

Norsk Kjemisk Selskap Nord-Norge



"Boats or Chairs?" The 50th Anniversary of How an Odd Hassel Became the Noble Subject of Physical Chemistry

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torsdag 31. oktober kl.1415

Realfagsbygget, Storeaud (B302)

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Fifty years ago, the 1969 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded jointly to the Englishman Derek Barton and the Norwegian Odd Hassel "for their contributions to the development of the concept of conformation and its application in chemistry". By the 1920s, it was known that molecules were defined not only by their atomic composition, but by the conformations allowed by the bonds between atoms. Rigid double bonds and stereochemistry distinguished molecules, but the seemingly free rotation of single bonds generated questions. Among them was the one now covered in introductory chemistry courses: what is the shape of the six-carbon ring of cyclohexane? Is it a boat, a chair, or something else?

Odd Hassel, born in Kristiania in 1897, had studied chemistry in Oslo (Cand. Real. 1920), Munich, and Berlin (Dr. Phil. 1924), and returned to Norway and chaired the first department of physical chemistry. But just as he was making key discoveries, he was arrested in 1943 by the Nasjonal Samling and held as prisoner until late 1944. Only after the war could the research continue, and he published two key papers in 1947, in the first volume of Acta Chemica Scandinavica, that formed the basis of the Nobel prize. This talk will review some of these most interesting aspects of the life and research of Odd Hassel.

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