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SCIENCE

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The American Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in 1848 and incorporated in 1874. Its objects are to further the work of scientists, to facilitate cooperation among them, to improve the effectiveness of science in the promotion of human welfare, and to increase public understanding and appreciation of the importance and promise of the methods of science in human progress.

The Image of the Scientist

That the public image of the scientist is a confused one has often been remarked. The confusion undoubtedly results in part from the speed with which the scientist's role in society has been changing. Most adults grew up when the ties between science and military affairs were not nearly so strong as they are now, when governmental support for science and interest in scientific matters were far weaker than they are now, when outer space could be dreamed about but not probed and entered, when the fruits of science were beneficial or neutral, but not to be feared as many people fear them now.

In time, and with better science education in schools and through the public media, much of the confusion can be cleared away, and most scientists seem to agree that the task of giving the public a better understanding of science is worth a lot of hard work.

But the clarification will apply chiefly to science and much less to the scientist as a person. For, as a person, he is usually out of sight of most of the public, and even when he appears he does not seem to fit the standard American pattern. In many ways he does not match that pattern, and even when he does the match is likely to go unrecognized. Several years ago David McClelland and his co-workers questioned a sample of small-town residents to determine the factors on which they based their ratings of personal achievement. One that loomed large was the extent to which a person had risen above his background. The son of a janitor who becomes a banker gains greater esteem than the son of a banker who follows in his father's footsteps. Many scientists have risen above the occupational status of their fathers, but they are such a mobile lot that few of their neighbors have any idea of the family backgrounds from which they came.

All in all, the scientist frequently is a "different" sort of person, but he probably fits the American ideal of a successful, contributing member of society better than his confused public image does. The degree of fit, however, is not generally recognized because for many Americans he is only an image and never a reality in the sense that the local doctor, lawyer, banker, and merchant are living realities. His works may be feared, appreciated, or ignored, but he remains a dim figure in the background. The use of Swiss cheese, French perfume, or a German automobile gives one little knowledge of the inhabitants of the lands from which these goods were imported; the use of antibiotics, synthetic fibers, or textbooks gives one little knowledge of the scientists whose work made possible their production.

Biographies, of which there have been some good ones, public lectures, and a rare motion picture or television program partially bridge the gap. But it seems likely that the image of the scientist will remain pretty unclear for most people. If this seems inevitable, why not stop worrying about the matter? In so far as they can be divorced, public attitudes toward science are more important than attitudes toward scientists. It is more useful for the public to have a fair understanding of science than an accurate knowledge of the personal characteristics of scientists. And it is more worth while for scientists to help develop an understanding of their work than to try to improve their own image.—D.W.