

## Chemical kaleidoscope

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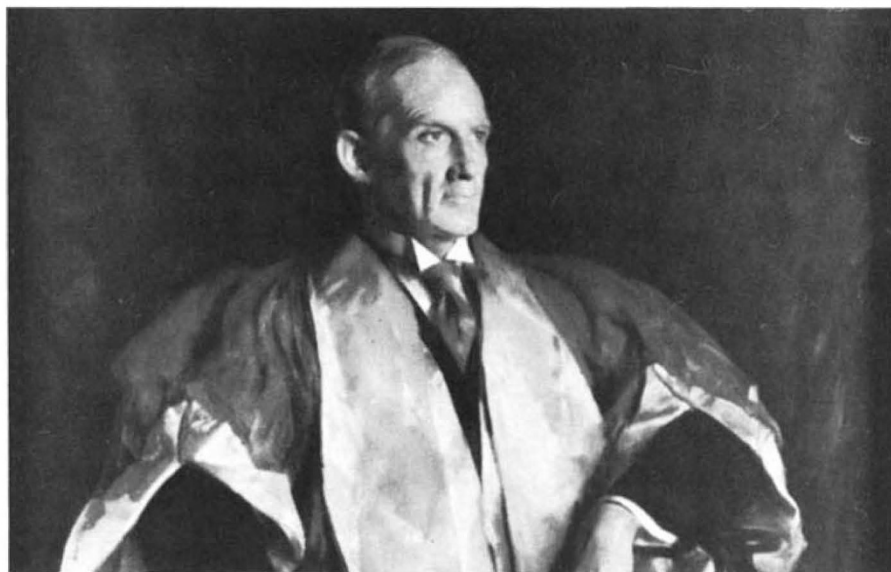
*Memoirs of a Minor Prophet: 70 Years of Organic Chemistry.* By Sir Robert Robinson. Pp. viii+252. (Elsevier: Amsterdam, Oxford and New York, 1976.) Dfl.49.50; \$18.95.

I LAST met Sir Robert Robinson a few months before his death in 1975. He looked very old. His sight had become weak and he moved with difficulty. But, sitting behind the big polished desk in his office high above the Thames, he suddenly became animated as he described the research he was still directing. His judgements on people and events showed none of the hazy mellowness to which an 88-year-old is surely entitled.

Robinson has been described by Lord Todd as "one of the few men of science to illumine by their own genius a wide variety of areas in their chosen subject" (*Chem. Brit.*, 11, 296, 1975). Within the international community of chemists, there were, and are, many deeply attracted by Robinson both as a man and as a scientist; yet one must record different reactions also. Nobody working in organic chemistry during the period 1915 to the mid-1950s could remain uninfluenced.

His book is a series of episodic recollections of people, places and scientific work, from early childhood to appointment to the Waynflete Chair of Chemistry at Oxford in 1930. One can compare it to the autobiographical writings of another great chemist, *Aus meinem Leben: von Arbeit, Musse und Freunden*, by Richard Willstätter (edit. by Arthur Stoll, Verlag Chemie, Weinheim, 1949), a tragic and human document about the fate of an outstanding scientist during the cataclysm of 20th century Europe. *Memoirs of a Minor Prophet* does not pretend to those heights because, one suspects, what really interested its author were ideas and things, rather than the human condition. As has been said about one of his great protagonists, he talked to molecules. If he suffered anguish, if he lay awake at night wrestling with the agonies of personal decisions, his book does not tell us about it. Emotions seem to have been fully engaged only with the ideas, substances and practitioners of science.

The autobiography presents a kaleidoscope of chemical ideas and personal views in the context of the first 30



years of this century, when organic chemistry was going through one of its most creative periods. Starting from a comfortable West Country middle-class background, the future Sir Robert passed through a Moravian Church school to Manchester University where H. B. Dixon, a pupil of Vernon Harcourt, was senior professor. Robinson entered the laboratories of W. H. Perkin, Jr, as a research student and started his academic career in the newly established Chair of Pure and Applied Organic Chemistry at Sydney in 1912. In the next 16 years he held five other appointments. Returning to a Chair in Liverpool in 1915, he spent a short, uncomfortable interlude with British Dyes Ltd in Huddersfield, followed by a Chair in St Andrews in 1921.

He returned to Manchester as Professor of Organic Chemistry in 1922 and transferred to University College, London, in 1928. The present book ends on the eve of his departure for Oxford. At each station of his progress there are descriptions of some colleagues and of research work in progress. The point of view is explicitly personal, and not all his contemporaries or those who followed would be expected to agree with it.

This was a most important period not only for science but also for scientists, whose contributions to the social fabric were being generally recognised; but there seem to have been few bridges between the worlds of university, in-

dustry and government the author describes. Of Robinson's contributions both as a theoretician, a practical chemist, and later as an industrial consultant, there can be no doubt. Whatever controversies surrounded some of the theoretical work, whole new fields of organic chemistry were explored by Robinson and his collaborators, laying the groundwork for spectacular insights not only in chemistry but also in many of the life sciences.

There are indications of all these strands in *Memoirs*, but the themes find their context only in terms of the author's personal impressions. Organic chemists will find vignettes of people, occasions and ideas which show the origin of a number of current developments in the science. They might usefully compare their present preoccupations with those of Robinson's generation, observing carefully not only those ideas treated in the book but those which are absent. For those who are not chemists, the need for highly specialised knowledge of the subject will create a formidable deterrent to understanding. But even for them *Memoirs* does dispose of, yet again, the mythical unemotional scientist, the desiccated calculating engine.

Beautifully produced and not unreasonably priced, the book is utterly disgraced by the lack of subject and topic indices. □

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