

John Read (1884–1963)



John Read was born in Maiden Newton, Somerset, England on February 17, 1884. Read obtained his college diploma in chemistry at Finsbury Technical College, London in 1904 where he also won the Chemistry Prize. During the rest of 1904 he remained at Finsbury as a demonstrator in the chemistry department. In 1905 he was awarded a three-year London County Council Senior Scholarship which enabled him to take graduate courses at the University of Zurich where he obtained his Ph.D. in the summer of 1907 under Alfred Werner for work on the chemistry of coumarin and its acid derivatives. While working with Werner, Read developed a keen interest in stereochemistry which served as the basis of much of his future research. He returned to England in late 1907 and obtained his B.Sc. in chemistry from the University of London. He then went to the University of Manchester, where he taught chemistry and studied optical activity with W. J. Pope. When Pope moved to Cambridge in 1908 Read accompanied him as his assistant. Together they continued their groundbreaking

studies in stereochemistry. Read's work was so impressive that he was honored in 1912 with the M.A. degree *honoris causa*.

He remained at Cambridge until 1916, when he moved to Australia to succeed Robert Robinson as professor and chair of chemistry at the University of Sydney. With his students he studied the reactions of bromine on organic compounds and began his lengthy studies on piperitone. While in Australia, Read developed a strong interest petroleum and the terpenes of native plants such as eucalyptus. In 1922 he returned to Britain on sabbatical and in 1923 decided to accept an appointment to the Purdie Chair of Chemistry at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Read taught organic chemistry and continued his research on optical activity at St. Andrews for the rest of his life. Read was a very popular teacher and was often called upon to give public lectures which he enjoyed greatly. He was an enthusiastic individual and was considered to be excellent teacher, a successful mentor and scientific collaborator, an excellent research director and an enjoyable social companion.

At St. Andrews, his humanistic leanings were stimulated when he encountered a book collection rich in works on alchemy and early chemistry. This led to his writing *Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy, Its Literature and Relationships*, published in 1936, a popular treatise that explained alchemy in relation to its scientific, artistic, and literary setting. Read was a prolific writer and published 17 books and over 250 papers. His papers dealt with research in organic chemistry, the history of chemistry, scientific education, and life in Australia. Between 1914 and 1949 he also wrote six books and staged several plays in the dialect of his native Somerset. His books include: *The Rise and Development of Organic Chemistry* (1919); *A Study of Historical Chemistry* (1922); *A Short Course of Practical Organic Chemistry* (1924); *A Text-Book of Organic Chemistry, Historical, Structural, and Economics* (1926, 1934, 1958); *An Introduction to Organic Chemistry* (1931, 1961); *Historical St. Andrews and Its University* (1939, 1957); *Explosives* (1942, Spanish translation 1947); *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art* (1947); *Humour and Humanism in Chemistry* (1947); *Through Alchemy to Chemistry* (1957); and *A Direct Entry to Organic Chemistry* (1948, German translation 1950, Italian translation, 1952).

In 1934 Read was awarded a D.Sc. from Cambridge University for his research on optical activity. He was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1935 for his work in stereochemistry. In 1948 he was elected President of Section B of the British Association. In 1950 he was appointed an Assessor of the Senatus Academicus on the University Court of the University of St. Andrews. He was a member of the Chemical Society, serving on its Council during 1935–1938, the Society of Chemical Industry, the American, Swiss, French, and German chemical societies and the Society of Alchemy and Early Chemistry. He was a founding member of the Australian Institute of Chemistry. He was co-editor of Bell's *Monographs on Modern Chemistry* and associate editor of *Chymia*. Read received the Dexter Award in 1959 for his numerous contributions to the history of chemistry, particularly for his books on alchemy and early chemistry.

Read pursued teaching and his stereochemical research until his death and left a major impact with his many books ranging from organic chemistry texts to historical treatises. He continued to lecture until to the day he died, on January 21, 1963, while riding his bicycle on his way home from St. Andrews. According to historian Aaron Ihde, "he was truly a humanist who saw chemistry as a humanistic discipline."

Sources

E. L. Hirst, "John Read (1884–1963)," *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* 9 (1963): 237–260.

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* 2 (1988):12.

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