## NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

# SAMUEL MARION MCELVAIN

## 1897—1973

A Biographical Memoir by GILBERT STORK

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Biographical Memoir

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# SAMUEL MARION MCELVAIN

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## BY GILBERT STORK

**S** (AMUEL) M(ARION) MCELVAIN was for his entire professional career a member of the chemistry department of the University of Wisconsin in Madison. That period—spanning the thirty-eight years from his appointment as instructor in 1923 (full professor from 1933) to his retirement in 1961—coincided with the explosive growth of organic chemistry. That growth resulted in no small measure from a handful of pioneers in a few universities who strove to bring some order to what was then a largely empirical field.

McElvain was one of those pioneers in the formative years of American organic chemistry. His work resulted in major contributions to the understanding of the mechanism of certain base-catalyzed reactions of esters and to the relation between structure and reactivity. It is this latter concern, together with an unusual ability to systematize these relationships, that led McElvain to what was probably his major scientific contribution, the discovery and study of the ketene acetals, a class of substances that proved to be of considerable synthetic interest, as well as of great significance with respect to the emerging theories of chemical reactivity.

McElvain's est in relating chemical behavior to structure extended ological activity, more particularly in the field of anesthesia. This led to another major contribution, the design of local anesthetics, some of which were developed into important and very successful drugs (Metycaine<sup>TM</sup>, Surfacaine<sup>TM</sup>) by the pharmaceutical house of Eli Lilly and Company.

Solomon and Eliza (Childess) McElvain had already had five children, four of whom died in infancy, when their last, Samuel Marion, was born on December 9, 1897 on a farm near DuQuoin, Illinois. The young McElvain attended the public school of DuQuoin, graduating from high school in 1915. The family then moved to St. Louis where, urged by his older brother who was a physician, McElvain enrolled in the St. Louis College of Pharmacy. Although this foray may have initiated his later interest in the design of possible anesthetics, McElvain became quickly convinced that his future lay elsewhere and, in 1916, he became a student in the Department of Chemical Engineering of Washington University in St. Louis. During his undergraduate days there, "Mac," as he had become known, partially supported himself through school by working in a drugstore during whatever spare time he had. Indeed, at the suggestion of the owner of the store, who had generously offered to pay his expenses if he should be successful, Mac traveled to Columbia, Missouri to takeand pass-the State Board examination to become a registered pharmacist. This little excursion did not, however, interfere with MacElvain's chemical career; after his graduation from Washington University in 1920, McElvain started to work toward his Ph.D. in organic chemistry at the University of Illinois under the tutelage of Roger Adams. In 1923, just three years later, he received his Ph.D. and was appointed instructor in the Chemistry Department of Wisconsin. The young instructor wasted no time starting a research program that led him over the years into a number of areas I will now discuss. I have organized this brief survey as follows: I. The Acetoacetic Ester Condensation. II. Ketene Acetals. III. Chemistry of Pyridines and Piperidines.

## 1. THE ACETOACETIC ESTER CONDENSATION

It may be hard for today's reader to appreciate the rather nebulous approach to chemical mechanisms at the time Mc-Elvain began his research career. One of the then widely held mechanisms for the important Claisen self-condensation of ethyl acetate (the "acetoacetic ester condensation"), which is shown below, illustrates the situation:

$$\begin{array}{c} O \\ I \end{pmatrix} CH_{3} COC_{2}H_{5} + NaOC_{2}H_{5} \rightarrow CH_{3} C \\ OEt \\ OEt \end{array}$$

2) 
$$CH_3 \stackrel{|}{C} - \underbrace{OEt + H}_{OEt} - CH_2 CO_2 Et \rightarrow CH_3 \stackrel{|}{C} - CH_2 CO_2 Et$$
  
 $OEt \stackrel{|}{OEt} OEt$ 

O Na  
O Na  
O Na  
O Na  

$$H_3 \overset{!}{C} - CH - CO_2 Et \rightarrow CH_3 \overset{!}{C} = CH CO_2 Et + EtOH$$
  
