

Book & Media Reviews

A Philatelic Ramble through Chemistry

Edgar Heilbronner and Foil A. Miller. Wiley-VCH: New York, 1998. 268 pp. ISBN 3-906390-17-9. \$200.00.

A philatelic ramble? My Merriam Webster's dictionary says that a ramble is, among other things, a leisurely excursion for pleasure. I think the title of the book under review could not have been more appropriate. *A Philatelic Ramble through Chemistry* is, indeed, an enjoyable overview of the world of chemistry as pictured on postage stamps and other philatelic materials. More than a thousand (!) color illustrations enhance Heilbronner and Miller's idiosyncratic writing, which combines engaging historical essays with fascinating anecdotes. Although the idea of using stamps in teaching chemistry is not new (see, for example, the "Chemistry on Stamps" series in this *Journal* in the 1980s), the authors succeed in presenting their stories with unusual charm and wit, aimed at a broad audience, chemists and philatelists alike.

The book is divided into nine chapters covering all major areas of chemistry, starting with the origins of chemistry in Greece and China and followed by an account of alchemy in the Middle Ages. Subsequent chapters are dedicated to inorganic, organic, physical, and theoretical chemistry, spectroscopy and X-ray diffraction, and various aspects of industrial chemistry, from polymers and pharmaceuticals to metallurgy and photography. The last chapter deals with miscellaneous topics such as chemical education, chemists at work, glassware, elemental symbols and formulas, chemical societies and meetings, and stamps displaying errors of design (e.g., a stamp showing the structure of methane as HC_4). A generous number of references and notes at the end of each chapter, as well as detailed name and subject indexes, are included in the book. The book also contains a stamp identification list showing the country and date of issue, brief description, and Scott catalogue number for each of the philatelic items displayed, a valuable feature for stamp collectors. Some recent stamps related to chemistry, issued after the book went into press, accompany this review. I should also men-



tion that the book has been printed on good-quality acid-free paper and carefully produced with regard to both text and figures. I was not able to find a single error, factual or typographical, with the exception, of course, of some pertaining to recent events like the passing away of Nobel laureates Barton, Prelog, Fukui, and others.

In summary, this book is bound to become the new "bible" of chemophilately, as Zvi Rappoport once called the philatelic study of chemistry. Readers with a general interest in chemical education or the history of chemistry, or perhaps simply with an attraction to stamps, will find it a most entertaining source of inspiration, and I sincerely recommend it. I only regret its high list price, justified in part for the quality of the work and luxurious presentation, but a limitation to many potential buyers nevertheless. A small financial sacrifice will be required from those surrendering to the beauty of *A Philatelic Ramble through Chemistry*.

Daniel Rabinovich