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Review: 'Rohm and Haas: History of a Chemical Company'

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Rohm and Haas: History of a Chemical Company. By Sheldon Hochheiser. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986. Pp. xiv+231; illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$19.95; £19.95.

A company history like Sheldon Hochheiser's *Rohm and Haas*—written by an employee of the firm for the express purpose of celebrating the organization's 75th anniversary—is almost invariably viewed with suspicion by the scholarly community. How can a study possess integrity if management has the last word on publication? Is this book nothing more than vanity press disguised beneath a university press book jacket?

Rest assured that in the case of *Rohm and Haas* these frequently invoked criticisms have no real merit. The author has produced a most remarkable study, for which both Hochheiser and the company should be commended. This work is extremely sound in the selection and analysis of printed and manuscript materials as well as in the careful use of information from numerous oral histories. Hochheiser interprets the firm's history within a historiographical context not typically found in this genre. In reconstructing the past from his unique perspective, he has filled a void in the historical literature by tracing the growth of a 20th-century leader in science-based industry.

With headquarters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and manufacturing operations scattered throughout the United States, Europe, and South America, the Rohm and Haas Company is at present one of the largest chemical companies in the world. Its products have touched all of our lives, but in an invisible manner since the company manufactures industrial rather than consumer goods. Water-soluble latex paints, ion-exchange resins, Plexiglas, and chemicals used in the electronics industry are all the consequence of Rohm and Haas innovations that have been introduced to the marketplace and have contributed to the shaping of today's synthetic world. Hochheiser's story traces the evolution of this most important organization and highlights the people and ideas that were so crucial to its development.

Initially the joint venture of Otto Rohm and Otto Haas, the company was established before World War I in Philadelphia with the purpose of selling Rohm's improved substance for the tanning of leather. Haas, a shrewd businessman and entrepreneur, took his partner's scientific ideas, including those dealing with acrylic polymers, and gradually carved out an industrial empire between 1909 and World War II. One of Rohm's most fruitful ideas led to the development of Plexiglas, an "organic glass" that was used almost universally by the aircraft industry during World War II. This product transformed the company's scale of operations and product strategy. After 1945, Rohm and Haas rapidly evolved into a public com-

pany, multinational in scope and increasingly directed by professional managers rather than the Haas family. In response to setbacks it suffered during the recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as a number of poor product choices, Rohm and Haas has reorganized and has emerged in the mid-1980s as one of the most profitable of all American chemical manufacturers.

Hochheiser's main thesis—one that unifies the study and that should interest those engaged either in business or the history of business—is that the company was, and still to some degree remains, a reflection of its founder in terms of principles and strategies. Haas possessed experience in the German dye industry and adopted and consistently applied ideas closely associated with that trade, such as a reliance on scientific knowledge in the development of new products, customer service by salesmen thoroughly trained in science and engineering, and an avoidance of consumer goods. Thus, Rohm and Haas was shaped to an extraordinary degree by the personality of its founder and leader. The firm's spectacular successes and its unpublicized reversals in agricultural chemicals and fibers can be best understood within this context.

Although Hochheiser's interpretive analysis and critical insights do much to strengthen his study, it is his inclusion of controversial material that separates *Rohm and Haas* from other company-sponsored histories. The author's discussion of unprofitable attempts to gain a share of the market in synthetic fibers during the 1970s, and especially his outline of a tragic episode involving a cancer-causing substance in the production of a synthetic resin during the 1960s, gave me the impression that the past had been reconstructed in a balanced manner. And it is this truthfulness that makes studies like *Rohm and Haas* useful to those who desire to avoid repeating past mistakes.

In conclusion, *Rohm and Haas* breaks new ground in the realm of company-sponsored history. Provocative, informative, and visually attractive, this volume should not be neglected by historians of science, technology, and business.

JOHN A. HEITMANN

DR. HEITMANN, assistant professor at the University of Dayton, received his doctorate in the history of science from Johns Hopkins University. His book, *The Modernization of the Louisiana Sugar Industry, 1830–1910*, was published in 1987 by Louisiana State University Press, and he is currently studying automation in the American chemical industry from 1930 to 1960.