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EDITORIAL

Obituaries and Biographies

There is something about obituaries and biographies (even self-serving autobiographies), which makes them eminently readable. Whenever a volume of the *Annual Reviews* crosses my desk, for the purpose of assigning a prospective reviewer, I invariably turn to the autobiographical essay which forms the introductory chapter. The discipline does not seem to matter. The experiences of men and women of accomplishment, from biochemists to astronomers and particle physicists to entomologists, seem always interesting. When a new issue of *Nature* or *Science* appears I can never resist reading an obituary first and these are usually of scientists, who have left rich legacies. Beyond a certain age, newspaper readers often turn to the column that records local deaths, scanning the announcements for familiar names. Even here, the stark three or four line announcements often convey a sense of loss, marking an event of great significance in the lives of otherwise unknown individuals. This column is a sharp reminder of mortality and the fragility and impermanence of life. There is a certain sadness at a premature death; a sense of admiration for a long and well lived life. Obituaries are surprisingly popular amongst readers of newspapers, magazines and journals.

The stimulus for this column was the arrival on my desk of a publication produced by the Geological Society of India. Entitled *Random Harvest* this book is a collection of 'biographical sketches' written by B. P. Radhakrishna, the indefatigable editor of the *Journal of the Geological Society of India*. Radhakrishna has periodically written about the people he knew or of public figures and, of course, eminent earth scientists over a period of two decades. In this collection, there are obituaries and biographical sketches, all eminently readable. The author notes, with becoming grace, of many of his subjects: 'Association with them has enriched my life and not a day passes without my remembering their many acts of love and kindness to me. Most of the persons whose life sketches are included here are no more, but my recollections of their magic presence make the long hours of old age less dreary and burdensome'. Radhakrishna writes with compelling clarity about those whom he knew and of others whom he admired from afar. In reflecting on great personalities, he follows Jane Austen's maxim, which he quotes approvingly: 'Think

only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure'. This is advice that most of us would do well to follow; selectively erasing unhappy events from our memories.

There have been many famous collections of biographical sketches, one of the most celebrated being Winston Churchill's, *Great Contemporaries*. My own favourite is C. P. Snow's slim volume, *Variety of Men* (Penguin Books, 1969). Snow's prose is soothing and his subjects men of considerable achievement, although in one case, Stalin, the judgement of history may well be very harsh. There are nine sketches in Snow's book; three are of scientists, Rutherford, Hardy and Einstein; there are four men in public life, Churchill, Stalin, Lloyd George and Dag Hammarskjöld and two men of letters, H. G. Wells and Robert Frost. In his preface, Snow notes that he 'met them all except Stalin, though Churchill only at committees, which didn't teach me much'. He states his motives as an author, with disarming simplicity: 'I wrote the book for fun, not because of the grandeur of most of my subjects, though of course that helped. The real fun was in the variety of human beings'. Snow was fortunate to have been in Cambridge in the 1920s and 1930s, in the years that transformed physics. He recounts that 'in 1923 at the meeting of the British Association for Advancement of Science Rutherford announced at the top of his enormous voice: "We are living in the heroic age of physics". He went on saying the same thing loudly and exuberantly, until he died, fourteen years later'. Snow's sketch of Rutherford is an extraordinarily perceptive assessment of one of the most exciting periods in physics; Cambridge, as Snow explains, 'was the metropolis of experimental physics for the entire world'. The men around Rutherford, some of the most famous names in physics appear; Chadwick and his neutron, Blackett and the positron and, of course, Kapitsa. Snow reserves his highest praise for Kapitsa: 'If he hadn't existed the world would have been worse: that is an epitaph that most of us would like and don't deserve'. Some of the most famous stories about Rutherford are recounted here. Two favourites bear repetition. 'You are always at the crest of the wave', someone said to Rutherford. 'Well after all, I made the wave, didn't I?' Rutherford replied. Rutherford once said in a speech: 'As I was standing in the drawing

