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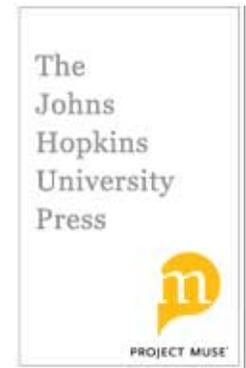
Natural Dyestuffs and Industrial Culture in Europe,
1750-1880 (review)

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Natural Dyestuffs and Industrial Culture in Europe, 1750–1880.

Edited by Robert Fox and Agustí Nieto-Galan. Canton, Mass.: Watson, 1999.

Pp. xxix+354; illustrations, tables, notes/references, index. \$49.95.

This is a selection of papers presented in 1996 at Oriel College, Oxford, as part of a European Science Foundation research program on “The Evolution of Chemistry in Europe, 1789–1939.” The papers are very diverse, addressing science and culture, production and management, commerce and migrations, institutions and politics. They are grounded on the extensive material catalogued in the *Bibliotheca Tinctoria*: printed works, government documents, patents, local records—and the papers of chemists, merchants, and business firms. For example, Geert Verbong’s history of the Dutch calico printing industry is mostly based on the archives of De Heyder and Company, a firm that preserved a valuable collection of

“recipes books, laboratory journals, sample books and cost price calculations” (p. 194). Similarly, Christian Simon begins his essay by describing the archive of the Geigy Company of Basel, which includes documents that permitted him to make statistical comparisons between the production of natural and artificial dyestuffs and to reassess the process of technical change. Thanks to their attention to primary historical sources, these authors are able to elucidate important issues in the history of chemistry and color making.

In their introduction to the volume, Robert Fox and Agustí Nieto-Galan set out four themes to frame their book: the making of a chemistry for natural dyestuffs; geography in the history of dyestuffs (markets and migrations); natural dyestuffs in the light of recent historiography on workshops, factories, and industrial culture; and the history of dyestuffs related to the fundamental debates about new technological eras. Some of the papers address all four, and some questions recur often. Each of the contributors stresses the complexity of modernization; instead of clear-cut trends, they prefer halftones and hybrids. Tony Travis underscores the mixed culture of Heinrich Caro’s chemical knowledge. Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, Nieto-Galan, and Girolamo Ramunni show how much controversy there was among chemists. Gérard Emptoz explains that traditional dyes (extracts) continued to interest scientists and industrialists until the end of the nineteenth century, well into the age of synthetic dyes. Emptoz and Simon both insist on the necessity of linking choices about natural dyestuffs with regional economic context. All the authors address technical processes and products with reference to their users. According to Verbong, Dutch calico printers cherished “small mistakes” in their batiks, and these were in turn imitated in Java. Ernst Homburg discusses the importance during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of copper plates and cylinders, which had to be reinvented after the introduction of Indian processes. Then, the colorist’s craft became more distinct from engravers and drawers.

The reappropriation and circulation of skills, technics, artifacts, and plants are all essential to understanding the world of natural dyes, and each of the authors highlights the part played by intermediaries—Angélique Kinini’s travelers in Greece, for instance, and Anne-Claire Déré’s merchant families from Nantes. These practices were sustained by elaborate forms of coordination. Some were institutional creations, from painters’ guilds in Homburg to the Royal Academy of Science in Turin to Catalan lobbying. Dyeing technics could be closely related to politics, as Luisa Dolza shows with regard to Victorio Amedeo III. More informal relationships operated as well, and Richard Hills shows how James Watt’s family networks mingled friendship, scientific cosmopolitanism, and business encounters. All these relationships, whether institutional or not, were deeply concerned with the tension between disclosure and secrecy. Strategies could be poles apart, as

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with Watt's and Berthollet's efforts to promote bleaching. Caro's inventions, devised as alternatives to Perkin's and Simpson's patents, seemed very distant from any academic ideal of shared knowledge. Individual and collective aims were often entangled, as in the case of the Société Industrielle de Mulhouse, the Ampelakian Association, and the Dutch Trading Company.

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This volume will be valuable to anyone interested in the history of dyestuffs or in broader issues in history of science and technology. The bibliographies are thorough and the overall presentation is excellent. Only one topic is not very well developed: whereas skilled workers and craft culture are seriously analyzed, those Eastern artisans who transmitted their techniques to the West remain largely anonymous.

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