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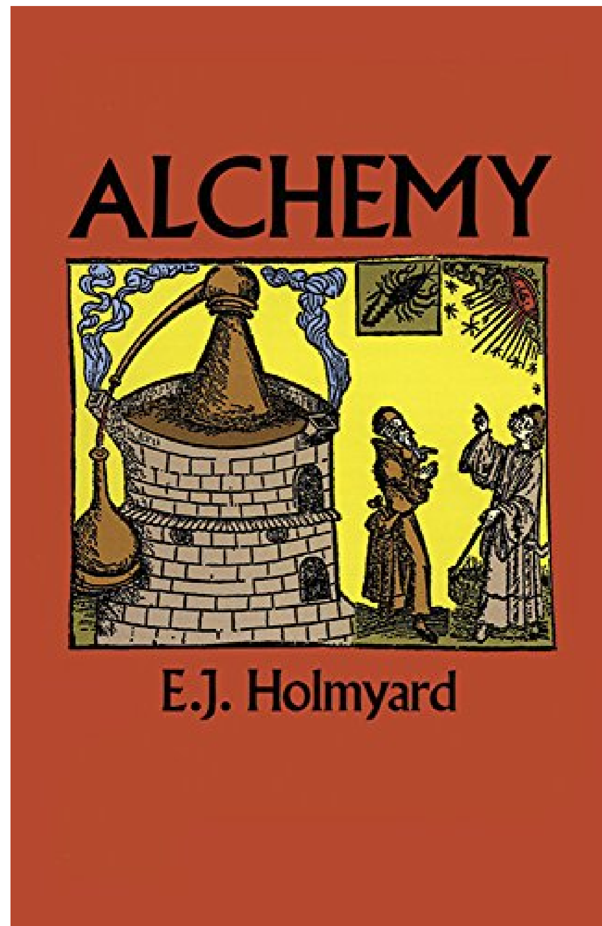

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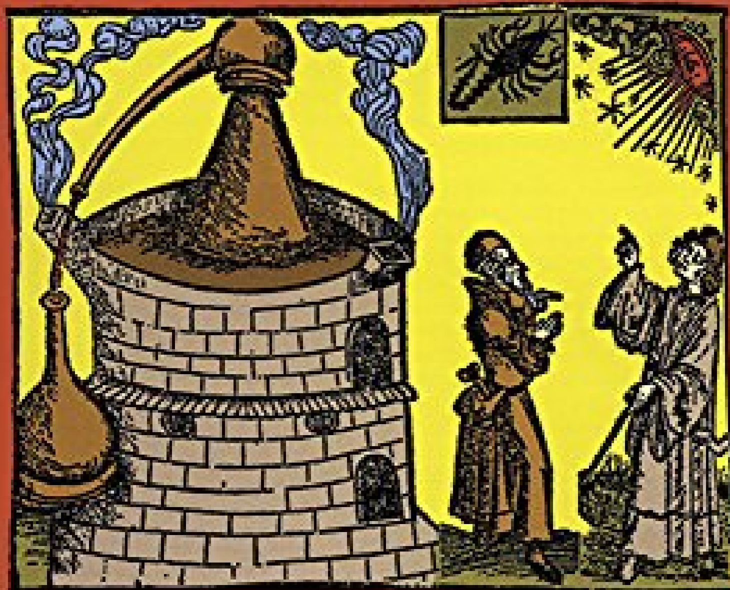

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Alchemy is thought to have originated over 2000 years ago in Hellenic Egypt, the result of three converging streams: Greek philosophy, Egyptian technology and the mysticism of Middle Eastern religions. Its heyday was from about 800 A.D. to the middle of the seventeenth century, and its practitioners ranged from kings, popes, and emperors to minor clergy, parish clerks, smiths, dyers, and tinkers. Even such accomplished men as Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, Sir Thomas Browne and Isaac Newton took an interest in alchemical matters.
In its search for the "Philosopher's Stone" that would transmute base metals into silver and gold, alchemy took on many philosophical, religious and mystical overtones. These and many other facets of alchemy are explored with enormous insight and erudition in this classic work. E. J. Holmyard, a noted scholar in the field, begins with the alchemists of ancient Greece and China and goes on to discuss alchemical apparatus, Islamic and early Western alchemy; signs, symbols, and secret terms; Paracelsus; English, Scottish and French alchemists; Helvetius, Price, and Semler, and much more.
Ranging over two millennia of alchemical history, Mr. Holmyard shows how, like astrology and witchcraft, alchemy was an integral part of the pre-scientific moral order, arousing the cupidity of princes, the blind fear of mobs and the intellectual curiosity of learned men. Eventually, however, with the advent and ascension of the scientific method, the hopes and ideas of the alchemists faded to the status of "pseudo-science." That transformation, as well as alchemy's undeniable role as a precursor of modern chemistry, are brilliantly illuminated in this book. Students of alchemy, chemistry, the history of science, and the occult, plus anyone interested in the origin and evolution of one of mankind's most enduring and influential myths, will want to have a copy of this masterly study.

