

Professor Sir John Meurig Thomas: First François Gault Lecturer of the European Federation of the Catalysis Societies (EFCATS)

At its last meeting held in Maastricht, The Netherlands, the Board of the European Federation of the Catalysis Societies (EFACTS) elected Professor Sir John Meurig Thomas as the François Gault Lecturer of EFCATS for the year 1996.

The François Gault Lectureship was created in 1978 to honour the memory of Professor François Gault who died unexpectedly while still an active member of the European Association on Catalysis (EUROCAT). Following the inspiration of the Ciapetta Lectureship sponsored by the North American Catalysis Society, which was to give an eminent scientist active in the field of catalysis the opportunity to visit catalysis centres and clubs in the USA and Canada, the members of EUROCAT, then under the presidency of Professor Eric Derouane, decided to sponsor the François Gault Lectureship to enable a scientist of world repute in the general field of catalysis, European or else, the possibility to lecture at several catalysis centres throughout Europe. Several distinguished scientists from the USA, Japan, and Europe were previous François Gault lecturers.

At that time, EUROCAT was what may be considered today as a club, an assembly of about twenty renowned scientists desiring to share openly their views of catalysis and to promote it further as a science, placed under the auspices of the Committee for Science and Technology of the Council of Europe. Two remarkable achievements of EUROCAT were the finalisation of two reference catalysts: a Ni

on silica material (EURONI-1, a project coordinated by Professors Jacques Coenen and John Geus with the support of Unilever) and a Pt on silica material (EUROPT-1, a project coordinated by Professors Geoffrey Bond and Peter Wells in collaboration with Johnson Matthey).

During 20 years since its inception, EUROCAT has contributed greatly to create an efficient link between several European catalysis centres. Today, EUROCAT has achieved its goals and its activities have ceased.

EFCATS, newly born in 1991 in the house of the Société Chimique de France, has taken over the relay baton on a much larger scale, as an official body covering the whole European catalytic scene, from West to East, providing a forum for elected delegates from national catalytic societies to discuss and promote catalytic science and to organise events at a European level. The first committee of EFCATS comprising of Professor Michel Che (Paris, President), Professor Eric Derouane (Namur, Vice President), and Professor Rutger van Santen (Eindhoven, The Netherlands), with the help of many colleagues and friends from throughout Europe, quickly raised the new organisation to a level where it has become officially recognised as the body unifying and promoting European catalysis. Today, about 25 European countries, from Western, Central and Eastern Europe, and the CIS are active members of EFCATS. Among its past achievements, one should mention the first European Conference on Catalysis (EUROPACAT-I) held in Montpellier, France,

in 1993, and its sister event, EUROPACAT-II, organised in Maastricht, The Netherlands, in 1995.

Three important decisions were made at the general meeting held in Maastricht in September 1995. Firstly, the locations of the next EUROPACAT conferences were agreed upon: EUROPACAT-III in Krakow, Poland, from 31 August to 6 September 1997, and EUROPACAT-IV in Bologna, Italy, from 5 to 10 September 1999. The choice of these sites has been motivated by two reasons: the activity which the local universities have in the field of catalysis and the fact that they belong to the Coimbra group of universities, representing the cultural patrimony of Europe. The University of Montpellier where EUROPACAT-I was held, was founded in 1289 by Pope Nicholas IV; the charter of the Jagellonian University in Krakow was issued by Casimir the Great in 1364; the University of Bologna, the oldest European University, sees its roots as early as 1088 under Mathilda of Tuscany and Emperor Henry V.

Secondly, a new Board was elected, comprising Professor Eric Derouane, President, who, about a year ago, became Director of the Leverhulme Centre for Innovative Catalysis at the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom, Professor Outi Krause, Vice President, of Helsinki University of Technology, Finland, Professor Antonio Cortes, Secretary, from the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas in Madrid, Spain. Professor Jerzy Haber, treasurer and chairman of EUROPACAT-III, of the Institute of Catalysis and Surface Science, Polish Academy of Sciences, in Krakow, Poland, and Professor Michel Che, past-president, University of Paris, France. The selection of this Board was aimed at representing the objective of EFCATS to cover the whole European catalytic scene, from North to South and West to East.

