

Rich Chemists and how they enjoyed their Wealth Title 6

The reasons why a young boy or girl decides to become a scientist are not often discussed. Nature or Nurture? Pure chance, an accident or infatuation with a teacher? There may well be many other reasons, but I have never come across any published research into that question which has now gained such importance. For many gifted young persons, science has now lost the attraction and glamour which it has had for the last 100 years.

Strictly speaking this is only true for the Western World, as in the East science and engineering careers are still the priority for the young. If material riches are the life's aim, the young in the West will opt for accountancy or law, or even for medicine in certain countries. To take up science means at least a basic knowledge of mathematics, always very hard studies at a university, but never financial rewards later in their careers. The number of really rich scientists I have met during my life can literally be counted on the fingers of my hand.

Three rich chemists, who became very good friends, were Franz Sondheimer, Arthur John Birch and Carl Djerassi. Franz and Arthur are now dead. Franz tragically committing suicide, Arthur after being the Foundation Professor of Chemistry at Australia's National University in Canberra, died peacefully a few years ago.

Franz, or Frank as he often called himself, became a really close friend. I first met him in Israel where he had become a Professor of Chemistry at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot and which I visited from time to time as a consultant on scientific public relations. Here follows a brief note how Frank spent a great deal of money after I introduced him to the passion of collecting. By then I myself was an ardent collector of antique scientific books, which of course I showed to Frank with some pride.

He then decided to do the same, but only to collect first editions of classic chemistry books which had been written by such great chemists as the Hon. Robert Boyle [1627-1691]. Even in London these treasures were difficult to find, and often cost several hundred, if not thousands of pounds sterling. After a few years, and after having splendid bookcases built for them in his Mayfair flat—Frank had by then become Royal Society Research Professor at University College, London—he had built up a superb collection of the history of chemistry. All were *editio princeps*, many of them in original bindings, often of antique leather and rebound if necessary. His magnificent collection was unique in private hands and it gave him great pleasure, as his wealth allowed him to enrich his knowledge and his life through it. Unfortunately after his death, the collection was dispersed by auction, only the Collection of books by Boyle found its way to an American University.