Science and the Public

ALL science writers must start on the following basis: decide on the readership one is trying to reach, assess the extent of the basic scientific knowledge possessed by that readership, and then build upon that knowledge in the full understanding that it may be necessary to introduce some highly unfamiliar concepts and terms into the story. It is not necessary to think in terms of readers who have no interest in science: scientific matters have a lively interest to everyone with a normal sense of curiosity and wonder, although it is true that this sense can wither if the individual suffers a faulty education. Many people are inclined to underestimate the extent to which ordinary people who have never been inside a laboratory in their lives are interested in scientific facts and scientific ideas. The interest in astronomy, for example, is enormous and apparently insatiable, judging from the success which so many books about the stars achieve. On the other hand the science writer goes wrong, at least in my opinion, if he approaches the subject with the idea that every bright young person who reads his articles is a potential professional scientist. Such an approach is wrong because a community composed of nothing but scientifically-trained individuals would be an intolerable abomination; it assumes that science is synonymous with omniscience, which is a false idea as all sensible scientists readily admit.

It is always pleasantly surprising to find how acute is the general interest in scientific matters. Indeed nowadays one frequently comes across this paradox: people who do not come into professional contact with scientists have a livelier interest in the general trend of scientific progress than many a narrow-minded scientist who earns his livelihood by the practice of science. An anecdote which illustrates this to perfection was told by Lord Moulton, the brilliantly versatile patent law expert who was appointed by the British Government chairman of the Dyestuffs Corporation of 1919, the organization which restored the fortunes of the British dye industry. Moulton met a solitary German on the top of a mountain.

> I found he was a chemist, and I began to talk upon a chemical subject. He told me he was only an organic chemist. He had not exhausted my resources, and I began to talk of coal-tar and pharmaceutical products. Then he told me he was a coal-tar by-product chemist. That did not beat me, because I had just been fighting a case of canary yellow. I thought I would get some subject that was common to us, and I slipped into the subject of canary yellow. Still the same ominous silence for a time, and then he said "I am only coal-tar chemist dealing with blues." But I had not finished. With an Englishman's pertinacity, not believing I was beaten, I racked my brains for a coal-tar blue—I had had to advise on some case—and I gradually, without a too obvious change of subject, slipped into that. Then he finally defeated me, because he said in equally solemn tones, but equally proud of the fact, "I only deal with methyl blues."

Science ceases to be science, of course, once it is professionally compartmentalized to such an extent: a man who studies nothing but methyl blues is not a scientist but a machine, and it is to be hoped that such work will soon be taken over by machines. A more comforting thought, however, is the harmony between the interests of the layman and those of the broad-minded scientist. The ordinary person can be aroused to interest in most of the scientific items which can be made interesting to a 16-year-old schoolboy. It is this basic and universal interest on which the public relations of science must be constructed.

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