

Encounters with Chemistry

H. L. Mencken

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Many famous nonchemists have left behind accounts of their first encounter with chemistry. Whether the person in question was a psychologist, a writer, a critic, an artist, an economist, a mathematician, or a philosopher, whether the experience was brief or prolonged, whether it was pleasant or unpleasant, the purpose of this series is to record these encounters and do so in the person's own words whenever possible.

Henry Louis Mencken (figure 1) or H. L. Mencken, as he was universally known, was perhaps the single most important American critic and social commentator of the 1920s. Beginning his career as a newspaper editor, he rapidly gained influence as a literary critic and humorous commentator on American culture and politics through his editorship of the magazines *The Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*. He also became an expert on American dialects, which led to the publication of his respected study, *The American Language* (1919, 1945, 1948). Though much of his writing fell out of favor during the great depression, there is now a revival of interest. Several collections of his literary, political, and social criticism are currently in print, as well as several volumes of collected letters, and he has been the subject of at least a dozen biographies and critical studies.

Born the son of a Baltimore cigar manufacturer, Mencken was sent at age 12 to the Baltimore Polytechnic, a vocational high school. In the third volume of his autobiographical trilogy: *Happy Days* (1940), *Newspaper Days* (1941), and *Heathen Days* (1943), he recounted his close call with a career in chemistry during his time at the Polytechnic:¹

My actual interests, in those days, lay far from tools and machinery. I was fascinated, on the one hand, by the art of writing and on the other by the science of chemistry, and both obsessions had been set going by Christmas presents – the first by that of a printing-press and the second by that of a camera. The two fought it out in my psyche all the while I was at the Polytechnic, and it was only in my last year that the writing insanity won. My first effort to write for publication was a sort of compromise between them, for it took the form of a report on a platinum solution that I



Figure 1. Henry Louis Mencken
(1880-1956)

had devised for toning silver prints. This was during the summer of 1894 when I was still less than fourteen years old. Writing won in the end largely if not principally because the brethren who expounded “literae humaniores” at the Polytechnic were both enthusiasts, whereas the brother who taught chemistry knew very little about it and appeared to have only mild interest in it...

I often worked in the chemical laboratory after school hours, but was never hurt there, though I had several narrow escapes. One day a boy working next to me filled a test-tube with nitric acid, plugged it with a cork, and proceeded in all innocence to heat it over a Bunsen burner. When it went off I managed to duck the murderous spatter, but the boy responsible got a big splash down one of his arms, and before I could douse him with an alkali a sizable groove was burned into his flesh ...

If I had encountered a good teacher of chemistry at the Polytechnic, it is very probable that I’d be a chemist at this moment, with a swell job on the staff of

the du Ponts and maybe a couple of new synthetic rubbers or super-cellophanes to my credit. My chief interest was always in organic chemistry, but the best that was offered by the gogue aforesaid was a childish high-school course in inorganic analysis, so I began, in a kind of despair, to work off my steam in literary endeavor.

References and Notes

1. H. L. Mencken, *Heathen Days: 1890-1936*, Knopf: New York, 1943, pp. 39, 49, 53.

Publication History

Published in *The Chemical Intelligencer*, **2000**, 6(3), 58.