

Preface

Wilhelm Ostwald was a genius who was equipped with a knack for unconventional thinking in science and philosophy and with skills in both painting and music. On the other hand he was, surprisingly, a much more conventional and average personality in everyday life. Whereas his scientific achievements are part of the fundamentals of modern chemistry, and his philosophic views have been extensively and critically reviewed,² the world of his personal thinking and feeling, laid out in his autobiography, has so far been rather closed for non-German readers. The present translation will hopefully change that. The translation of his autobiography is certainly of special interest for readers in the US, the UK and France, as it shows what impressions Ostwald took from these countries during the course of his extensive travels. They will, of course, not agree with all of his views.

Ostwald published the first volume of his autobiography in 1926, followed by the second and third volumes in 1927.³ An abridged and commented (German) version was published in 2003.⁴ That edition contains a number of regrettable cuts and also errors in some comments. Beside his autobiography, two biographies have been published in German; one by his daughter Grete Ostwald⁵ in 1953 and one as early as 1904 by his former student Paul Walden.⁶ There are also other biographical

²Görs B, Psarros N, Ziche P (eds) (2005) Wilhelm Ostwald at the Crossroads between Chemistry, Philosophy and Media Culture. Universitätsverlag, Leipzig.

³Ostwald W (1926/1927) *Lebenslinien. Eine Selbstbiographie*. Klasing & Co GmbH, Berlin.

⁴Ostwald W (2003) *Lebenslinien. Eine Selbstbiographie. Nach der Ausgabe von 1927/27 überarbeitet und kommentiert von Karl Hansel*. Verlag der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Leipzig (in Kommission bei S. Hirzel, Stuttgart, Leipzig)

⁵Ostwald G (1953) *Mein Vater*. Berliner Union, Stuttgart

⁶Walden P (1904) *Wilhelm Ostwald*. Engelmann, Leipzig

publications about Ostwald in German.^{7,8,9} Although the corner stones of Ostwald's life are known in the English speaking world,^{10,11} the subtle details and especially his personal attitude towards his colleagues in Germany and abroad are still hidden in his German writings. The fact that the autobiography has never been translated to English may be surprising, especially because Ostwald and his students played an outstanding role in the establishment of physical chemistry in the USA^{12,13,14} and his contributions to chemistry are basic to this science and part of the chemistry curricula world wide. The lack of a translation may be due at least in part to the anti-German feelings that prevailed after World War I, during the Nazi period (1933–1945), and also after World War II. These times were not conducive to the popularisation of the biography of a German scientist, especially since Ostwald, as a child of his times, was a strong believer in a nationalistically biased world view. There is however an interesting dichotomy here for, as the autobiography shows, Ostwald was at the same time a tireless propagator in many diverse areas of, international cooperation. Perhaps now that the dust of these historical struggles has settled back down, non-German readers may be better prepared to understand that some of Ostwald's seemingly outrageous remarks merely reflect the spirit of the times in which he lived. The present publication, together with a recently published book on the development of electrochemistry in Eastern Europe¹⁵ is aimed at opening up the history of science in Europe and making it accessible to English speakers.

This translation is based on the German original 1926/27 edition. In addition to the text and photos, it contains a Name Index (see end) and a pedigree of the Ostwald family. I am very happy that my colleague at the University of Greifswald, Professor Robert Jack, carried out the translation, because this was a task which needed someone who is both a “native speaker” and a scientist. We have

⁷Ertl G (2009) *Chemie in unserer Zeit* 121:6724–6730.

⁸Bartel HG (1999) Ostwald, Friedrich Wilhelm. In: *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 19:630–631 (online: <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd11859057X.html>)

⁹Messow U, Krause K (1998) *Physikalische Chemie in Leipzig. Festschrift zum 100. Jahrestag der Einweihung des Physikalisch-chemischen Instituts an der Universität Leipzig*. Universitätsverlag, Leipzig.

¹⁰Donnan FG (1933) Ostwald Memorial Lecture. *J Chem Soc* 316–332

¹¹Sutton M (2003) The Father of Physical Chemistry. *Chem Brit* 39(5):32–34

¹²Stock JT (2003) *Ostwald's American Students. Apparatus, Techniques and Careers*. Plaidswede Publishing, Concord

¹³Servos JW (1996) *Physical Chemistry from Ostwald to Pauling: The Making of a Science in America*. University Press, Princeton

¹⁴Coffey P (2008) *Cathedrals of science. The Personalities and Rivalries that Made Modern Chemistry*. University Press, Oxford

¹⁵Scholz F (ed.) (2015) *Electrochemistry in a divided world. Innovations in Eastern Europe in the 20th Century*. Springer, Berlin

intensively—sometimes heatedly—discussed the details of the translation, because it is no mean task to make Ostwald's text understandable to contemporary English readers. Robert gives some explanations of his translation in the Translator's note.

Greifswald, Germany

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