

# Reflections on the Death of C. P. Snow

## *Can 'Renaissance Man' be resuscitated?*

by Derek Turner

Much of C. P. Snow's famous lecture sounds hopelessly out of date today. The world he knew and addressed was already passing away, and it is now largely gone. Snow wrote and talked at the tail end of an era when the majority of people in positions of influence in the West still thought and spoke of Western culture as a discrete entity, even if many of them didn't quite understand or approve of it. The whole structure of society, based as it was on the assumptions provided by widespread adherence to a compound of classicism, Christianity and the ideals of the Enlightenment, still just held together. Buildings were made solidly and people had children in large numbers. Youth revolution, sex revolution, class revolution, race revolution, free love, Timothy Leary, prefabricated buildings, graffiti, flared trousers, NAFTA, the Euro, Bill Clinton -- all these horrors loomed in an unforeseeable future. A "traditionally educated upper class" continued to dominate public life -- a state of affairs which Snow decried, but which sounds like an impossible dream now, in a society dominated by pop stars and footballers! There was residual end-of-war euphoria and increasing prosperity, causing a baby boom and useful technological advances, such as household appliances which did away with much drudgery.

### Attitudes towards scientists

People seem to have rather liked scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, for making all those wonderful machines that beat as they swept as they cleaned, and for contributing to the decrease in childhood illness and mortality (although increasing numbers were questioning the ethics of the atom bomb). An hygienic future of

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perpetual change seemed to many of the Westerners of the 1950s to be not just logical but also desirable.

As Snow noted, there was indeed a cleavage between the arts and the sciences, and of course some working in the longer-established disciplines, who were still motivated by vestigial romanticism, were a little dismissive of their fresh-faced counterparts. This cleavage continues today, when not enough people are willing to become scientists, preferring instead the meretricious attractions of "Media Studies" or "Twentieth Century Cinema."

There has not always been such a gulf. In the Middle Ages, alchemists had also been engineers, artists, lawyers, translators, theologians and astrologers and barbers had put up red-and-white striped poles to signify their expertise in minor surgery. The "Renaissance Man" ideal aimed at by such as Leonardo da Vinci or Sir Philip Sidney was at its peak of popularity. Civilized men were expected to be able to read and speak Latin, Greek and French at least, to be able to write decent verse, to know a little about anatomy, to be able to fight duels, to go hunting, to be able to judge points of law, to know the signs of the Zodiac, and to know what a cosine was (speaking Latin and Greek were in any case necessary for those desiring mathematical expertise, as much of the ancients' work had not yet been translated). The integralism sought in religion was reflected in an integralism of daily life, in which everything was seen as part of a greater whole, and all was in the service of God (at least that was the theory). Hospitals, for example, were not only infirmaries, but also almshouses, laboratories and schools, and they usually had a religious function too.

### The need for specialization

But the limits of trying to be a Renaissance Man are exemplified by the anecdote of Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665), the English naval commander and diplomat, whose

treatise “On the Cure of Wounds” was based on the premise that wounds could be cured by rubbing “sympathetic powder” on the weapon which had caused the wound (1). Being a generalist was only possible when there was a relatively low level of scientific knowledge. The sheer volume of scientific knowledge accumulated after the Middle Ages, and the rapidity with which it was accumulated, made specialization inevitable. Educated men still tried to obtain a good general knowledge -- Dr. Johnson, Boswell noted, displayed not only great interest in but considerable knowledge of such un-literary occupations as distilling and thatching (2) — but it had become more and more difficult. Specialization is a corollary of living in complex societies, just as people who live in towns neither grow their own food nor make their own clothes.

All of us now tend to concentrate on those things which interest us, and to neglect those which do not interest us. Being a jack of all trades may mean that you are master of none, as the proverb warns. This is unfortunate; for example, I feel I would benefit from knowing more physics and chemistry (although I am much too lazy to actually do anything about it!). Indeed, uncharitable though it may sound, Snow himself may have been an exemplar of the problems of trying to encompass too much — his strength lay in the communication of interesting ideas (many of them other people's ideas), rather than in either scientific method or literary excellence. Leavis said, unfairly, that Snow had only “a show of knowledgeableness”; Snow replied, less felicitously, that at least *he* knew the second law of thermodynamics. (The second law of thermodynamics became for Snow a sort of sine qua non of the educated man — I must find out what it is myself.)

### The divided West

Having recognized that there is a gulf between the sciences and the arts, the next question is “Does it matter?” I am not sure that it does matter all that much. Scientists would certainly benefit from being a little more imaginative and by thinking about the social, cultural, political and ethical implications of their work. Perhaps they should leave their laboratories once in a while and let their imaginations wander over a good book. Conversely, perhaps poets should pore over test-tubes occasionally or go on geology expeditions. To this extent, Snow's thoughts still have a contemporary resonance.

