

Book review

Steroids Made It Possible; by Carl Djerassi. *Profiles, Pathways and Dreams*; edited by Jeffrey I. Seeman, American Chemical Society, Washington, DC, 1990, xxiv + 205 pages. ISBN 0-8412-1773-4.

Profiles, Pathways and Dreams is a series of autobiographies of eminent chemists which is being produced by the American Chemical Society. Each contributor has the opportunity to describe progress in their specific area of chemistry and to indicate how their research program has contributed to its development. In his preface the editor to the series indicates that each author was asked not to write a review article of their field, but to detail their own research accomplishments.

Carl Djerassi is one of the major figures of modern steroid chemistry. His career began in the 1940s during the period of steroid research which culminated in the discovery of the alleviation of the effects of rheumatoid arthritis by cortisone and which also, in the subsequent decade, included the introduction of the first steroidal oral contraceptives. New steroid raw materials had to be explored by the pharmaceutical industry and routes developed for the synthesis of these biologically active materials. Djerassi was able to bridge the academic/industrial interface and made many significant contributions to this chemistry. Indeed Djerassi is one of the most prolific authors of this period. However the thesis developed in this book is not just that the steroids were just important pharmaceuticals, but that they provided a framework for many other studies, permitting for example the development of spectroscopic measurements, particularly optical rotatory dispersion, circular dichroism and mass spectrometry. Sterols are ubiquitous, and in recent years Djerassi's group have made significant contributions to the structure elucidation of marine sterols, many of which possess unusual structural features. As new reactions and reagents are developed, particularly from the progress in organometallic chemistry, there is a need to have a system in which the regio- and stereo-specificity of these can be evaluated. The message of this book is that the steroids provide a readily available framework that can be used for this type of study.

Djerassi has been a prolific author not only of scientific work, but also of articles on matters of public policy and, more recently, of novels and short stories. The epilogue to the book contains some of the Djerassi philosophy embodied in these articles. The book conveys in a readable and interesting form, the infectious energy and humour which Djerassi has brought to his science from the early 1940s to the present day.