

Professor William Dittmar. By Professor Crum Brown.

(Read June 19, 1893.)

William Dittmar was born at Umstadt, near Darmstadt, 15th April 1833. He was the second son of Fritz Dittmar, then Assessor at Umstadt, afterwards Landrichter at Ulrichstein in Ober-Hessen, where his attitude towards the revolutionary party, in 1848, led to his retiring on a pension. He removed to Darmstadt, where William was apprenticed to the "Hof-Apotheker." After passing the "Gehülfe Examen" with distinction, he went to Mühlhausen, where for several years he served as assistant. He returned to Darmstadt for the Staats-Examen in Pharmacy, which he passed with distinction.

He then went to Heidelberg to work in Bunsen's laboratory, where he was soon appointed assistant. Sir Henry Roscoe invited him to Manchester as his private assistant, and, on his appointment as Professor of Chemistry in the Owens College, took Dittmar with him as assistant. In 1861 he became chief assistant in the Chemical Laboratory of the University of Edinburgh, under Lord Playfair. In 1869 he went to Bonn, where he acted first as "privat-docent," and afterwards as Lecturer on Meteorology at the Agricultural College at Poppelsdorf. In 1872 he declined the offer of the Chair of Chemistry in the Polytechnic School at Cassel, and returned to his old post in Edinburgh. In 1873 he was appointed Lecturer on Practical and Technical Chemistry in the Owens College, and in 1874 succeeded Professor Thorpe as Professor of Chemistry in Anderson's College, Glasgow. This office he held till his death, 9th February 1892. On that morning he lectured, but not feeling very well, went home in the middle of the day, and, after a few hours' illness, died at 11.30. He was a Fellow of this Society since 1863, and of the Royal Society of London since 1882. In 1887 the University of Edinburgh conferred on him the degree of LL.D. In 1891 the Philosophical Society of Glasgow awarded him the Graham medal for his investigation into the quantitative composition of water.

Dittmar was a good all-round chemist. His discovery of glutaric acid showed that he was quite at home in organic chemistry; but it was as an analyst that he was great. His investigation into the compositions of the specimens of sea-water collected by the "Challenger" Expedition is full of instruction in the way such work should be done. And in all his analytical work, and in all his teaching, his aim was not so much to perfect or to teach methods of analysis, as to settle and teach principles from which methods can be deduced as they are wanted. He was quick to detect sources of error, and estimate their effect on results. As the great instrument of the analyst, the balance early attracted his attention, and some of the most important improvements in the construction of the balance are due to him. Besides the work already mentioned on the quantitative composition of water, and on the composition of sea-water, the determination of the atomic weight of platinum, and the examination of the hydrates, carbonates, and peroxides of the alkali metals may be specially noted. Very interesting also are his investigations into the relation of the composition of acids of constant boiling-point to the pressure under which they are distilled.

Dittmar was an admirable teacher. He communicated to his students something of his own love of accuracy, and, instead of merely telling them what to do, and seeing that they did it, he also taught them to think for themselves. The transparent simplicity of his character, and the honest frankness of his manner, made his friendships close and constant rather than numerous.