

BOOKS

SCIENCE IS A SACRED COW

by Anthony Standen

E. P. Dutton, N.Y., 221 pp., \$2.75

*Reviewed by C. E. Harrold
Research Fellow in Biology*

AT THE BEGINNING of his book Standen acknowledges his debt to the Long Island Railroad and confesses that "... the more the train was delayed the more time I had to write." One, at least, of his readers hopes that the Long Island Railroad can do something about its schedules before Mr. Standen feels obliged to burden us with a further confusion of prejudice and half-truth.

The book is intended as a blast against that monstrous regiment of educators and scientists who think that "... Science with a capital S—or rather its concentrated and distilled essence, the Scientific Method—is the universal cure-all for mankind." Standen continues, "... The idea that science is infallible and beyond criticism is a delusion and even a dangerous one. The teaching of science only perpetuates this delusion for it is always taught by scientists, who are so busy keeping up with science that they can never look at it from the outside."

The notion that science and the

scientists are infallible is dangerous. The public, of course, should be aware of the limitations of science and realize that by their very nature the theories of science at any moment are only a current approximation to the facts and will be altered as new facts are accumulated. But the public should know that this willingness to alter scientific concepts is the essence of the scientific attitude and that it was necessary to establish this essential discipline in the face of much authoritarian opposition, before the great body of scientific knowledge could grow.

Nothing Serious

Rather than stress this important point Standen prefers to woo his readers with the specious argument that since today's knowledge about the atom makes the ideas of twenty years ago look decidedly imperfect, so, in its turn, today's knowledge will inevitably appear to be "decidedly frowsy" twenty or thirty years hence and therefore should not be taken too seriously.

He has neither honesty nor wisdom enough to inform his readers that today's ideas will become obsolete by the practice of those same disciplines which made yesterday's ideas untenable and that this is how scientific knowledge advances. Such irrelevant and fallacious arguments characterize most of the book.

It may be sad that science cannot be practised in popular terms which everybody misunderstands, but it is

a fact that Mr. Standen and many other people must recognize.

After the general assault on science the author takes his readers on a rampage through the scientific china shop, smashing one imagined idol after another. At the end of this the layman, for whose edification science is dubbed a sacred cow, will probably know nothing more about physics, biology, psychology or the social sciences (chemistry is lumped in with physics) than he did at the outset. Worse still, he may have picked up many confused and inaccurate notions about these fields of study—and here Mr. Standen has done his cause a great disservice.

Science Is a Sacred Cow approaches many problems which are vitally important for society today but to solve or even define such problems demands an honesty and clarity which Mr. Standen does not bring to them. Reasoned argument and statement of fact are too often replaced by tiresome buffoonery in this disappointing book. It is a sad comment on the competence or motives of the guardians of public opinion that Standen's book received uncritical publicity in one of the most widely circulated of the national weeklies. If Standen's readers, misled as they will be about the nature and consequences of science, should accept his invitation to join him in laughing at science, "the great Sacred Cow of our time", they might do well to ponder their discomfort on finding that they are the victims of their own unpleasant joke.

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