In Memoriam

Professor Sir Geoffrey Wilkinson
1921–1996

Geoffrey Wilkinson was Editor-in-Chief of Polyhedron since its inception fifteen years ago, and he was the guiding hand in its creation, ethos and scale. His strength of purpose and candour with the publisher at that time ensured an attractive and high quality Journal for then, now and for the future.

By today's patterns his early scientific career must be seen as somewhat atypical as a result of the intervention of the 1939–1945 World War. After his sound Yorkshire schooling he arrived at Imperial College, London in 1939 the holder of a Royal Scholarship to study chemistry. In 1941 he graduated at the head of his year, and commenced his research career; but this was soon interrupted by a call to join the Allies atomic energy project. He worked at Montreal and Chalk River until 1946 when he joined Professor Glenn Seaborg's laboratory at the University of California at Berkeley, where over four years he made significant contributions to isotope chemistry. Nineteen fifty to 1956 saw Geoffrey Wilkinson at M.I.T. and Harvard carrying out researches which were to totally transform thinking in a broad swathe of inorganic chemistry.

Early in 1952, along with R. B. Woodward, he published a rational structure for a newly reported organic compound of iron; that compound we now know as ferrocene. Immediately thereafter he produced a stream of now classical papers that laid the basis for the organometallic chemistry of the transition metals. That remarkable field of chemistry continues to expand and surprise us with its richness; it is a rare issue of any journal of inorganic or organometallic chemistry that does not now contain mention of a cyclopentadienyl complex!

It is difficult to credit now, that when he returned to Imperial College in 1956 as one of its youngest ever

professors, he took up the only established chair of inorganic chemistry in Britain. In a very short space of time he established a group of enthusiastic co-workers and inspired them to produce a major contribution to the fundamentals of organometallic chemistry. He never failed to produce more fascinating ideas and suggestions than we could ever hope to put into practice. Years later I would read in the literature an urgent "Communication" of a topic that G.W. had suggested in the 1950s but I had just failed to get around to (even on a six or seven day week). His "see you in the morning" on a Saturday evening did not mean Monday.

Sir Geoffrey was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1965 and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry jointly with E. O. Fischer in 1973. He formally retired from the established Sir Edward Frankland Chair of Inorganic Chemistry at Imperial College in 1988, but he continued active research and writing in the Johnson Matthey Laboratories built and endowed at the College for his use, until the week of his sudden death.

In addition to his researches, Geoffrey Wilkinson made a major contribution to the teaching of inorganic chemistry. In collaboration with Al Cotton in 1962 was published *Advanced Inorganic Chemistry*, which changed the content of courses in inorganic chemistry in virtually every chemistry department in the world. One of the last tasks he completed in the week of his death was the submission of his contribution to the sixth edition of 'Cotton and Wilkinson'. He was the leader and inspiration of the team that produced the encyclopedia *Comprehensive Organometallic Chemistry* in nine volumes in 1982, followed in 1995 by the much larger fourteen volumes sequel.

His major chemical discoveries over the years have been many in organometallic chemistry, but additionally he discovered metal thiocarbonyls, fluxional organometallics, Wilkinson's catalyst, rhodium based hydroformylation, etc., a truly remarkable catalogue of 'firsts'.

He was knighted for his contributions to chemistry in 1976, but kept himself outside the establishment net. He was a passionate advocate for the funding of truly curiosity driven chemical research, and this often placed him in conflict with those driving for 'mission oriented' research. He strongly believed that 'management' of research would stifle innovation. Prime Ministers, Secretaries of State, Members of Parliament and Heads of Funding and Research Councils were regular recipients of his critical letters.

Scientific children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of Geoffrey Wilkinson are themselves now continuing in his footsteps across all five continents, with their own contributions to chemistry.

Geoffrey Wilkinson was honoured in the United Kingdom and world wide by visiting lectureships, honorary degrees and awards among which were the Consejero de Honor of Spain, the Lavoisier Medal of France, the Hiroshima Medal of Japan, the Galileo Medal of Italy, the Foreign Associateship of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, the Foreign Membership of the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Arts, the Royal Medal of the Royal Society and the Mond, the Sir Edward Frankland and the Longstaffe Medals of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Chemistry is hugely the richer for him and we are fortunate to have known him.

Eddie Abel