

PREFACE



At the conclusion of 2019 I was contacted by the Division on the History of Chemistry of the German Chemical Society and asked to consider writing an autobiography, as part of a series of books on the life and work of eminent scientists. I accepted the invitation. The resulting written account is intended to provide insight into what motivated me to embark on a career of scientific research, the formative influences that shaped the way I approached research, how I came to focus my research on understanding the chemistry of enzyme catalysis, what I achieved in the course of a lifelong pursuit of that knowledge, what factors stimulated my original scientific insights, and how those ideas were received by the scientific community.

Ever since my undergraduate days at university, I have been fascinated by the mechanisms of acceptance and rejection of scientific ideas: why some ideas are immediately and widely accepted while other ideas are overlooked or even rejected, either fate often bearing no relation to their ultimate validity. Because of my early interest in that question, I briefly considered majoring in Philosophy but instead decided to initially pursue a career in scientific research as a basis for subsequent philosophic ruminations. From the beginning I have regarded my own research experiences as a series of case studies of how the scientific community reacts to (my) new



ideas. Sometimes unexpectedly positively, other times inexplicably passively (“who cares”) or even negatively (“everything you say is wrong”), again having little to do with the validity of the ideas.

What I had not bargained on in setting out to pursue a career in scientific research for just a limited period was that I would become “hooked”, fascinated by the simple “pleasure of finding things out, the kick in the discovery, (making) the observation that other people use ...”, and that consequently I would spend the whole of my professional life devoted to scientific research. In the course of a variegated, peripatetic research career I made original contributions to the chemistry of peptides and proteins. In particular I developed

Fig. 0.1.
Presenting at
the Emil Fischer
Symposium,
Berlin,
December 2019.

Transcript of an
interview with
Richard Feyn-
man made for
the BBC tele-
vision program
Horizon in 1981.
This interview
was published in
the book Rich-
ard P. Feynman:
*The pleasure of
finding things
out. The Best
Short Works
of Richard P.
Feynman* (Ed.:
Jeffrey Robbins).
Perseus Books,
Cambridge
Mass., 1999.

Fig. 0.2. (right)
Stephen Kent,
July 2019.

novel approaches to both the synthesis and analysis of peptides and proteins, motivated by the goal of having better tools to understand the chemistry of enzyme catalysis. As well as increasing our fundamental understanding of enzymes, these new methods significantly impacted important topics in biomedical science.

My hope is that this personal story of naively idealistic adventures in science will contribute to a greater appreciation by young researchers of the true origins and development of scientific ideas, which bears little resemblance to the highly formalized and impersonal way that ideas are presented in published scientific papers. It is my fond wish that this tale of scientific research driven by simple curiosity will inspire in others a sense of the excitement of finding out how things work.

Fig. 0.3.
Stephen Kent,
Keynote talk,
European
Peptide Sym-
posium, Leipzig,
September 2016.



