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THE LITRE STORY

Ken A. Woolner
Department of Physics
University of Waterloo
Waterloo ON N2L 3G1

Claude Émile Jean-Baptiste Litre was born during a crippling blizzard, in a hotel room in Ottawa, in December of 1977. Reg Friesen and I were there on an expedition to visit a few high schools, hoping to find out why their students seemed to perform much better than the average on UW's prize exams, the CHEM 13 NEWS Exam and the SIN Test. Not that we found out anything of the sort, of course, but we were well received, and enjoyed our visits immensely, especially at the school where we had the salutary experience of taking over the morning classes of teachers who were snowed in at home!

The idea for Litre came from Reg, who told me that a group of U.S. chemists (I believe) had proposed that the common abbreviation for the unit of volume should be changed to "L", on the grounds that the "l" then in use was confusing for both readers and typists. But the rules of nomenclature of the Conférence Générale des Poids et Mesures require that upper-case letters be reserved for units which are named for individual scientists, and since no such person existed for "L", it seemed reasonable that one should be invented. Reg suggested that I should write a "biography" for the April issue of CHEM 13 NEWS, and over the course of an evening (which included, I think I recall, most of a bottle of scotch) we generated much of the substance of an 18th century life, full of drama, revolution and romance.

When I actually sat down to write the article (a month or so later, after quite a few reminders from Reg), I realized that drama, revolution and romance were all very good, but the joke would be better if the article came across as a piece of sober historical research. The idea was to give a straightforward account with correct dates and accurate historical details, but with one person added to the great stream of history. So that's how I wrote it, and I thought it came out very well. Given the possibility that some readers might miss the joke simply by not recognizing the significance of the fact that the article appeared in the April issue of the magazine, I made sure that the captions to the illustrations were obviously funny, and I left a 15-year gap in Litre's life so that others could contribute to the story.

The immediate response to the article made me feel very good indeed. Several readers went along with the game, filling in some of my missing details, particularly on the life of Litre's daughter Millie. I also found that I had been "scooped" by Bruce Dodd of the Canadian Government Specifications Board, who had published a "Research Note" on Marco Guiseppe Litroni in the June 1977 issue of *Standards Engineering*. The link between Litroni and Litre was provided in 1979 by Steve Marriott of the British Standards Institution, who speculated that the name "Litre" was adopted by Litroni when he settled in France after a mafia-induced flight from his native Tuscany! The best pseudo-historical contributions came from T. J. Kukkamäki of the Helsinki Geodetic Institute, (a genuine expert on Maupertuis' expedition to Lapland), who provided detailed evidence to show that Litre had stayed on in Sweden after the rest of Maupertuis' party had returned to France in 1737. In September 1979, the article was reprinted in IUPAC's *International Newsletter on Chemical Education*. Editor D.J. Waddington received some further contributions to the Litre story, which he shared with us. It was clear that a great deal of innocent pleasure was being had by one and all. My article was a success.

There is a special corner of Hell reserved for failed humorists, and the first indication that a place was being prepared for me came as early as November 1978, when a college librarian wrote from California requesting "... any information and sources you have used in the preparation of this most interesting article." A rash of similar requests was triggered by the *International Newsletter* version of the article, which had all my words but had omitted the illustrations and their captions, which didn't fit into the newsletter's format. The Big Event which turned my "spoof" into a "literary hoax" came in January 1980, when a precis of the article appeared in *Chemistry International*, another IUPAC newsletter. This rewrite was based on the *International Newsletter* version of the article, and stripped the thing right down to the essentials of Litre's life, leaving a very good piece of reportage marred only by the fact that the writer actually took the original seriously!

Unfortunately, it was the *Chemistry International* version which seems to have been most widely read, and this was the version which, together with the editor's apology for not recognizing the hoax, made it into Robert Weber's *More Random Walks in Science*. The *Chemistry International* version got Litre on to the radio, on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's science magazine show, *Quirks and Quarks.* It was also the version which the editors of *The New York Times* so roundly castigated as they indignantly "put the deception to rest!"

All things considered, the creation of Litre provided me with a great deal of amusement for a number of years, and didn't do any real harm, although I did hear that he'd made it into a textbook! My only regret is that it seems that one should only ever write one fictional biography. (Even Rayburne, the only classic exponent of the genre, was never able to repeat the success of his full-length biography of Thos. Crapper.) Which is a shame, since in the course of writing the Litre piece, I thought of several individuals who really should have some sort of biographical memorial. (It's very hard to stop, once you've started!) As my own personal contribution to this special issue of CHEM 13 NEWS and its readers, I offer the following capsule sketches, upon which you might like to expand.

Rodrigues d'Ombreija – Sixteenth-century Portuguese navigator who brought the parasol from China.

Thomas Flange – Foreman in Stephenson's factory, whose invenion made it possible for us to have railways rather than grooveways.

Sir Horace Rajendra Bungaloo – Knighted by Queen Victoria for his contributions to domestic architecture.

Bratislav Parseč – Turn-of-the-century director of the Prague Observatory.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE

The man who lies here, deceased,
Was trained as a Catholic priest.
With help from St. Peter
He invented the litre,
That infamous Claude Jean-Baptiste.

(Found engraved on a tombstone in a Waterloo cemetery by Gerry Toogood of UW's Chemistry Department. Apparently, Litre's body was among those sent overseas for burial when the 1778 cholera epidemic produced more victims than French cemeteries could handle. Note the new evidence that Litre studied theology, possibly during the "15-year gap" from 1736 to 1751)

The article EM8806 reprinted above is used in Figure 2.18 of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Chapter 1 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #1.