

The Inorganic Chemistry Department of Imperial College was still under the benevolent supervision of Professor J.C. Philip FRS while I was a student there in 1935. Around 1910, before World War I, as it was then part of proper education, he had studied chemistry in Heidelberg and Göttingen, and ever since it was his wish that, what he had learnt in Germany during his student days, should also benefit his own students in London.

One of his principles was that, in addition to teaching chemistry in the strict classical manner and with immaculate laboratory etiquette, he should have some personal contact with, and knowledge of, his students. To achieve this, there was a monthly tea party in his large house in Queens Gate, a broad tree-lined avenue next to the College, where he and his wife received about a dozen third-year students. He was the only professor of Imperial College who took this trouble and this small contact was much appreciated, although I doubt if it had much influence on my behaviour.

During my four years as a student at Imperial College, I lived the first two years at the College Union, a pretty grim, but utilitarian Hostel. Small rooms with bed and washbasin, table and chair, and book shelves; but a bathroom with facilities was only at the end of a long corridor. One night, I do not remember where or with whom, I must have had too much to drink. I got back to my room and was sick on the floor. This must have been reported to the Warden, a totally uninspiring ex-chemistry tutor, who had been demoted to the position of Warden. He threatened me with expulsion from the Hostel, if ever I repeated such "despicable misbehaviour". His warning made a deep impression on me at the time, and ever since then, in 1935, I can only remember one further instance of being completely drunk. I was still a student a year or so later and in Lyon, France, where I fell victim to absinthe, a drink I have avoided ever since.

I worked hard again to pass the final exams in Chemistry with Botany as a subsidiary subject and in 1936 I could proudly write B.Sc. and A.R.C.S. (Associate of the Royal College of Science) behind my name. In the four months of holiday which followed the final exams, I worked for part of the time in the private laboratory of a Dr Rudolf Lessing, determining the fluorine contents in coal dust, as parts per 10 million. Another month was spent idyllically with my father whom I met in the Sporthotel Parsenn in Klosters, Switzerland. My diary tells me that we were both very happy together.