first Nobel Laureate in Chemistry in 1914, the year Elvira (as she was known to her friends) completed her M.A. During the next seven years she was a high school teacher and an analyst in industrial laboratories.

In 1921, she became an instructor in chemistry at the University of Kansas where she also continued her graduate work. She completed her Ph.D. in 1927 and was promoted to assistant professor and, ten years later to associate professor. Although she carried on some experimental research in the midst of heavy teaching duties, her real interests were in languages and humanistic studies and she began to combine these talents as she moved into her studies of the history of chemistry.

At Kansas she found that Frank B. Dains had accumulated a splendid collection of pictures of famous chemists. After taking his Ph.D. at Chicago in 1898, Dains had spent a year in Berlin and Freiburg and, as was customary among American students, had visited numerous chemists and asked for pictures. Dains continued to collect pictures during the rest of his career, but because of a busy research program in organic chemistry, had never published any papers exploiting the collection. Elvira Weeks combined her dual interest in chemistry and languages to prepare a series of papers about the discovery of the elements. These were published as a series of 21 articles in the *Journal of Chemical Education* in 1932–1933. The popularity of the series encouraged the Chemical Education Publishing Company of Easton, Pennsylvania, to collect the series and publish it as a paperbound book, *Discovery of the Elements* (1934). The articles and the resulting book were lavishly illustrated with pictures from Dains' collection, subsequently supplemented by pictures collected by Weeks. The book ultimately went through seven editions; the last in 1968 with the co-authorship of Henry M. Leicester. The book was, in many respects, a history of chemistry developed around the theme of discovering elements. There is extensive digression, particularly about other activities of the chemists who discovered elements.

Despite the success of her writings, her department was not inclined to reward her for her literary work. Chemistry faculties were inclined to place a premium on laboratory investigations, not on historical research, no matter how well done. She was kept on her assistant professorship before being promoted. After seven more years as associate professor she decided to abandon teaching in order to exploit her interests in languages and books. In 1944 she took a position as research associate in scientific literature at the Kresge-Hooker Science Library being established at Wayne State University in Detroit. Here she had an opportunity to use to the fullest her talents in languages. She retired from her position in 1954 but continued to live in her home in Detroit and worked part-time as a scientific translator.

Her writing talents were drawn on again as mid-century approached. The American Chemical Society (ACS), as its seventy-fifth anniversary approached, planned to have its history written and published. At the request of the society, in 1944, authorship was undertaken by Charles A. Browne, a member of ACS since the last years of the nineteenth century, a Göttingen Ph.D. (1901), a chemist with experience in academia, industry, and government, and one of the founders of the ACS Division of the History of Chemistry (HIST). Browne, during his career as director of the New York Sugar Research Laboratory, and later as chief chemist of the U.S. Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, pursued a lively avocation as an historian of chemistry. He was obviously the right person to write the Society's history and he was agreeable. He had, 25 years earlier, served as editor of the Golden Jubilee Number of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* and had written the chapter on agricultural chemistry. Browne died early 1947 at age 76 with the organization of the book set up and nine chapters completed. Several months earlier he had persuaded Weeks to become a co-author. She was responsible for most of the eleven chapters that remained and for the collection of the supplementary material. *A History of the American Chemical Society—Seventy-five Eventful Years* was published in 1952.

Week's Detroit years were undoubtedly the most satisfying of her life. She was able to combine her love of science with her love of languages and was doing professionally what she enjoyed most. After retirement she remained in her Detroit home where she continued to do professional translating at a leisurely pace. By nature a retiring person, she was nevertheless equal to tasks of great magnitude. She died on June 20, 1975 after several months in a Detroit nursing home. She was a friendly but somewhat retiring person who enjoyed a good time, but preferably with her closest friends. She was most comfortable with books and journals.

Mary Elvira Weeks, a chemical literature specialist, received the Dexter Award for her *Discovery of the Elements* and for completion of *A History of the American Chemical Society*, as well other contributions to the history of chemistry.

Sources

The preceding text is taken from Aaron J. Ihde, *A Quarter Century of Dexter Awards*, 1981, unpublished manuscript. Copy in the University of Pennsylvania Library, QD21 .Q8 1981a; an abridged version can be found in *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 3 (1989): 11–12.

Photo courtesy of the Oesper Collections: University of Cincinnati.