

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**ALBERT ESCHENMOSER**

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Tonja A. Koepfel

at the

Swiss Federal Institute of Technology

on

7 October 1985

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

*Albert Eschenmoser*

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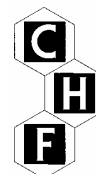
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## ALBERT ESCHENMOSER

1925 Born in Erstfeld, Switzerland, 5 August

### Education

1949 Dipl.sc.nat., Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich  
1951 Dr.sc.nat., Organic Chemistry, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich

### Professional Experience

Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich  
1956-1960 Instructor, Organic Chemistry  
1960-1965 Associate Professor, Organic Chemistry  
1965-1992 Professor, Organic Chemistry  
1992- Professor Emeritus

The Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, California  
1996- Professor, Skaggs Institute for Chemical Biology

### Honorary Degrees

1966 University of Fribourg  
1970 University of Chicago  
1979 University of Edinburgh  
1989 University of Bologna  
1990 Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität  
1991 Université Louis Pasteur de Strasbourg  
1993 Harvard University

### Awards

1949 Kern Prize, ETH  
1956 Werner Prize, Schweizerische Chemische Gesellschaft  
1958 Ruzicka Prize, ETH  
1966 Fritzsche Award, American Chemical Society  
1973 Marcel Benoist Prize, Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern  
1974 Robert A. Welch Award, Houston

1976 Kirkwood Medal, Yale University  
1976 August Wilhelm von Hofmann Medal, Gesellschaft Deutscher Chemiker  
1976 ACS Centennial Foreign Fellow, American Chemical Society  
1977 Dannie Heineman Prize, Akademie der Wissenschaften  
1978 Davy Medal, Royal Society  
1980 Dr. Cliff S. Hamilton Award in Organic Chemistry, Lincoln, Nebraska  
1981 Honorary Fellow, Royal Society of Chemistry  
1981 Tetrahedron Prize for Creativity in Organic Chemistry, Pergamon Press  
1982 George Kenner Award, University of Liverpool  
1984 Arthur C. Cope Award, American Chemical Society  
1986 Wolf Prize in Chemistry, Wolf Foundation  
1988 M. M. Janot Medal, Gif-sur-Yvette  
1991 Cothenius Medal, Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina  
1994 CIBA-Drew Award in Biomedical Research, Drew University  
1995 H. H. Inhoffen Medall, Gesellschaft für Biotechnologische Forschung  
1998 Nakanishi Prize, Chemical Society of Japan

## ABSTRACT

**Albert Eschenmoser** begins the interview with a discussion of his early life and education. Born in Switzerland, he attended school in the canton of Uri. At the age of sixteen, he decided that he wanted to become a secondary school teacher, and attended an Oberrealschule in St. Gallen. He received his Maturität in 1944, and continued on to the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH). Eschenmoser was encouraged to pursue chemistry, and—inspired by Leopold Ruzicka—concentrated on organic chemistry. His research focused on sesquiterpene chemistry. In 1949, he earned his diploma, and became a doctoral student under Ruzicka. His doctoral thesis addressed acid-catalyzed cyclization, and in 1951 he received his doctorate. Eschenmoser's research interests then turned to the synthesis of colchicine, which his group accomplished in 1959. Next came vitamin B<sub>12</sub> and the corrin ligand system. ETH collaborated with Robert B. Woodward's Harvard research group on this project, and in 1972 they announced the success of the vitamin B<sub>12</sub> synthesis. Eschenmoser concludes the interview with a discussion of research funding, his professional recognition, and the ramifications of the vitamin B<sub>12</sub> synthesis.

## INTERVIEWER

**Tonja A. Koepfel** received a master's degree in chemistry from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in 1944. Since then she has written about chemistry, conducted research, and taught college chemistry. In 1973 she earned a Ph.D. degree in the history and sociology of science from the University of Pennsylvania. She is especially interested in the development of organic chemistry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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