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Book Review

Chemical criminalistics, by A. Maehly and L. Strömberg, Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, New York, 1981, VII + 322 pp., 70 figs., 65 tables, price DM 162.00, ca. US\$ 75.50, ISBN 3-540-10723-1.

This volume is first of all an excellent book on forensic science. The introductory chapters survey the structure of forensic services in various countries and the development of these services. Then follow a number of chapters on the various materials that a forensic scientist may have to examine, and here the authors make extensive use of chromatographic methods. However, what is even more important, and not only for forensic scientists, they point out clearly the limitations of chemical evidence.

For example, in the chapter on soils, they compare two soils by numerous methods, all of which give identical results, but the conclusion is worded as follows: "Based on the results of the investigation, it cannot be excluded that sample 1 (from the hotel room) has come from the field in question". This is clearly all that can be said under the circumstances, but this would not have prevented many people from jumping to conclusions and affirming that the soil sample "must have come from the field in question". In this sense the book can be recommended to chromatographers in general, as I can list numerous instances in the literature where authors claimed "identification" or even "unambiguous identification" simply on the evidence of identical retention values and spectra.

The final section of the book deals with the organisation of a forensic science laboratory. Page 303 and Table C.17 discuss a project in which 240 forensic laboratories participated in 21 tasks. The number of "correct answers" is listed. Many a defence attorney, facing "unrefutable forensic evidence" may be grateful!

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