THE POPE COLLECTION OF ALCHEMICAL PAINTINGS AND ENGRAVINGS

BY PROF. JOHN READ, F.R.S.

THE late Sir William Jackson Pope, professor of chemistry in the University of Cambridge from 1908 until 1939, besides being one of the most eminent of British chemists, was known among the *cognoscenti* as a discerning collector of alchemical paintings and engravings. His treasures included many fine examples, either originals or engravings, of the work of the younger Teniers, Wijck, Bega, Steen, and other painters of the celebrated Dutch school of the seventeenth century. Among other items of much interest there was an unusually complete series of the rich reproductions in mezzo-tint of the paintings of Joseph Wright, the eighteenth-century painter of Derby, whose strangely effective high-lights are seen to such advantage in his representation of the discovery of phosphorus and in his charming study of a philosopher giving a lecture on the orrery.

There was also an impression of the rare engraving on copper, dated 1643, showing the experimenting Franciscan monk, Bertold Schwartz ("Black Bertold"), of Freiburg im Breisgau, "Doctor, Alchemist, und Erfinder der freijen Kunst des Büchschenschiessens, im Jar 1380", firing a charge of gunpowder with a flint and steel in his laboratory. Very exceptionally, the collection contained engravings in both 'enantiomorphic forms' of Teniers' "Le Plaisir des Fous": this famous picture, caricaturing the unintelligent operations of the 'puffers', or exoteric alchemists, depicts an ape seated at an alchemist's hearth with a pair of bellows, the operative paw being the right in one reproduction and the left in its 'mirror-image'. The pair of small engravings, which used to face each other upon the mantelpiece of Pope's study in Cambridge, naturally made a strong appeal to the great master of stereochemistry, who had taken delight for so long in the production of new and startling dextro- and lævo-forms in the laboratory.

One of the most attractive items in the collection was an original oil-painting, "The Chemyst", by Cornelis Pietersz Bega. This used to grace the entrance hall of the owner's Cambridge home, and it

came from the Sawbridge-Earle-Drax Collection. Painted on a wooden panel, it is remarkable for the purity of its flesh-tones, its striking light effects, and its delicate tones of heliotrope and blue. An excellent black-and-white reproduction of this picturesque alchemical interior by Bega adorns the cover of a recent issue of *The Laboratory*, an interesting advertising periodical published in booklet form by the Fisher Scientific Company of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

Some time after the death, in October 1939, of Sir William Pope, his collection was acquired by the Fisher Scientific Company; having survived the perils of an adventurous passage across the Atlantic, it is now safely deposited at Pittsburg in the well-known Fisher Collection of notable pictures dealing with alchemy and historical chemistry. The Fisher Scientific Company has combined enterprise with good fortune in securing this handsome accession, and the pleasing thought is worthy of expression that the Pope Collection will preserve its identity in the new milieu.

It is a sign of the great interest taken by American chemists, both academic and industrial, in the historical evolution of their science that an American industrial corporation should take such pains in building up a purely historical collection of the kind under notice. While congratulating the United States most cordially on her clear vision and good fortune in this matter, all British chemists who appreciate the interest, inspiration and educative value of historical chemistry will entertain a feeling of regret that a collection of such outstanding merit as that of Pope could not have been preserved in Cambridge.

These beautiful alchemical paintings and engravings, together with the fascinating collections of drug jars and ornamented mortars brought together by the same hand, would have formed an artistic and unique addition to the Fitzwilliam Museum, besides providing a memorial truly characteristic of Sir William Pope, who accomplished more for the Cambridge school of chemistry than any other man.

EXCAVATIONS AT ELMSWELL, EAST YORKSHIRE, 1938

EXCAVATIONS on the Roman site at Elmswell, carried on by A. L. Congreve in 1936-37, were continued by Philip Corder in 1938 (*Hull Mus. Pub.*, No. 207; 1940). In the earlier investigations finds were both plentiful and remarkable, including thirty-seven coins ranging from one of the Iceni, coins of the whole Roman period and a barbarous type resembling a *secenta*, pottery unstratified, but of the whole Roman period in the north, ending with an extensive collection of late fourth century ware, the earliest decorated Samian being of the period of Domitian, and stamped Saxon sherds; and a large pile of iron slag, estimated at half a ton in weight, "the product of direct reduction of fairly pure iron ore", which is similar chemically and petrographically to other Romano-British slag. The varied nature of the finds indicated a long period of occupation, which from

other finds in the neighbourhood, evidently extended over an area of some square miles from the Bronze Age until Saxon times.

In 1938 a much wider area was trenched—in all about two acres. Ditches were traced, several areas of cobbling or roughly laid chalk blocks were uncovered and one hut floor was examined in detail. No stone-built house of Roman date—the principal objective—was discovered. Three more pits, similar to those already recorded, were excavated, and trenching on the triangular promontory some way from the main site revealed a solitary kiln.

The ditch proved to be shallow and not more than 8-9 ft. across. It must be interpreted as a boundary rather than a defence. Parallel to this, but 108 ft. to the east, was a second ditch, which must be considered part of the same system. All signs of occupation—