

17. Working Party WP on the History of Chemistry

The Working Party on the History of Chemistry organises an international conference on the history of chemistry every second year.

The 10th International Conference for the History of Chemistry (10ICHC) of the Working Party on the History of Chemistry (EuCheMS) was held on 9 – 12 September 2015 at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. The theme of the meeting was “Chemical Biography in the 21st Century”. Biographies – whether in the form of books or articles – have always been an important genre in the history of chemistry. General histories of chemistry have indeed often taken a biographical approach. Many chemists have written autobiographies, which, along with the formal obituaries produced by national academies of science, have formed an important source of information for historians of chemistry. This conference was an opportunity to critically examine how the genre evolved and explore ways in which the biographical approach can be fruitfully employed by historians of chemistry and chemists, especially at a time where manuscripts and typed documents are disappearing.

The conference was a successful event, and gathered 63 participants from 21 countries and 3 continents. Most participants came from European countries, but there were also participants from USA, Japan, Columbia and Brazil. Even more encouraging was the strong presence of the younger generation, new faces from countries that were not yet represented and the presence of colleagues from the Division of Chemical Education.

The program combined keynote lectures and thematic sessions with shorter papers. One of the plenary lectures was given at the Fábrica Centro Ciência Viva, Science Center of the Aveiro University, and featured the reputed Portuguese chemist Jorge Calado (Technical University of Lisbon) who gave a lecture entitled “Ghost Science”. In her key-note “Towards a Biography of Carbon at the Intersection Between Nature and Culture”, Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent (University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne) explored how choosing to write a biography of a scientific object might add to the usual narratives in the history of chemistry and get deeper into the specific essence of the science. By asking “Who Doesn’t Get a Biography in the History of Chemistry?”, Michael Gordin (Princeton University) analysed the reason why certain important figures such as Paul Walden, or Wilhelm Ostwald, as well as other less known but nevertheless crucial actors, are still missing a decent biography.

The remaining part of the two and a half days was split into two parallel sessions that hosted 52 papers, concentrated on a wide range of themes, including Translation, Textbooks, Oral and Digital Sources for Recent History, Controversies and Autobiographies, Myths and Misrepresentations, Prosopography, Dictionaries and Sets of Biography, Historiography, Discipline Building, Biography and History of the Laboratory, Biographies and History of Chemical Engineering.

The Working Party plans a double session on Standardisation and International Scientific Organisations at the next European conference for the History of Science, as well as a tribute session on Dalton’s 250th birthday in partnership with the Division of Chemical Education.

Chair:	Dr. Brigitte Van Tiggelen (Royal Chemical Society, Belgium), 2013
Vice Chair:	Prof. Annette Lykknes (Norwegian Chemical Society), 2009
Secretary:	Dr. Ignacio Suay-Mattallana (Royal Spanish Society), 2015
Members:	26 active delegates, 150 members
Countries:	21 countries represented by 23 member societies and 32 delegates (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) and 15 observers

The Working Party is currently under internal and external reorganisation: refreshing national delegations, and recruiting delegates from societies not yet represented; reviewing structures so as to adapt to reality (terms of chair, broadening the board, task group; connecting to the other EuCheMS divisions, and participating in EuCheMS activities; appointing observers from other institutions and groups devoted to the history of chemistry). The Working Party on the History of Chemistry published a report on the teaching of the discipline in 2007. The final document – titled “Teaching history of chemistry in Europe”, a survey of the History of Chemistry in Europe – was the result of information provided by many colleagues from all around Europe, and aimed at understanding the position of history of chemistry in the context of the Bologna reform.

Some eight years later, the academic landscape has evolved and the discipline is facing new challenges, both inside and outside of the university sphere. By updating the 2007 report and preparing an overview on the situation of the history of chemistry in Europe, the WP wants to evaluate the current situation and help to identify how best to support and reinforce local, national and international initiatives.

The questionnaire includes a detailed paragraph on the teaching of history of chemistry, since this is the most visible aspect of the discipline and its professionalisation. There are other questions however, as history of chemistry spreads into other areas, and many of our colleagues are active in museums, collections, associations and journals. Two questions touch on the actual challenges and successes of the history of chemistry in the local context, so as to get a better sense of where we stand and what we can do. The preliminary results have been discussed during the business meeting in IOIHC and the report will be accessible on the Working Party webpage.