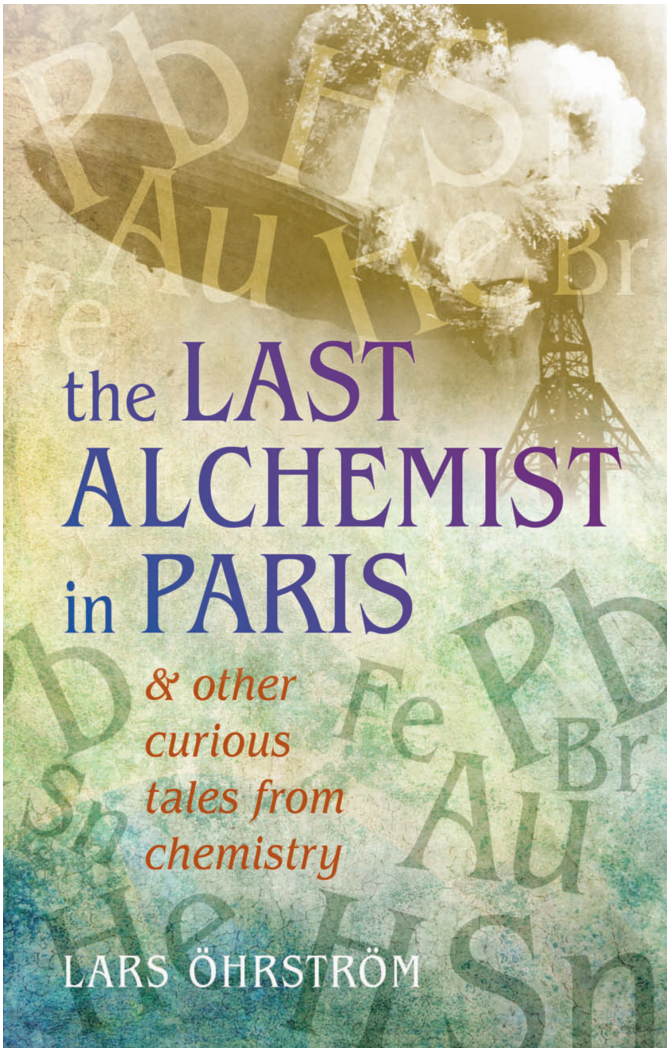
The Last Alchemist in Paris

by Lars Öhrström
Oxford University Press, 2014, xiv + 257 p.

reviewed by Juris Meija

Like most popular science books of chemistry, *The Last Alchemist in Paris* is a collection of stories where chemistry of elements intertwines with the cultural history of recent or distant times. A problem common to many popular chemistry books is that either good chemists are usually not good historians, or that good historians are usually bad chemists. Öhrström is certainly a good chemist and in this book he also demonstrates a passion and respect for history.



By now, most of us have heard the tale of "Napoleon's buttons," the chemical "romance" of the soldiers' tin buttons crumbling to dust in the cold Russian winter of 1812, aiding the defeat of the French army. Fact or fiction? To answer this question, Öhrström does not exercise the popular copy-paste approach to writing and research. Rather, he draws from contemporary and historic records and offers an exemplary dive into the crux of this story. It also helps that he has seen the infamous buttons and has participated in the investigation of the recently discovered mass grave of the grand army in Lithuania. His analysis of facts, rumors, and opinions is a first-rate example of critical thinking, research, and scientific journalism. Overall, this book offers an inspiring tour behind the scientific backdrop of so many cultural scenes of our lives.

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The book is inspiring. I can imagine, for example, a young reader and aspiring scientist performing alkaline hydrolysis of cloves in mom's kitchen in anticipation of conjuring the scent of nutmeg. Öhrström also has a good sense of humor. There are plenty of witty subtitles and comments: mining, he writes, has been around ever since Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and for easy reference he approximates the chloride-to-bromide amount ratio in seawater as 666:1 (can't argue with that). On a more serious side of things, this book has the intellectual muscle. In this book you will find out the answers to important and interesting socio-chemical questions. Why were the zeppelins not filled with the non-flammable helium a century ago and why should we resist buying those useless helium-filled party balloons. Most importantly, you will find out how to tell apart a diamond from the coveted cubic zirconia.

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