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Edited by

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Preface

“The abundance of substances of which animals and plants are composed, the remarkable processes whereby they are formed and then broken down again have claimed the attention of mankind of old, and hence from the early days they also persistently captivated the interest of chemists”.

Emil Fischer, Nobel Lecture, 1902

“The chemist who designs and completes an original and esthetically pleasing multistep synthesis is like the composer, artist or poet who, with great individuality, fashions new forms of beauty from the interplay of mind and spirit”.

Elias James Corey, Nobel Lecture, 1990

Nature has always been a permanent source of inspiration for chemists but, as Emil Fischer brightly indicated in his Nobel award acceptance lecture in 1902, it is not only the vast diversity of compounds that living beings are capable of creating, but also the extraordinary strategies of synthesis deployed. Evidently, the catalysts used by living beings – enzymes – are key to Nature’s Synthesis Strategies. Emil Fischer himself foretold, a few paragraphs further into his lecture, that chemistry would employ enzymes at large and – to our greatest surprise, bearing in mind that these words were written as early as 1902 – that artificial enzymes would be tailor-made to serve its purposes.

The longing of biocatalysis to transfer to the laboratory the exquisite efficiency shown by enzymes in Nature has begun to become a reality since the late 1980s, with the invention of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR). The level of development and access brought about by the PCR to genetic material handling and transformation, has allowed the number of available enzymes to grow exponentially. Modifying the catalytic properties of enzymes to adapt them to their new environment in a test tube has become a reality. We have learned to imitate the strategies used by Nature to create new enzymes, and to adapt the existing ones to new synthetic needs. Eventually, Emil Fischer’s prediction has come true.

Living beings do not use enzymes in isolation, however. A large portion of the extraordinary synthetic effectiveness that enzymes display in Nature comes from the fact that living beings apply a multistep synthesis strategy, catalyzed by enzymes acting sequentially. It is the utilization of more- or less-complicated biosynthetic routes that allows living beings to build complex structures from simple elements; to obtain and to store energy; and to know and to communicate with their environment. The jointed action of a sequence of enzymes can make irreversible a reversible process, eliminate inhibition problems caused by product excess, or prevent the lack of substrate scattered on the bulk solution. Evidently, in order to develop, biocatalysis could not look away from these and other synthesis opportunities served by multistep reactions. The level of relevance attained by the development of this synthetic strategy in the field of biocatalysis and biotransformation is evidenced by the celebration in April 2006 of the first Symposium on *Multistep Enzyme-Catalyzed Processes*, organized jointly by the Applied Biocatalysis Research Centre at Gratz and the European Federation of Biotechnology Section of Applied Biocatalysis (ESAB), to which this book is indebted.

The aim of this handbook is to bring together various key aspects to cover the broad field of *multistep enzyme-catalyzed processes*, from the 'simplest' system in which one or a few isolated enzymes are used alone or in combination with non-enzyme-catalyzed steps, to the most 'complex' system in which artificial or natural pathways are created or even whole cells are modified to be used as synthetic factories.

I would like thank all those authors who have participated in this exciting project for their superb work, valuable time and remarkable efforts; and in particular, I thank Elke Maase and Stefanie Volk at Wiley-VCH for their patience, friendliness and precious help in editing.

I hope that you enjoy reading this book, and that it can serve as an inspirational source and stimulus to researchers of all levels – especially the youngest – who are working in the biocatalysis field.

Madrid, July 2008

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