room at Trinity, a clergyman came in. And I said to him: 'I am Lord Rutherford'. And he said to me: 'I'm the Archbishop of York'. And I don't suppose either of us believed the other'. Snow's assessment of Rutherford's place in science is clear: 'Was Rutherford the greatest experimental scientist since Michael Faraday? Without any doubt. Greater than Faraday? Possibly so'. But it is Snow's judgement of Rutherford as a man that is required reading for aspiring writers: 'He was a great man, a very great man, by any standards which we can apply. He was not subtle: but he was clever as well as creatively gifted, magnanimous (within human limits) as well as hearty. He was also superbly and magnificently vain as well as wise – the combination is commoner than we think when we are young. He enjoyed a life of miraculous success. On the whole he enjoyed his own personality. But I am sure that, even quite late in his life, he felt stabs of sickening insecurity'.

Snow's account of the mathematician G. H. Hardy, known widely as the discoverer of Ramanujan, is an exceptional essay. He calls Hardy's book *A Mathematician's Apology* 'a book of such haunting sadness'. Snow's assessment is beautiful: 'Yes, it is witty and sharp with intellectual high spirits: yes, the crystalline clarity and candour are still there: yes, it is the statement of a creative artist. But it is also, in an understated stoical fashion, a passionate lament for creative powers that used to be and will never come again. I know nothing like it in the language; partly because most people with the literary gift to express such a lament don't come to feel it: it is very rare for a writer to realize, with the finality of truth that he is absolutely finished'.

In a short essay, several years ago, Eugene Garfield considered *The Human Face of Science*. He asked: 'Why do we wait until the death of our colleagues to commemorate the achievements of their lives? Among scientists, the first biographical account is too often the obituary notice'. Garfield argues that for understanding 'the human element in science', autobiographies are important. Often, autobiographical essays provide uncommon insights into personalities and scientific problems; sometimes they are plagued by the problems of selective memory. Nevertheless, as Garfield notes, 'even when written by a well-informed associate, the biography or obituary, being essentially a view from the outside, cannot substitute for the rich per-

sonal details and revealing statements found in first-person accounts' (*The Scientist*, 15 December 1986, 1(3), 9; *Essays of an Information Scientist*, 1991, 14, 214). My personal preference would still be for the more neutral biographical sketch; autobiographical essays can almost never hope to achieve the penetrative analysis provided by Hardy's *Apology*. Obituaries remain the only published assessment of the work of scientists of moderate distinction. Most will pass on without drawing more than a brief announcement. Curiously, sometime ago, the *British Medical Journal* carried an article entitled, *It's Never Been a Better Time to Die. A Look at the Changing Art of Obituary Writing* (Bullamore, T., *BMJ*, July 2003). The author notes (possibly, tongue in cheek) 'it's not just the dry bones of a life lived' that the obituary enthusiasts want; rather 'a little bit of gossip goes a long way; a light sprinkling of skepticism over what otherwise appears to be a blameless life makes for an interesting read'. Clearly obituary writers are being urged to remember Mark Anthony's famous words: 'The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones' (*Julius Caesar*).

Reading balanced and well-written obituaries or biographical sketches of men and women of accomplishment can be inspirational; at times it can be educational and revealing. It is always comforting to be reassured that our heroes are also human. In India, good biographical writing is rare; hagiographies are the norm rather than the exception. B. P. Radhakrishna's essays are therefore important both for scientists and writers, who would like to chronicle the lives of men of achievement. His essay on C. V. Raman, written years after Raman's death, is sympathetic, but honest. Raman comes across as an immodest, often intolerant man. 'Humility was not part of his make-up'. He is also portrayed with admiration as a man of boundless energy, a compelling orator, possessing remarkable physical insights and driven by a 'fervent desire to see his country advance in the field of science'. Radhakrishna quotes, approvingly, Raman's rather forlorn lament: 'I thought I would build true science in this country, but all we have is a legion of camp-followers of the West'. There is indeed much to be learned from biographies and obituaries.

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