

Editorial

G Nagendrappa, Associate Editor

Paul Flory, on receiving the Priestly Medal of the American Chemical Society, said, “Significant inventions are not mere accidents... Knowledge in depth and breadth are virtual pre-requisites... Unless the mind is thoroughly charged before-hand, ... probably we will find nothing to ignite.” Louis Pasteur had made a similar statement, “In the field of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind.”



The young mind of William Henry Perkin, the chemist featured in this issue, was thoroughly charged when he embarked upon preparing quinine. Perkin was quite confident that his planned synthesis would inevitably lead to the targeted product. However, as Sir Derek Barton puts it¹, “Happily, this is not the way it always happens in the real world.” The product was an unexpected beautiful purple substance. Earlier, purple colour was for royals and high society people. Perkin’s Mauve changed all that. As Jonathan Brown and Steve Connor suggest², “In the great consumer democracy of the 21st century, even the most humble citizens can choose it as the colour of their latest shellsuit”. This is one of the most important serendipitous discoveries ever, which opened up a whole new area of scientific research and chemical industry.

Modern educationists would consider Perkin’s discontinuation of his studies as a case of a “college dropout”. But he did it with a purpose and achieved success. A top formal degree from a first rate university is not necessarily a prerequisite for making great contribution to a scientific field or to be a great human being.

Perkin’s school teacher Thomas Hall is a good example of how an inspiring teacher can shape the minds of his pupils at their impressionable age. We need many Halls for our children studying in schools and colleges, if we want at least some of them to become Perkins, not only in chemistry but in every branch of knowledge. Does our educational system have Halls and Perkins?

We need parents like Perkin’s father who are supportive of their wards’ ideas. But in our society children are often forced to study the subjects of the parents’ choice. When do we start allowing our children to pursue their interest?

¹ In his foreword to *Serendipity* by R M Roberts, Wiley & Sons, 1989. ²An Invention to Dye for: the Colour Purple in *The Independent* of Monday, 17 April 2006 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the discovery of mauve.