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Most helpful customer reviews

23 of 24 people found the following review helpful.
Best Introduction
By Heavenly Hermes
This is perhaps the best ever introduction to the history of alchemy. Holmyard was a professional researcher in chemistry and few writers in English have had anything approaching his familiarity and depth of knowledge about the subject of experimental alchemy. His knowledge of the contributions of Muslim

civilization to alchemy are the best to be found in any history of alchemy. This is one one of the book's main pluses, in contrast to the other reviewer who does not seem to appreciate the overwhelming importance of the Muslim contribution. Indeed, as an _experimental_ science, alchemy/chemistry proper was virtually invented by Muslim civilization.

Today the scientific aspects of alchemy are frequently ignored/deemphasized in favor of speculative psychology and other trends, but it must not be forgotten that alchemy was/is fundamentally a scientific enterprise, although its notion of ``science'' presumes a very holistic cosmology and phenomenology of macrocosm and microcosm; and of matter, soul, and spirit. In any case, even an understanding of inner/esoteric alchemy cannot be divorced from its outer/exoteric aspects. For those more interested in the inner/esoteric side of alchemy, this text is still quite essential, for although Holmyard focuses on the exoteric side, he also also provides the appropriate links to the esoteric side of alchemy as well. One simply cannot properly appreciate authentic esoteric alchemy without a grounding in its exoteric foundations.

Titus Burckhardt's ``Alchemy'' provides an good companion to Holmyard. Although Burckhardt is focused on inner alchemy, Holmyard provides much of the historical background needed to get the most out of Burckhardt's essay which is, unfortunately, quite vague and abstruse in too many places. Together, these two texts are indispensable for anyone serious about the meaning and history of alchemy.

27 of 30 people found the following review helpful.
Ian Myles Slater on: The Real Alchemy
By Ian M. Slater
For just about half a century, E.J. Holmyard's concisely-titled "Alchemy" has served as a literate, well-informed, and charming introduction to the history and literature of Western alchemy. I first read it while in High School, and can say that, while it may take a little dedication to get through, it should be worth the trouble.

I would commend it to any serious beginner in the subject, including those teenagers and adults who first encountered the Philosopher's Stone and the French alchemist Nicholas Flamel by way of Harry Potter (see especially Holmyard's Chapter Eleven), or who have wondered about the quest for the Stone, and discussions of its precursors, like "The Red Water," as portrayed in the manga or anime versions of Hiromu Arakawa's "Full-Metal Alchemist" ("Hagane No Renkinjutsushi").

(For the Stone, the Lapis Philosophorum, see throughout; but Fullmetal fans should take an especially close look at Holmyard's Plate 24, showing Flamel's "diagram" -- which is also found on-line -- for the source of Edward Elric's serpentine insignia; although the Flamel legend says this is copied from a Jewish manuscript, the iconography is based on a Christian interpretation of Numbers 21:8-9; and see also 2 Kings 18:4.)

Unfortunately, such appearances in popular culture tend to reinforce the idea that alchemy was a form of magic, and neither series of stories, although entertaining, has much to do with real-world alchemy.

Yes, some ceremonial magicians were interested in alchemy, and vice-versa; so were many other literate people. Supposed spell-books available to the public (originally on the sly, more openly in historically dubious products of nineteenth-century printers) often offered the gullible "short-cuts" to successful transmutation.

The real basis of alchemy, however, was a mixture of practical, if misunderstood, experience and high philosophical ideas about Nature and Time, linked by enthusiastic notions about how matter could be manipulated to achieve human ends. A lot about Aristotle's Four Elements (Earth, Air, Fire, Water), the Four

Qualities (Hot, Cold, Dry, Moist), the Ripening of Metals in the Womb of the Earth, and speculations about the wonderful properties of "True" Sulphur and Quicksilver (not the obviously-adulterated real-world stuff, which gave unsatisfactory results).

But no use of spirits (except as a term for the products of distillation, like "spirits of wine"), no magic circles (sorry, Edward and Alphonse Elric), and no incantations -- although chanting to keep track of elapsed time, in the absence of clocks with minute hands, apparently is an attested practice.