Thirdly, EFCATS (at the suggestion of Professor Robbie Burch, who was the last president of EUROCAT and then secretary of the board of EFCATS), also decided to establish and organise the François Gault Lectureship under its

auspices and to turn it into the most prestigious distinction a catalytic scientist can receive from an official European organisation which brings together and represents European catalysis. The François Gault Lectureship in its present form comprises about ten lectures over the whole of Europe and the CIS. The François Gault Lecturer will be either a prominent scientist or a scientist conducting research at the very frontiers of catalytic science. Professor Sir John Meurig Thomas was elected as the first François Gault Lecturer under the auspices of EFCATS.

Sir John's history and achievements are too numerous to be described in any detail. Born in 1932, in South Wales, he started his academic career at the University College of North Wales in Bangor, from where he moved successively to University College of Wales in Aberystwyth, to King's College, Cambridge (where he was also Head of the Department of Physical Chemistry at the University of Cambridge), and to the Royal Institution of Great Britain as Director and Fullerian Professor of Chemistry (the chair created for Michael Faraday) at the same. He was then appointed Deputy Pro-Chancellor of the Federal University of Wales before being elected to his current position as Master of Peterhouse in Cambridge, the first scientist to be in this position since the college was founded in 1284 (Note: according to the testimony of Roger of Wendover's *Flores Historiarum*, the University of Cambridge has its origin in 1209; the earliest extant seal of the University of Cambridge is attached to a document dated 26 May 1291 kept in the archives and treasury of Peterhouse).

Sir John has held many named Lectureships and Visiting Professorships in many universities world-wide. He has authored or co-authored over 750 research articles and 24 books, distinguished contributions to catalysis, solid-state chemistry, surface chemistry and many other interdisciplinary areas of science. He laid the foundations for the structural design and synthesis of many new materials, especially solid acid catalysts (e.g., zeolites) and heterogenised, met-

allocene-derived organometallic catalysts, which today are of great significance for environmentally clean technologies. He is also recognised for his pioneering contributions to the development and quantification of numerous physical techniques, e.g., high resolution transmission electron microscopy, the combined use of X-ray absorption spectroscopy and X-ray diffraction for the in situ study of catalysts, and solid-state high-resolution nuclear magnetic resonance.

One of Sir John's preoccupations has always been to share his enthusiasm for science with non-scientists, either adults or young children, through lecture demonstrations, televised broadcasts (BBC), and several books and articles on subjects such as the life of Michael Faraday. To scientists, his eloquent language and his persuasive presentations are a breath of fresh air. His text *Heterogeneous Catalysis: Theory and Practice* which will appear shortly will most certainly be a piece of art and knowledge which all catalytic scientists will enjoy. Last but not least, he also serves the catalytic community as joint founding editor of *Catalysis Letters* and *Current Opinion in Solid-State and Material Science*.

The list of awards and honours given to Sir John is too long to be cited here. The most recent recognitions of his achievements are, in

1994 the Davy Medal from the Royal Society, in 1995, the Willard Gibbs Gold Medal of the American Chemical Society, and in 1996, the Longstaff Medal of the Royal Society of Chemistry, a triennial award since 1881 to one of its members who has most advanced its subject by research. In 1991, Professor John Meurig Thomas was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to chemistry and the popularisation of science.

A concern of the members of EFCATS when they elected Professor Sir John Meurig Thomas as the François Gault Lecturer, was that someone of his stature, with many requests and responsibilities, would not be able to find the time necessary for the demanding contribution of a concerted set of lectures all over Europe. His reaction, however, was positive and immediate. As president of EFCATS, I wish, wholeheartedly, to thank Sir John for his recognition and support to a body of which the goals are to promote catalysis as a whole and to extend the frontiers of catalytic science.

Eric G. Derouane
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Leverhulme Center for Innovative Catalysis
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