OEt H

McElvain examined, in a number of papers published between 1929 and 1934, some of the controversies then surrounding this reaction. He was able to show, by careful quantitative experiments: 1) that although sodium metal had repeatedly been claimed to be the initiator of the condensation reaction, the initiating reagent is actually the metal alkoxide formed by various side-reactions of the metal. This suggestion had indeed been put forward very early by Claisen himself, but it had subsequently been vigorously contested, inter alia, by Arthur Michael. 2) That the "acetoacetic ester condensation" could be applied, in contrast to previous claims, to form the  $\beta$ -ketoesters derived from the homologs of propionic esters simply by removal of the alcohol generated in the condensation, thus driving it to completion. 3) That the previous failure to achieve the self-condensation of esters such as ethyl isobutyrate, which only have one hydrogen alpha to the ester carbonyl, is not an intrinsic property of such esters. He concluded that such condensations might succeed if stronger bases than metal alkoxides were used, and his suggestion to Spielman and Schmidt that these selfcondensations might work with mesitylmagnesium bromide indeed led to success. Hauser, independently, made the same observation, using sodium triphenylmethide as the base.

These contributions were fundamental to the development of our present understanding of base-catalyzed reactions.

## **II. KETENE ACETALS**

McElvain's interest in ketene acetal was originally aroused by a proposal in the literature that 1,1-diethoxyethylene, the diethylacetal of ketene, is an intermediate in the abovementioned Claisen self-condensation of ethyl acetate. Mc-Elvain's view of the course of the Claisen condensation was incompatible with this suggestion. The properties ascribed to the supposed ketene acetal seemed to him highly unlikely, and he showed that the "intermediate" that had been isolated was actually a mixture of ethanol and ethyl acetate! The postulated structure did, however, seem intriguing, and McElvain set out to synthesize the real ketene acetal. Success was reported in 1936, and over the next nineteen years McElvain published thirty-seven papers encompassing the synthesis, properties, and synthetic usefulness of this unusually reactive class of substances.

McElvain quickly recognized (1940) that the ketene acetal structure was a special case of what Robert Robinson had labeled a "heteroenoid" system and as such should exhibit especially high nucleophilicity. It is also historically and pedagogically (more about this later) noteworthy that McElvain's second and third papers on ketene acetals (J. Am. Chem.

Soc., 62:964, 1281; 1940) were among the first papers in the United States to make explicit use of the "curved arrows" introduced a few years earlier, largely by Robinson in England, to indicate the motion of electron pairs attending bond formation.

A large number of novel reactions were encountered in the study of ketene acetals for which McElvain introduced a general method of synthesis, the dealcoholation of orthoesters by means of aluminum alkoxides. The study of the unusual chemistry of these nucleophilic species was to lead to a number of surprising reactions, such as the remarkable ability of the parent substance to form carbon-carbon bonds with particularly reactive halides such as benzyl halides.

$$C_6H_5CH_2Br + H_2C = C \xrightarrow{O} Et C_6H_5CH_2CH_2C - OEt + EtBr$$

This reaction is not of great synthetic utility but has mechanistic analogies with the broad area of enamine chemistry, which was developed much later. Much more potentially useful was the reaction of ketene diethylacetal with acid chlorides, a reaction that leads to a very simple synthesis of  $\beta$ -ketoesters. This is shown below

$$R - CCl + CH_2 = C \xrightarrow{OEt} R - C - CH_2C - OEt + EtCl$$

and will serve to illustrate the general type of reaction undergone by ketene acetals with strong electrophiles. Note that the  $\beta$ -ketoester thus formed is accompanied only by the volatile ethyl chloride, and that the reaction represents a completely general synthesis of the very class of compounds that had attracted McElvain's early interest in an entirely different context (see above). Every generation is condemned to redis-

## **BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS**

cover part of what was known to the previous one, and it is interesting that a very similar reaction has been "introduced" recently that uses a mixed ethoxy trialkylsiloxy ketene acetal in place of the more convenient ketene acetal.

## III. PYRIDINE AND PIPERIDINE CHEMISTRY

McElvain's early interest in pharmacology focused on cocaine analogs during his graduate work with Roger Adams at Illinois. By the time he started independent work as an instructor at Wisconsin, McElvain was convinced that structures embodying relatively simple elements of the cocaine structure might show both enhanced anesthetic activity and lowered side effects. McElvain's first independent publication (1924) describes the synthesis of benzoates of simple N-hydroxyalkylpiperidines. It is extraordinary that it includes the substance that eventually became, after its introduction by Eli Lilly, the widely used local anesthetic Metycaine<sup>TM</sup>. This marked the beginning of a long and fruitful association between McElvain and Eli Lilly.