But our culture is too complex for any individual to comprehend completely. In any case, do we each really need to know much about topics which do not really interest us so long as there are people involved in these other disciplines whom we can trust to be sensible, and who trust us in turn in our fields of speciality? Besides, will scientists ever read more widely and deeply? Even if they have the time, will they have the inclination to study the great works of a dying culture? “What now *are* the great books?” is a question increasingly heard from those who think that books written by dead, white, European males are ipso facto “irrelevant.” Snow's own list of reading features no great writers and a large number of exceedingly obscure ones (3). Even science, which ought to be about what is measurable, is under attack from women who dislike the masculine emphasis on getting verifiable answers and call for a new, compassionate “fallibilism,” where *everybody* can be right. If Western culture was divided in 1959, when Snow was already concerned about its ability to act decisively in what he perceived to be its own interests, how much more divided and insecure is it now?

### An attack on literary intellectuals

Snow's strictures were in any case less a plea for mutual understanding between literary and scientific intellectuals than an attack on literary intellectuals who made him feel uneasy socially, and whose politics he detested. He certainly would not have relished the comparison, but his vituperative attacks on the cultural elite arc reminiscent of Goering's famous statement that every time he heard the word “culture,” he reached for his Browning. All radicals use modernity as a weapon against the past which has created the establishment they despise. Leavis' famous attack on Snow, although intemperate, was justifiable to some extent as a spirited defense of traduced “literateurs.”

Snow attacked traditionalists' “snobbish and nostalgic social attitudes.” “Intellectuals have never tried to understand the industrial Revolution” (4), he thought, unfairly ignoring unscientific intellectuals like Charles Dickens. He thought that literary intellectuals were effeminate, an impression that can only have been strengthened by Leavis' ad hominem attack. Scientific culture, by contrast, was “steadily heterosexual... there is an absence of the feline and oblique” (5). “Fallibilism” was not much in evidence in 1959, even on the political

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His dislike of the prevailing culture was also political: “Nine out of ten of those who have dominated literary sensibility in our time — weren’t they not only politically silly, but politically wicked? Didn’t the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much closer?” (6). Or, equally foolishly, “The Russians have judged the situation sensibly...the people in [Soviet novels] believe in education exactly as my grandfather did, and for the same mixture of idealistic and bread-and-butter reasons”(7). For him, “science, democracy and modernity” were interchangeable and equally desirable (8) and Britain needed to be “modernized” at all costs (an interesting echo of this latter sentiment is to be found in the rhetoric of leading figures in the UK’s present Labor government). Like all Leftists, he thought that a great deal could be done by education and that there would be “nobody poor by 2000”(!) (9). Of course, he later became a scientific adviser to a Labor government, and looked forward to a day when a scientific elite would rule, and every day would be what Leavis called woundingly a “technologico-Benthamite” reduction of human experience (10).

Snow’s admiration of scientists was likewise completely irrational: “They are by and large the soundest group of intellectuals we have; there is a moral component right in the grain of science itself, and almost all scientists form their own judgements of the moral life” (11), he opined. That “[Scientific] culture contains a great deal more argument, usually much more rigorous, and almost always at a higher conceptual level, than literary persons’ arguments” (12), he seems to have genuinely believed. That scientists are dispassionate much more often than other people is a claim difficult to sustain. Science, like economics, follows cultural assumptions, not the other way around.

### Brave new technological world

Snow’s “technologico-Benthamite” future seems a lot less attractive to us, now that we effectively have such a society. Technology has become the only uncontroversial activity left in the Western world; every other movement implies some kind of “value-judgment,” which will offend one or more groups in our diverse and fragmented societies. The effect of this is that we now have better means of communicating with each other than ever before, but we all have less worth saying — or,

increasingly, there is less we *dare* to say. We live longer, but enjoy ourselves less. The anodyne language of “prosperity” and “rising standards of living” which Snow wanted to hear replacing the hated “nostalgic and snobbish attitudes” is now the common currency of even ostensibly “conservative” parties in most Western countries, which parties should surely be doing their best to preserve our unhygienic, colorful local inconsistencies and inequities.

Lionel Trilling said that both Snow and Leavis were equally “committed to England” in their different ways (13). This fact in itself actually shows how substantially intact our national (and Western) culture was then, despite the local difficulty of which Snow complained. We are now in a position where, with honorable exceptions, neither our scientific nor our literary elite (nor any other of our elites) are “committed to England.” Indeed, they are committed to anything *but* England in many cases. Westerners must now recapture their culture. They will do this by learning to have faith in themselves again. Our scientific achievements, such as the Apollo missions, may be inspiring and useful as a means of instilling self-worth, but I disagree with Snow’s Leftwing view that science is the most important field of endeavor. If anything, it is the least important field, and it has been used to justify so many unpleasant things that its contributions should always be greeted with considerable reserve. It is in the arts, instead, that combat must be joined between those who love the West and everybody else. Snow should have defended, not attacked, our now eclipsed high culture — which was our chief defense against the brave new world of sterility and science he and others did so much to bring into being.

### NOTES

- 1 *Brief Lives*, John Aubrey
- 2 *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, James Boswell
- 3 *The Two Cultures*, C. P. Snow, Cambridge University Press, p.63
- 4 *Ibid*, p.22
- 5 *Ibid*, p.xxvi, Introduction by Stefan Collini
- 6 *Ibid*, p.7
- 7 *Ibid*, pp,36,37
- 8 *Ibid*, p.xlii
- 9 *Ibid*, p.42
- 10 *Ibid*, p.xxxiii

11 Ibid, p.13

12 Ibid, p.12

13 Ibid, p.xxxix