

O. Theodor Benfey (1925-)*



(Left) At his Certificate of Appreciation lecture, August 21, 2016, ACS National Meeting, Philadelphia. Photograph courtesy J. I. Seeman. (Right) Front cover of the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*, combined issues 13 and 14, 1992-1993.

Ted Benfey was born on October 31, 1925 in Berlin, Germany. He was sent to England in 1936 and was educated at the Watford Grammar School. His parents immigrated to the United States in 1938, but Ted stayed on in England with the Mendl family. He entered University College, London in 1942 and eventually graduated with a Ph.D. in 1947 (spending much of the war years in Aberystwyth, Wales) under the direction of C.K. Ingold. Ted's other heritage from his England period was to become a Quaker, a group that welcomed him into its fellowship and with whom he has continued to be associated.

Ted came to America as a post-doctoral Fellow with L.P. Hammett at Columbia University in 1947. He was appointed to the Chemistry Department at Haverford College, a Quaker institution, in 1948 and served there until 1955, when he spent a year on Sabbatical Leave with Frank Westheimer at Harvard University. Rather than pursue a career in research at a major university, Ted chose to teach at Earlham College, a small Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. This allowed him to pursue what would become his real passions: teaching and the history of science, especially chemistry. He stayed at Earlham from 1956-1972. In 1973 he was appointed the Dana Professor of Chemistry and History of Science at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, another school with Quaker roots. He retired from Guilford in 1988 and joined Arnold Thackray at the Beckman Center for the History of Chemistry in Philadelphia, then part of the University of Pennsylvania. At what was soon to be called the Chemical Heritage Foundation, now known as the Science History Institute, Ted edited the institution's newsmagazine, *Chemical Heritage*, for six years.

Ted Benfey got his baptism into the history of science in 1949 during a Harvard Summer school on "Case Histories in Experimental Science" run by Harvard President James B. Conant. Ted also met Leonard Nash and Thomas Kuhn. His first published paper on history of chemistry and chemical education was on (William) Prout's Hypothesis in the *Journal of Chemical*

Education in 1952. Ted has written seven books on chemistry and the history of chemistry: *From Vital Force to Structural Formulas* (1964), *The Names and Structures of Organic Compounds* (1966), *Introduction to Organic Reaction Mechanisms* (1970); *Development of the Structural Theory of Organic Chemistry* (1977; audiotape); *From Intellectual Scaffolding to the Elixir of Life*, editorials from *Chemistry* magazine (1978), *Friends and the World of Nature* (1981), and *Robert Burns Woodward and the Art of Organic Synthesis* (1992), with Peter Morris. He has also edited or co-edited six on history of chemistry and chemical education, written 14 chapters (mostly on the history of chemistry) in monographs, and has published 89 articles and reviews in chemistry and the history of science.

In addition to his work as a historian, Ted Benfey was and continues to be a frequent editor. He had a deep knowledge of chemistry and a truly synoptic view of the whole field. He was the editor of the ACS magazine *Chemistry* from 1963-1978. He brought both incisive editorials and historically grounded articles to this publication. He edited many books, including *Classics in the Theory of Chemical Combination* (1963) and *The Kekulé Centennial* (1966). He also co-translated Vladimir Prelog's autobiography from German to English. And he served as Chair of the Division of the History of Chemistry of the ACS in 1966, now over 50 years ago.

Ted was recognized with a two-day symposium at the 41st Southeastern Regional ACS Meeting in Winston-Salem, North Carolina on October 11-12, 1989, and a Festschrift volume of the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*, numbers 13 and 14, 1992-1993. The list of speakers and authors of that event included many winners of the HIST Award! He also received a Certificate of Accomplishment from HIST and a day-long symposium in his honor in 2016. In 1996, following his second or perhaps third retirement, depending on how one counts, Ted retired from CHF and, with his wife Rachel, left Philadelphia and returned to Greensboro, NC where Ted had taught at Guilford College and Rachel had graduated (Class of '48). They moved into the Friends Homes at Guilford. Sadly, in 2005, Rachel suffered a stroke and was moved to the skilled nursing facility at Friends Homes, and she died peacefully on September 22, 2013. Ted continued his association with CHF, being Editor at Large of *Chemical Heritage* until 2014. He still writes, edits, and on special occasions, translates. Most recently he initiated, assembled, and edited four booklets, each entitled *The Experience of War: Residents of Friends Homes Tell Their Stories*. These volumes, published by the Friends Homes in 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2014, are comprised of short essays by residents of the Friends Homes about their wartime experiences. They have recently been combined into a single bound volume with the same title.

It is a privilege for HIST to bestow upon Otto Theodor Benfey **The HIST Award for Outstanding Achievement in the History of Chemistry for 2019**. It is awarded in honor of "his incisive efforts to clarify chemical concepts through creating, as his award plaque will read, *The Context of Chemistry: Conceptual, Historical, Social*.*

* This biography is based in part on J. J. Bohning, *Bull. Hist. Chem.* "From Stereochemistry to Social Responsibility. The Eclectic Life of Otto Theodor Benfey." **1993**, 13-14, 4-16; and J. I. Seeman, "From Stereochemistry to Social Responsibility. The Eclectic Life of Otto Theodor Benfey. Part 2: 1990 to the Present," http://acshist.scs.illinois.edu/awards/Certificates/Seeman%202016%20Benfey%20ms_170106%20very%20%20final.pdf, accessed on February 11, 2019.