A number of additional substances of this general type were synthesized in collaboration with Thomas P. Carney, who was a postdoctoral associate of McElvain's in 1943 and 1944 and later became a vice president of Eli Lilly. I still remember the sight on Tom Carney's laboratory bench when all of the various piperidine hydrobromides he had made on one of his last days at work were stacked to dry on pieces of filter paper held on ring stands all over the laboratory. One of these substances eventually was developed by Eli Lilly as the clinically valuable local anesthetic Surfacaine<sup>TM</sup>.

Although he returned to this pharmaceutical interest in anesthetics from time to time, McElvain mostly used it to spark important fundamental research both in piperidine and in pyridine chemistry. This area, like that of ketene acetal chemistry, remained a lifelong interest that found

expression in over thirty papers. In pyridine chemistry, McElvain made important studies of the bromination and sulfonation of pyridines and introduced a number of muchimproved methods for the synthesis of several of these heteroatom-substituted pyridines. He was the first to find a general synthesis of 3- and 4-piperidones by the use of the Dieckman cyclization of aminodiesters. In many cases the resulting ketones were further elaborated to potential cocaine analogs.

McElvain's involvement in piperidine chemistry, parenthetically, turned out to be of considerable interest to me: it led to my going to the University of Wisconsin for the Ph.D. because of the (correct) surmise that McElvain might show some sympathetic interest in my planned use of 4-piperidones in a quinine synthesis.

## MCELVAIN AS TEACHER

Important as many of McElvain's scientific contributions have proven to be, his influence as a guide of the young people who elected to work with him for the doctorate was even greater-and this influence did not confine itself to the members of his group. McElvain was an outstanding teacher, and his graduate courses were extremely successful. One was the celebrated course in qualitative organic analysis for which he wrote a successful text The Characterization of Organic Compounds (1945; revised edition, 1953). Many first tasted in that course the thrill of discovery and acquired the skill of putting together the pieces of a chemical detective story, of weighing the importance of conflicting clues, and of exercising their powers of logical analysis. This, of course, was all without benefit of NMR or of infrared spectroscopy and without the help of gas, liquid, or thin layer chromatography! The course relied sometimes, as any course must have at the time, on color tests of dubious generality and made use of samples of

"unknowns" that were very large by current standards. Much was learned in the course, in large part because of McElvain's insistance on clear, logical analysis.

In one other graduate course, or rather a portion of a graduate course that he shared with two other members of the organic staff, McElvain must have been one of the first to teach systematically the particular way to look at reactivity that was then called the "Electronic Theory of the English School." This referred to the analysis of the course of reactions based on an attempt at the rational prediction of the fate of electron pairs involved in bond making and breaking. The brilliant systematization Robinson had developed in an *Outline of an Electrochemical (Electronic) Theory of Organic Reactions* (1932) had been given wider circulation by the chapter written by J. R. Johnson in the first edition (1938) of Gilman's celebrated *Advanced Organic Chemistry*. This approach to chemistry was, however, far from common when McElvain started teaching it formally.

McElvain was able to project a certain avuncular sternness (everyone in his group referred to him as "Uncle Mac"). He was always accessible, his door open-but one had to have something to say. One did not drop in for casual conversation. Mac would usually be working at his desk on a manuscript that he would later turn over to Grace Legler, the organic group's secretary. He would raise one eye from his writing toward the visitor, who was expected to get to the point, unassisted. Having thus ensured that he would be spared trivialities, Mac then gave the matter his concentrated attention. Perhaps his sense of humor was even more appreciated because of this kind of aloofness. I will always remember the sudden hearty laughter with which he greeted an outraged report of my (presumed?) lack of cooperation in enforcing rigorous discipline on the undergraduates in the laboratory section in which I was a teaching assistant. He then

arranged for me to get a University Fellowship to replace the assistantship for which the powers that be had found me no longer acceptable.

It took some time for the graduate students in Mac's group to appreciate the warmth behind the projected aloofness. It became quite evident when Professor and Mrs. Mc-Elvain entertained those of his group who had remained in Madison at Thanksgiving dinners in their home. And it was with great anticipation that, on several such occasions, we walked through the snow to the house on 2017 Adams Street.

One cannot help thinking that McElvain's special ability to instill high standards and respect for hard work, his emphasis on developing responsible self-reliance, at the same time that he was able to make his students aware of his genuine interest in their problems, were responsible for the remarkable fact that three of the students who received their doctorates in his group eventually won the American Chemical Society Award in Pure Chemistry. No other teacher of organic chemistry has yet equalled this record.

