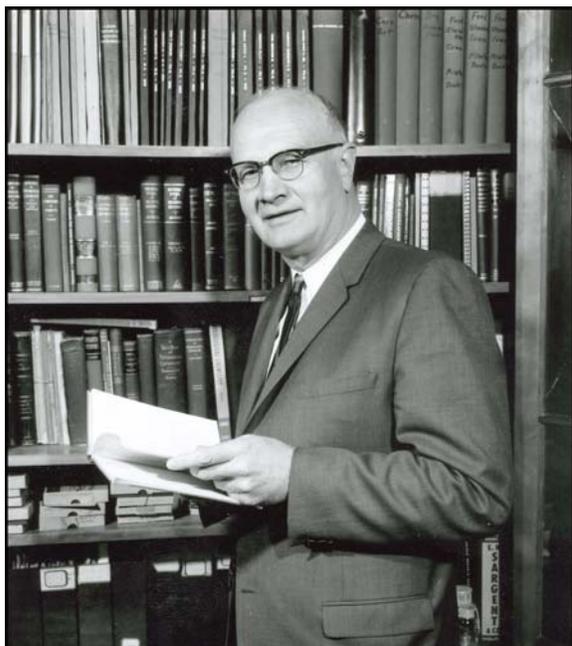


## Aaron John Ihde (1909–2000)



Aaron John Ihde was born on December 31, 1909, and raised on a dairy farm near Neenah, Wisconsin. His immigrant parents had little formal education, but they treasured books and learning. Aaron was only the fourth of his one-room country "K through 8" school to go on to high school. His parents realized his lack of interest in farming and supported their son to attend the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He graduated in 1931 from the university's "Chemistry Course" and accepted a job as the staff chemist at the Blue Valley Creamery Company in Chicago, Il (later acquired by Beatrice Foods), where he did research and development on food products. It was at this time that he developed a deep interest in the history of food controls.

In early 1938 he returned to the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he majored in food chemistry (under Henry Schuette) and minored in biochemistry (under Harry Steenbock), earning his doctorate in 1941. It was Schuette who furthered his latent interests in the history of chemistry. After one year of teaching in the chemistry department at Butler University, Indianapolis IN, he returned to Madison for a one-year instructorship in the chemistry department. Following two renewals of this appointment, in 1945 he was hired on the tenure track and carried a heavy teaching load in the freshman chemistry program during and after the war years. In the summer of 1946, he revived a dormant course in the history of chemistry previously taught by Louis Kahlenberg (until his retirement in 1940). Ihde's interest in the history of science was further recognized in 1947 when he was invited to teach the first science course, "The Physical Universe," a two-year sequence of general studies of an interdisciplinary nature. Ihde's course, which drew material from chemistry, physics, and astronomy, sought to show the nature of science and the growth of scientific ideas through the historic debates associated with planetary systems, atomic and molecular theory, and cosmic concepts. He continued to teach the course until his retirement in 1980; more than 7,000 students took this course under his leadership. By 1949, Ihde had placed the history of science at the center of the new Integrated Liberal Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin.

Ihde's thrust toward history of science was accelerated by three parallel developments: 1) the creation of a major program in the history of science at Wisconsin—started in 1941 by Henry Guerlac and continued after the war by R. Stauffer and Marshall Clagett, with ancillary history programs in pharmacy, from Georg Urdang and medicine from Erwin Ackerknecht; 2) the university's purchase of Denis Duveen's book collection—supplementing the Thordarson Collection (1945—science and technology) and the later purchase of two collections of Hugh Sinclair (1957—Boyle and Priestley) and William A. Cole (1978—rich in revised editions and translations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European treatises); and 3) a year spent at Harvard University in 1951–52 as a Carnegie Intern in General Education, working with James B. Conant, Leonard Nash, and Thomas Kuhn in teaching Conant's Case History course in science. That year also permitted him to become associated with George Sarton, I. B. Cohen, and Gerald Holton in the history of science program they were developing at Harvard. In 1957, the University of Wisconsin's History of Science Department welcomed Ihde officially to its ranks.