As Holmyard explains, Western Alchemy is a complex of ideas about the true nature of the physical world, and the possibility of manipulating its substance, which emerged in late classical antiquity, were adopted and refined in early Islam, and transferred to medieval Europe, where they underwent a series of transformations before splitting into occult speculation and proto-chemistry in the course of the seventeenth-century. Paracelsus, often remembered as a "typical" alchemist, was in his time a revolutionary innovator in the field. (His claim to know how to make an artificial human, a "homunculus," inspired Goethe, and is another contributor to "Fullmetal Alchemist" but is outside Holmyard's consideration, although the man himself gets a whole chapter.)

In the process, translations and supposed translations of Arabic alchemical writings deposited dozens of Arabic words, and words transmitted through Arabic, into Western languages, including English. (Holmyard gives a breakdown of major examples; also noting where that sixteenth-century maverick Paracelsus either made up Arabic-looking words, or radically changed the meanings of real ones, such as "alcohol," to suit himself.)

It seems that everyone is familiar with the idea that alchemy was about transmuting "base" (corruptible) metals into imperishable gold, and most people assume that the motive was economic. As in China, which had its own form of alchemy, however, the motivation was also medical. The same "perfecting" of nature, by finding a perfect balance of the "elements" and "qualities," that worked on metals would cure all diseases, including old age, and even death, so the Elixir of Life was sought with equal, if not greater zeal. This fit in nicely with the medical views of the age, which, despite a preference for "animal and vegetable" rather than "mineral" remedies, sought for a drinkable gold, or "aurum potabile," as a way for the body to absorb the metal's "incorruptibility." As Chaucer ironically noted of a greedy Physician, in the "General Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales," "For gold in phisik [medicine] is a cordial [heart restorative] / Therefore he lovede gold in special" (lines 443-444).

So Cortez was not being *entirely* dishonest when he told the Aztecs he wanted all that yellow metal to cure a "sickness of the heart" to which Spaniards were especially subject. Experiments in this field don't seem to have been very successful, although elixir poisoning, a big problem in China, seems to have been avoided -- eating off gold dishes seems to have been thought sufficient, even by wealthy patrons (a practice endorsed for the Medici by the Florentine philosopher-astrologer, Marsilio Ficino). Which was probably just as well; a "drinkable" gold might have been mixed with mercury, a favorite of some alchemical schools; and, as pointed out on an episode of "House," bio-active gold salts may be effective against arthritis, but are potentially lethal.

Christian alchemists at times argued that Transmutation was surely possible, because it was a "proof" of Transubstantiation, concealed by God in the Material world to bear witness to the Spiritual -- a view rejected by unsympathetic or cautious theologians. In fact, in developments briefly covered by Holmyard, C.G. Jung tried to rewrite the history of Alchemy in the west around this equation, a project which forced him to minimize the Islamic role in the tradition; and to "discover" that explicit Greek and Arabic references to Jewish alchemists, and quotations from them, all referred to early Christians.

Alongside this specific application of a religious concept, the imagery of death and resurrection was also applied to the "mortification" and "revival" of substances in "higher" forms, and not just among Christians. This is one of the reasons it is sometimes difficult to figure out if a given text is really "chemical" or "spiritual," or even initiatory, or is even supposed to be read on more than one level.

Holmyard's account of this complex of developments was originally published under Penguin Book's old "Pelican Books" imprint for non-fiction -- a circumstance alluded to in the text in connection with the use of the word "pelican" for a type of still, which now may baffle readers. I have a copy of the 1968 reprinting, with an attractive cover (from the color original of one of the black-and-white plates), but the book was unavailable for years before being picked up by Dover in 1990.

This new trade paperback format is easier on the eyes, and some of the plates seem somewhat clearer in their larger size, but the book is otherwise unchanged, and contains no additional bibliographic or other information -- a pity, but not a reason to avoid the book. Slightly earlier but generally comparable volumes, notably John Read's "Prelude to Chemistry" (second edition, 1939) and F. Sherwood Taylor's "The Alchemists" (1949), seem to be long out of print. Too many of the more recent introductory books seem to be either New Age guides to the "spiritual meaning" of alchemy, reported at second or third hand, with too little foundation in the actual literature, or merely collections of alchemical art, extremely beautiful, but with commentary of limited value.

