



The Last Sorcerers: The Path from Alchemy to the Periodic Table

By Richard Morris

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They started with four: earth, air, fire, and water. From these basics, they sought to understand the essential ingredients of the world. Those who could see further, those who understood that the four were just the beginning, were the last sorcerers and the world's first chemists.

What we now call chemistry began in the fiery cauldrons of mystics and sorcerers seeking not to make a better world through science, but rather to make themselves richer through magic formulas and con games. But among these early magicians, frauds, and con artists were a few far-seeing alchemists who, through rigorous experimentation, transformed mysticism into science.

By the 18th century the building blocks of nature, the elements of which all matter is composed, were on the verge of being discovered. Initially, it was not easy to determine whether a substance really was an element. Was water just water, plain and simple? Or could it be the sum of other (unknown and maybe unknowable) parts? And if water was made up of other substances, how could it be broken down into discrete, fundamental, and measurable components?

Scientific historians generally credit the great 18th century French chemist Antoine Lavoisier with addressing these fundamental questions and ultimately modernizing the field of chemistry. Through his meticulous and precise work this chaotic new field of scientific inquiry was given order. Exacting by nature, Lavoisier painstakingly set about performing experiments that would provide lasting and verifiable proofs of various chemical theories. Unfortunately, the outspoken Lavoisier eventually lost his head in the Terror, but others would follow his lead, carefully examining, measuring, and recording their findings.

As the field slowly progressed, another pioneer was to emerge almost 100 years later. Dimitri Mendeleev, an eccentric genius who cut his flowing hair and beard but once a year, sought to answer the most pressing questions that remained to chemists: Why did some elements have properties that resembled those of others? Were there certain natural groups of elements? And, if so, how many, and what elements fit into them? It was Mendeleev who finally addressed all these

issues when he constructed the first Periodic Table in the late 1800s.

But between and after Lavoisier and Mendeleev were a host of other colorful, brilliant scientists who made their mark on the field of chemistry. Depicting the lively careers of these scientists and their contributions while carefully deconstructing the history and the science, author Richard Morris skillfully brings it all to life. Hailed by Kirkus Reviews as a "clear and lively writer with a penchant for down-to-earth examples" Morris's gift for explanation and pure entertainment is abundantly obvious. Taking a cue from the great chemists themselves, Morris has brewed up a potent combination of the alluringly obscure and the historically momentous, spiked with just the right dose of quirky and ribald detail to deliver a magical brew of history, science, and personalities.

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The Last Sorcerers: The Path from Alchemy to the Periodic Table By Richard Morris Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Though the stories in this volume have been told before in other books, Morris (The Evolutionists; *Time's Arrow*) manages to make the history of the periodic table's conception fresh and quirky one more time. He does this by focusing his narrative on the early alchemists, who were among the first scientists to investigate the composition of metals and who were widely perceived to be near-sorcerous practitioners of mysterious arts. Bernard of Treves, for one, squandered his life and money questing for the secret that would turn ordinary metals into gold. Another alchemist, Paracelsus, was the first to use the word "chemistry," though his egomania and his devotion to the truth earned him nothing but trouble. Hennig Brandt collected buckets of human urine trying to make gold and instead ended up producing phosphorus. In Morris's account, even Robert Boyle, "generally considered to be the founder of modern chemistry," was an alchemist. It wasn't until the 18th century, Morris writes, that "alchemy was supposedly superceded by chemistry." Thus the more familiar legends of chemistry—featuring scientists like Humphrey Davy, Joseph Priestly and Antoine Lavoisier—appear later in this volume, which recounts the formation of our basic ideas about chemical compounds, elements and molecules. Dimitri Mendeleev, the organizer of the periodic table, gets special treatment. Morris finishes up this delightful tale of science history by sweeping through the 20th century chemists whose discoveries were beyond the wildest imaginings of the ancient Greeks, but who still couldn't make gold from lead.

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Review

"...a fascinating read... well-written popular science, and as such deserves to be widely read." -- *Nature*, January 1, 2004

"...rife with rich stories and wacky characters. This book puts fun into the fundamentals of chemistry." -- *East Oregonian*, November 9, 2003

"A potpourri of eccentric, foolhardy, strange, and even law-breaking geniuses and near-geniuses populate these pages." -- *Choice*, April 2004

"In this lively chronology, Morris introduces these scores of others who shaped chemistry." -- *Science News*, January 24, 2004

"The book is easy to read even for nonchemists..." -- *Chemical & Engineering News*, October 6, 2003

"This book is written to present the history of chemistry as a voyage of discovery. It makes excellent reading." -- *Books-on-Line*

"[A] lively account of how rigorous experimentation led from mysticism to science..." -- *Nob Hill Gazette*, January 2004

From the Inside Flap

"By distilling weird but wondrous human chemistry, Richard Morris has brought forth—like a sorcerer—the enchanting drama of an awesome scientific saga."

-- Dudley Herschbach, winner of Nobel Prize in Chemistry

"As an introduction to the evolution of chemistry, it would be hard to beat Richard Morris's *The Last Sorcerers*. Erudite and entertaining, I enjoyed every page."

-- Michael White, co-author of *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science*

"An intriguing look at the development of the chemical knowledge of atoms and elements which parallels the even more astonishing discoveries of recent years -- by physicists -- of the world within the atom.

Interesting, informative and eminently readable."

-- Penny Le Couteur, author of *Napoleon's Buttons: How Seventeen Molecules Changed History*

"The struggle to understand the material world started with the ancient Greeks, who believed everything consisted of earth, air, fire, and water, and ended 2500 years later with the discovery of the chemical elements, the periodic table, and the structure of atoms. Along the way those shadowy figures, the much misunderstood alchemists of the Middle Ages, struggled with the problem, but with little success. Morris tells all these stories in a well-researched book that is both informative and a delight to read, with lots of amusing and dramatic anecdotes about those who finally brought us to our present state of knowledge."

-- John Emsley, author of *The 13th Element: The Sordid Tale of Murder, Fire, and Phosphorus and Molecules at an Exhibition*

"It's our journey from magic to molecules. It may explain why people still approach chemists asking, "Hey, can you blow something up?""

-- Bill Nye the Science Guy

"An entertaining romp through the maverick lives of great chemists and physicists, from the pioneers of chemistry who transcended their roots in alchemy to the atomic physicists who finally accomplished the alchemists' dream of transmuting matter."

-- Nick Lane, author of *Oxygen: The Molecule that Made the World*

"An enjoyable and accessible tour through the distant mirror of alchemy, and the discoveries of the chemical elements, atomic, subatomic and quantum theories, emphasizing personalities of the scientists in their historical contexts."

-- Dr. Arthur Greenberg, Dean of Engineering and Physical Sciences, University of New Hampshire and author of *The Art of Chemistry*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Blair Kennedy:

The book *The Last Sorcerers: The Path from Alchemy to the Periodic Table* can give more knowledge and information about everything you want. Exactly why must we leave the great thing like a book *The Last Sorcerers: The Path from Alchemy to the Periodic Table*? Wide variety you have a different opinion about book. But one aim that book can give many data for us. It is absolutely suitable. Right now, try to closer with the book. Knowledge or facts that you take for that, you can give for each other; it is possible to share all of these. Book *The Last Sorcerers: The Path from Alchemy to the Periodic Table* has simple shape nevertheless, you know: it has great and large function for you. You can appear the enormous world by open and read a reserve. So it is very wonderful.

Melinda Miller:

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Janice Pyles:

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