

## EDITORIAL: PROMOTING DIVERSITY

---

Carmen J. Giunta, Professor of Chemistry, Le Moyne College,  
Syracuse, NY, USA

This issue of the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* contains more than the usual number of articles focused on chemists who were not white men. Dean Martin, Vera Mainz, and Gregory Girolami have contributed a meticulously detailed article on St. Elmo Brady (1884-1966), the first African-American chemist to earn a Ph.D. in chemistry. Marelene and Geoff Rayner-Canham, frequent contributors to the pages of the *Bulletin*, describe the life and career of the classical crystallographer Mary “Polly” Porter (1886-1980). Jeffery Leigh has provided us with some personal details of the courtship of Alexander (1770-1822) and Jane (1769-1858) Marcet (née Haldimand), the last of several articles about the author of *Conversations on Chemistry* and her husband. And Kathleen and James Neeley present us with a thoroughly documented account of a wave of women chemists at the University of Kansas in the first half of the twentieth century, focusing particular attention on Mary Elvira Weeks (1892-1975). Weeks is best known to chemists interested in the history of our discipline as the author of *Discovery of the Elements*.

The purpose of this editorial is not self-congratulatory, though. On the contrary, the presence of articles **not** centered on the life and work of white men is a reminder of the dominance of their work and life in the pages of this journal. “We have been here all along,” proclaimed the cover of the February 22, 2021, issue of *Chemical and Engineering News*, celebrating Black chemists and chemical engineers. The stories of individuals from groups

underrepresented in chemistry need to be told, including a frank description of the obstacles they faced. The past tense of “faced” reflects the fact that the subject matter of the *Bulletin* is typically the past; it is not meant to imply that those impediments existed only in the past. Awareness of obstacles in the past can help us dismantle or mitigate those same or similar obstructions in the present.

The modest diversity among the subjects of articles in this issue presents an opportunity to reflect on the importance of promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity in our institutions—in this context, specifically in the *Bulletin*. As noted already, the pages of this journal need to include stories about chemists from groups underrepresented in chemistry. The *Bulletin* has an obligation to make those stories better known to members of both the predominant groups in chemistry and underrepresented groups. Removing obstacles to inclusion is a task for members of both groups, and it can only be facilitated through a common understanding of those obstacles.

In addition to a greater diversity among the subjects of its articles, the *Bulletin* would benefit from a greater diversity among its authors and reviewers, who can provide a wide range of perspectives on all aspects of the history of chemistry—not only that of minority groups. A greater diversity in subscribers to the *Bulletin*—primarily but not exclusively members of the Division of the History of Chemistry (HIST) of the American Chemical Society (ACS)—would help the *Bulletin* gather more voices as

authors and reviewers. And more diversity in HIST would also enrich its programs.

Recognizing the desirability of more diversity in our institutions is a necessary but not a sufficient step in making them more diverse. It is not enough to welcome and value all comers: proactive outreach is required for meaningful progress to be made.

In pointing to the need for more diversity of backgrounds and perspectives, I do not wish to deprecate the efforts already made in that direction by the *Bulletin*, by HIST, and by ACS. I close by pointing out two further opportunities to learn more about the history of African Americans in chemistry. HIST will sponsor a symposium on that subject, organized by Sibrina Collins, Taiya Fabre,

and Tracey Simmons-Willis at the Fall 2021 ACS National meeting. (The Fall 2021 meeting will have a hybrid format, so it will not be necessary to be in Atlanta to partake of the programming.) And the ACS Symposium series has just published, online at least, a volume titled *African American Chemists: Academia, Industry, and Social Entrepreneurship*, edited by Sibrina Collins. Expect to see a review in the next issue of the *Bulletin*.

### About the Author

Carmen Giunta is Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, USA. He is editor of the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*.

## COMMENT AND RESPONSE

### The Toxicity of Mercury

Volume 45, issue 2, contained a paper on mercury, its singular properties, and several of its toxic effects over time (L. C. Soares, "From 'Blue Pills' to the Minamata Convention: Mercury, a Singular Metal," *Bull. Hist. Chem.*, **2020**, *45*, 67-79). Prof. E. J. Behrman wrote with a wish that the paper had treated the varying effects of different chemical species in greater detail. Prof. Soares took the opportunity to provide some additional information differentiating the effects of different mercury species, and explaining how the less toxic metallic form still presents hazards. Prof. Behrman's letter and Prof. Soares's response are printed below.

—Editor

### Comment by Prof. Behrman

Dear Editor,

I wish that the author had emphasized more strongly the importance of the chemical state of mercury in discussing toxicity. Elemental mercury is not the same as dimethyl mercury. A casual reader might be left with the impression that all forms of mercury are equally toxic from the frequent use of "mercury" rather than "mercury compounds." Elemental mercury is hardly toxic at all because it is so unreactive. (An exception is mercury vapor, produced by heating, if inhaled. However, at room temperature its vapor pressure is very low, viz.  $1.84 \times 10^{-3}$  mm at 25 °C vs. 760 mm at 356.9 °C, its boiling point—hence its use in vacuum systems.) Of course, even at room temperature, there is some vapor phase mercury, but the dosage matters. An analogy would be to avoid carbon and nitrogen because their combination is the cyanide ion. Schools need not be shut down because mercury has been spilled from a broken thermometer.