Professor McElvain was married in 1926 to Helen Roth of Madison. They had two daughters, Anne, who is now Mrs. William R. Frazier of Princeton, N.J., and Jane, now Mrs. Carl E. Jenkins of Bath, Ohio. I have had the good fortune to know Mrs. McElvain for many years. The cheerful enthusiasm, which I first encountered at the Thanksgiving parties I mentioned, was just as apparent when I had the honor of being McElvain Visiting Scholar in Madison in 1977.

It would seem appropriate to end this brief account of Professor McElvain's career by recording some of the more notable recognitions accorded him: he was chairman of the Organic Division of the American Chemical Society in 1945 and 1946; on the editorial board of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, 1946–1956; and he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1949. The Regents of the University of Wisconsin awarded him the title of Professor Emeritus when he retired early (at the age of sixty-three) in 1961.

The University of Wisconsin has recognized his leadership, which contributed so much to bringing its Chemistry Department to the front rank, his scientific accomplishments, and his loyalty to the University in a variety of ways. An Organic Symposium was held in his honor, in Madison, upon his retirement in 1961. The S. M. McElvain Professorship was created in 1972 (with Harlan Goering as its first incumbent). The S. M. McElvain Visiting Scholarship was established in 1977 and, finally, the organic laboratories in the Daniels-Matthews Chemistry Building at Wisconsin were named the Samuel M. McElvain Laboratories of Organic Chemistry at a ceremony on March 15, 1979. A great honor befitting an outstanding man.

1 WISH TO EXPRESS my sincere thanks first to Mrs. McElvain, whose recent death before this could be published was a source of sadness to many, and also to professors Aaron J. Ihde and Harlan Goering who supplied me with much essential material.

#### SAMUEL MARION MCELVAIN

## PH.D. DEGREES TAKEN UNDER S. M. MCELVAIN

- 1928 Nelson W. Bolyard, James R. Thayer
- 1930 Charles F. Bailey, Kenneth Crook
- 1931 Robert N. Isbell, Charles F. Koelsch, Joseph Semb
- 1932 Arthur C. Cope, Edward A. Prill, J. M. Snell, Frank M. Strong, William B. Thomas
- 1933 Richard F. B. Cox, Benjamin W. Howk, Sulo A. Karjala
- 1934 Wray V. Drake, Norman G. Fischer, Edwin H. Kroeker, Lewis A. Walter
- 1936 John R. Roland
- 1937 Fred Beyerstedt, Arthur Magnani
- 1938 Harry M. Barnes, Stanford Moore, Charles W. Tullock
- 1940 Emanuel L. Foreman
- 1941 Harry Cohn, Harold G. Johnson, Allan K. Schneider, Robert F. Taylor
- 1942 Howard B. Burkett, Donald G. Kundiger, Philip M. Walters
- 1944 Edward L. Engelhardt, Arthur G. Jelinek, Robert E. Kent, James W. Langston
- 1945 Gilbert Stork
- 1947 Robert L. Clarke, Kurt J. Rorig, Calvin L. Stevens
- 1948 Michael J. Curry, Robert E. McMahon, Everett H. Pryde, Juel P. Schroeder, John Vozzam
- 1949 George P. Gregory, Robert E. Lyle, Jr., John C. Safranski, Jr., Burris D. Tiffany, James T. Venerable
- 1950 William B. Dickinson, Paul M. Laughton, Melvin M. Olson, Bryce E. Tate, Kenneth N. Warner, Jr., Spencer H. Watkins
- 1951 Archibald N. Bolstad, Gerald Gilbert, Herbert F. Mc-Shane, Jr., Leo R. Morris, Wallace F. Runge
- 1952 Clyde L. Aldridge, Edward R. Degginer, Charles H. Stammer
- 1953 Loren W. Bannister, Averal T. Trimble, Jr.
- 1954 Robert J. Ithey, Richard S. Berger, Roy E. Starn, Jr.
- 1955 Edmund Eisenbraun
- 1956 Robert C McKay, Jr., Phillip H. Parker, Jr.
- 1957 Robert E Bates, David H. Clemens
- 1958 Rodney Clampitt, Thomas A. Lies, David C. Remy, Philip L. /eyna

POSTDOCTORAL ASSOCIATES

Paul R. Johnson (1938–1940) Robert Bright (1940–1941) Thomas P. Carney (1943–1944) Luis A. Perez-Medina (1944–1945) Raymond Mariella (1945–1946)

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## 1926

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