What I think of as the best of the later books accessible to non-specialists seem to be more narrowly focused. This may be an illusion, of course, as I find it hard to recapture the sense the discovery I experienced reading Holmyard, decades ago. Of these later books, my favorites are Mircea Eliades's "The Forge and the Crucible" (French original, 1956; translation 1962, last revised 1978), an amazing demonstration of the pervasiveness of proto-alchemical ideas about the world in a great range of cultures, and rather sympathetic to Jung's psychological (although not his historical) glosses, and Raphael Patai's "The Jewish Alchemists" (1994), which I found more informative in detail than convincing. (I have reviewed it separately.)

Holmyard included a short, interesting chapter on the very important topic of Chinese alchemy, which had its own traditions, and interacted in complex ways with those of the Islamic world as well. But the study of Chinese science (and its relations to Taoism and Buddhism) was in its infancy at the time of writing, and the brevity of Chapter 3 may be its saving grace. As a supplement and corrective to his account (and Eliade's), I would direct those curious about the chemical aspects of Chinese alchemy -- it also had mystical aspects, alongside a yoga-like theory and practice of "internal alchemy" -- to another Dover reprint, Ho Peng Yoke's "Li, Qi and Shu: An Introduction to Science and Civilization in China." It is rather heavy going, but popular books on the subject, although easier and more exciting, are of dubious reliability.

Dover used to have on its list John Maxson Stillman's massive "The Story of Early Chemistry" (1924), re-titled as "Story of Alchemy and Early Chemistry" (1960; currently available under the newer title from Kessinger, with many other of Stillman's writings, as well as from dealers, used). This was heavily weighted toward offering evidence of actual experiments and chemical knowledge, as indicated by the book's original title. It was (and is) an interesting book, and had a valid approach, but it pretty much took for granted that Alchemy was of genuine interest mainly as a "primitive" stage in the development of "real" chemistry, with mistakes that needed to be corrected. Holmyard sees it as an episode in intellectual history in its own right, which I find far more satisfying.

Holmyard therefore makes the effort to show that alchemical ideas did not circulate in isolation, confined to narrow groups of specialists, but played a part in the history of philosophy and high culture. Where Stillman quoted alchemical recipes, and "translated" them into modern terms, Holmyard (who does offer a few),

regularly includes translations of programmatic statements, citations from medieval encyclopedias, and excerpts from literary works on alchemical themes. His summary and running commentary on Chaucer's "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is a pleasure in itself, and at the same time an addition to his roster of tales about the tricks played by con-men cashing in on the name of alchemy.

There is an even better story of a brilliant con, from medieval Damascus, which Holmyard retells very briefly on pages 96-97; unhappily, this is one of places where Holmyard doesn't cite the source. He gives an interesting, rather sad, account of a wandering Scot, Alexander Seton, and some European associates, in the Holy Roman Empire of Rudolf II, which involves the often problematic relations of the enthusiastic, the gullible, and the truly dishonest. This has a place among other biographies of English, Scots, and French alchemists, three chapters which are followed by some concluding accounts of supposed transmutations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries -- one still mysterious, one demonstrably fraudulent, and one farcical -- and a brief Epilogue and Glossary.

18 of 20 people found the following review helpful.
Alchemy as Nascent Chemistry
By BlueJay54
This pleasant little primer on alchemy was first published in 1957, by a respected British historian of chemistry. His view on alchemy is summarized by his quotation of Socrates on the Pre-Socratics (even then known only through fragments): he agreed with what he could understand and, as for what he couldn't, he could only guess that perhaps they were right. So our author is not overly judgemental about the early alchemists, mistaken as they must be the philosopher's stone and ignorant of the fundamentals of modern scientific chemistry. The book is very uneven: only 8 pages on Greek alchemy (including barely 2 pages on Zosimos) but 65 pages on Islamic alchemy--a fact that reflects his decided slant toward the more modern, scientific alchemists. The most interesting and useful sections concern his biographies, especially a whole chapter on Paracelsus and a chapter each on Scottish and French alchemists. Especially interesting is his story about Alexander Seton (p.223-232) who, like a true Merlin or Taoist wizard, quietly toured Europe having unbelievers transform gold from lead with his secret powder, never touching the preparations himself. Still, our author concludes that the innumerable accounts by reliable eyewitnesses were all, somehow, fakes--a conclusion he reaches after "rejecting as we must the hypothesis that Seton effected genuine transmutations" [p. 232]. That should give you a taste of this opus. You will need to look elsewhere for psychological (Jung) or hermetic (Goddard, Evola) perspectives on alchemy. Nevertheless, this is a decent historical overview of the field and not a bad place to start.

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