The Beringer Hoax

The Lying Stones of Dr. Johann Bartholomew Adam Beringer, Being His Lithographiae Wirceburgensis. Translated and annotated by Melvin E. Jahn and Daniel J. Wolff. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1963. xiv + 221 pp. Illus. $6.50.

Anyone who has taught a survey course in the history of science has probably spent a good part of at least one lecture on the obscure but fascinating Dr. Johann Bartholomew Adam Beringer. The good doctor can serve as an example of so many different things! He is, of course, a beautiful case of preconceived ideas triumphing over common sense. He also serves as a transition figure in the history of geology, one which leaves much of the 17th century behind, yet one which is separated by a gulf from the great geologists of the later 18th century. And, finally, there is the story, calculated to set the hearts of undergraduates beating faster in empathy, of how his students "salted" his dig with fantastic fossils, including Hebraic letters. The letters led him to interpret earth forms literally as the elements of a second Divine Book. The humor of the publication of the *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis*, which was followed almost immediately by Beringer's discovery of a "fossil" with his own name on it, has always seemed to outweigh the pathos of his subsequent attempt to buy back copies of his book and thereby to remove it from circulation. I suspect that, like myself, most historians of science have never read the work. Beringer's contributions to geology have not appeared to be major, and the volume is both rare and written in fairly difficult Latin.

Melvin E. Jahn and Daniel J. Wolff (University of California) have now made the *Lithographiae* available in an English translation, complete with notes and four appendixes. As an indicator of the intellectual milieu in which Beringer thrived, this volume is invaluable. Not only does it shed light upon the history of geology, but it also is a real contribution to our understanding of the Age of Reason. Beringer's gullibility was by no means unique in his time, and the *Lithographiae* defines its dimensions in a way that provides a good deal of insight into the early years of the Enlightenment.

The editors have done their job conscientiously and well. The notes are real aids to the understanding of the text, and they add materially to the usefulness of the book. The four appendixes flesh out both Beringer's history and the history of geology. Appendix B places the Beringer hoax in a more somber setting. It would appear that it was not a student prank at all but the calculated effort of two of Beringer's colleagues to discredit him which led to the planting of the false fossils. It will be impossible, in the future, to laugh so easily at the hoodwinked professor.

The volume is well printed. It contains over 20 pages of plates which reproduce those in Beringer's work and include photographs, as well, of some of the "lying stones" that still exist. An index and a bibliography complete the volume. It is one well worth owning.

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High Polymer Series

Polyurethanes. Chemistry and technology. vol. 1, *Chemistry*. J. H. Saunders and K. C. Frisch. Interscience (Wiley), New York, 1962. xvi + 368 pp. Illus. $14.

This new book in the High Polymer Series appears to be consistent with the high standards already established by most of the preceding volumes in the series. In general this book, the first of the two parts that will constitute volume 14 of the series, attains a major objective stated on page viii—to be "the systematic and critical presentation of available information on various aspects of the chemistry . . . relating to polyurethanes." (The second part will be concerned with technology.) For any work of this sort, one would expect to find differences of opinion regarding the degree of detail that is appropriate, and some readers may find that in places perhaps too much has been included. In the reviewer's opinion the discrimination and meticulous ordering of details from the scattered literature gives the book great value. This applies equally to its sections on chemistry of synthesis (chapters 1–4), on physical and structural chemistry (chapter 6), and on the physical and chemical principles of foam formation (chapter 5).

One typographical feature that should be avoided in future editions is that of setting reference numbers in ordinary type (not italicized) and without spaces between them, so that they appear to read as patent numbers—for example, at the bottom of page 69, 30,140,143, instead of *30*, *140*, and *143*. It would be helpful if, in the list of abbreviations for the various isocyanate chemicals (page xv), the molecular structure had been indicated along with the abbreviation and the chemical name. This would enable those not expert in the field more rapidly to assess the structural differences of these isocyanates which bear importantly on chapter 4, "Polymer structure and properties."

This book is indispensable to those interested in the up-to-date state of polyurethane chemistry. The synoptic view presented by the authors in chapter 1 is particularly helpful.

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New Books

Mathematics, Physical Sciences, and Engineering

New Chemical Engineering Separation Techniques. Herbert M. Schoen, Ed. Interscience (Wiley), New York, 1962. 452 pp. Illus. $14.50.

Operator Techniques in Atomic Spectroscopy. Brian R. Judd. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1963. 252 pp. Illus. $9.95.

The Physics of Conductors. Proceedings of the international conference, 1962. Inst. of Physics and the Physical Soc., London, 1962. 921 pp. Illus. £10 10s.

The Principles of Electromagnetism. Applied to electrical machines. B. Hague. Dover, New York (© 1929), 1962. 373 pp. Illus. Paper, $2.25.

Probabilities and Life. Emile Borel. Translated from the French (*Les Probabilités et la Vie*, 1943) by Maurice Baudin. Dover, New York, 1962. 93 pp. Paper, $1.

Probability Theory and Mathematical Statistics. Marek Fisz. Authorized translation from the Polish (1954) by R. Bartoszynski. Wiley, New York, ed. 3, 1963. 693 pp. Illus. $15.75.

Solved and Unsolved Problems in Number Theory. Daniel Shanks. Spartan, Washington, D.C., 1962. 240 pp. Illus.

Spectroscopy in the Metallurgical Industry. Papers contributed to the Buxton symposium, 1962. L. Bovey, Ed. Hilger and Watts, London, 1963. 98 pp. Illus. Paper, £1 10s.

Strange Particles and Strong Interactions. R. H. Dalitz. Published for the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research by Oxford Univ. Press, New York, 1962. 195 pp. Illus. $5.05.

Textbook of Organic Chemistry. Alexander Gero. Wiley, New York, 1963. 689 pp. Illus.