The Back Story

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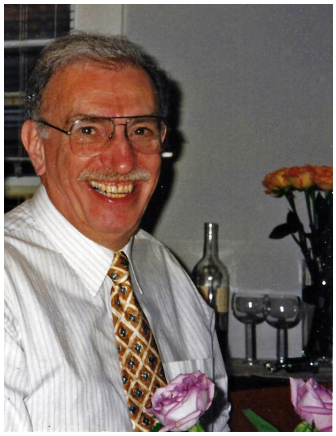
Steve Weininger, Comfortable in Many Disciplines



Stephen J. Weininger is rare among the scholars who pursue the history of chemistry (HoC). His distinctiveness comes in part from his desire and ability to study, publish and present on the history of chemistry for chemists; on the history of chemistry for professional historians; and on the philosophy of chemistry for philosophers. Indeed, he has a particular skill for contributing to these several disciplines simultaneously and is welcome in all three communities. In my first draft of this essay, I included representative titles of Steve's publications, but ultimately that approach seemed too encyclopedic and sterile, the opposite of my intent. Table 1 (in the Supplementary Information) clusters Steve's publications multifurcated by discipline. You are invited to see for yourself his multidisciplinary scholarship.

Regardless of the discipline, Steve publishes in its journals and uses the idiosyncratic style and language of the discipline. He is comfortable in many distinctly different scientific cultures. By formal education and academic appointment, Steve is a chemist. His academic home is in a Department of Chemistry at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). Steve is a former Chair of the Division of History of Chemistry (HIST) of the ACS. He has published research articles in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society,* the *Journal of Organic Chemistry, Tetrahedron Letters,* the *Journal of Polymer Science*, and so forth. As we shall shortly see, by passion, Steve became a self-educated historian and philosopher of chemistry.

Perhaps Steve's transformation from chemist to interdisciplinarian began in 1970 when WPI revised its curriculum to stress interdisciplinary teaching and research. Steve and others formed a *Group for Integrative Studies*. One course that Steve initiated and eventually taught with a colleague in the Art History Department was *Light, Vision and Understanding*. In the early 1980s, together with like-minded colleagues from other institutions, Steve founded a Society for Literature & Science, now called the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts (SLSA). Steve was its first vice president and ultimately its president. Still a very active organization, SLSA holds annual conferences and publishes a journal, *Configurations*—a double entendre from the chemist's perspective or perhaps an "in joke" played by Steve on his SLSA colleagues.

I am particularly amused by some of the titles (and what's inside them) in Steve's portfolio. Here are several: "Sooner Silence Than Confusion: The Tortuous Entry of Entropy into Chemistry" (with Helge Kragh) in *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* (1996); "Contemplating the Finger: A Semiotic Perspective on Chemistry" in *HYLE* (1998); "Chemistry for the 'Industrial Classes': Laboratory Instruction, Mass Education and Women's Experience in Mid-Western Land-Grant Colleges, 1870-1914" in the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* (2013) (chosen for the Best Paper Award by HIST); and "Paper Tools from the 1780s to the 1960s: Nomenclature, Classification, and Representations" (with Mary Jo Nye) in *Ambix* (2018); among others.

How can it be that Steve is welcomed in so many disciplines beyond his home discipline of chemistry? It is his combination of academic brilliance, professional amiability, and personal charm. One of our colleagues said of him, "Steve shows that he cares about you by always giving you his full attention. He's really interested in you and what you have to say." Another colleague said, "Everyone loves Steve. His enthusiasm for chemistry, for scholarship in any field, for food and drink, for fellowship, for life in general, is incredibly infectious. He is kind and thoughtful, but also has a quick, analytical mind. Life is good when you are around Steve."

Steve tells me that his paper in this special issue of the *Bulletin*—aptly focused on bringing the above-named disciplines closer together—will be his last scientific publication. He is hanging up his reins and saddle for the last time. His absence in the post-2022 literature and at our HoC meetings will be keenly felt. Our loss will be tempered with the knowledge that he and his fertile mind will be dancing, along with his wife Jennifer, to other tunes in other venues.

Steve is one of my heroes. I have particularly admired his warm smile, which he offers generously. If one cannot hope to duplicate this virtuoso model, one can surely value and appreciate Steve Weininger.