Ihde's research and publications transformed the field of the history of chemistry. The intellectual fruits of six decades at Wisconsin as a student, as a faculty member, and as professor

emeritus occupy seven bound volumes in the stacks of the Memorial Library and consist of 342 items including a posthumous paper published in the *Bulletin of the History of Chemistry*. He made the University of Wisconsin the premier center for the study of the history of chemistry especially after he was joined on the faculty by his first Ph.D. student Robert Siegfried. Over the years, Aaron supervised 21 Ph.D.s in history of science, as well as a number of masters' students and post-doctoral fellows. His best known books are, *The Development of Modern Chemistry* (1964) and his volumes of *Selected Readings in the History of Chemistry*, culled from the *Journal of Chemical Education* and co-edited with the journal's editor William Kieffer. *The Development of Modern Chemistry*, the standard textbook in the field, included the history of chemical technology, biochemistry, agricultural chemistry, and chemical physics, extending coverage to the first half of the twentieth century. He wrote broadly and widely about Paracelsus and Boyle, on classic nineteenth-century European scientists such as Avogadro, Faraday, Bunsen, and Baeyer, on the development of chemistry in the United States, and on the history of the pure food law.

Ihde was an advocate of progressive causes, especially the social responsibilities of scientists, and the purity and safety of drugs. From 1955 to 1968 he was a member of the Wisconsin Food Standards Advisory Committee and served as its chair for two years. In 1958 he was offered the position of scientific director of Consumer's Union, but declined a position that would have doubled his salary because he loved his work as a scholar and teacher. In the early 1960s Aaron Ihde and other University of Wisconsin professors, including Grant Cottam, James Crow, Arthur Hasler, Hugh Iltis, Karl Schmidt, and Van Potter, advocated public and scholarly discussion of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the impact of pesticides on the environment. As a result, they were accused of spreading false and misleading information and some questioned their competence and their qualifications to speak to the public about pesticides.

Ihde was admired and respected by students and colleagues. All his dealings with students were models of organization, dignity, and respect for scholarly inquiry. He was generous in making all his books and resources available to any visitor to his office. He promoted and enjoyed contacts with alumni and former students. He was the long-time editor of the *Badger Chemist*. His interest in the history of the University of Wisconsin Department of Chemistry resulted in the publication in 1990 of his last book: *Chemistry, As Viewed from Bascom Hill: A History of the Chemistry Department at the University of Wisconsin in Madison*.

Ihde received the Dexter Award in 1968 and the University of Wisconsin's Chancellor's Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1978. He served as president of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, chair of the ACS Wisconsin Section, and chair of the ACS History of Chemistry Division (1962–1964). He was elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He remained active in retirement and devoted himself to reading, writing, family visits, and volunteer work in the Arboretum, removing invasive honeysuckle and buckthorn thickets from the Lost City Forest section of the Arboretum; over the years he single-handedly restored a large wildflower meadow. He spent his final eighteen months with his daughter Gretchen and her family in Sarasota, FL, where he began to show symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. He is survived by his two children and their families. Aaron Ihde died on February 23, 2000, in Sarasota, Florida.

### Sources

Most of the preceding text is taken from B. Z. Shakhshiri, C. Casey, V. Hilts, D. Lindberg, R. Siegfried, "Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison on the Death of Professor Emeritus Aaron J. Ihde" UW-Madison Faculty Document 1544—5 February 2001 or Aaron J. Ihde, *A Quarter Century of Dexter Awards*, 1981, unpublished manuscript. Copy in the University of Pennsylvania Library, QD21 .Q8 1981a; an abridged version can be found in *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 3 (1989): 12.

William B. Jensen, "Aaron John Ihde, 1909–2000," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 26 (2001): 1–2.

James J. Bohning, "Aaron Ihde: A Life From Bascom's Hill," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 26 (2001): 3–14.

Alan J. Rocke, "Aaron Ihde and His Students," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 26 (2001): 15–23.

William B. Jensen, "Aaron Ihde's Contributions to the History of Chemistry," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 26 (2001): 24–32.

Robert Siegfried, "Memories of Aaron Ihde," *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 26 (2001): 33–35.

Photo courtesy of the Oesper Collections: University of Cincinnati.