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THE FIRST WORD

A NEW LUNAR SOCIETY

What is the best forum for scientific communication? That question is always with a journal editor, of course. But this season—with a very agreeable roundtable just behind us and our first big conference coming up later this month—the question becomes especially urgent.

The *Bio/Technology* roundtable—reproduced, if lamentably abbreviated, in this issue—reminds us that the most satisfying forum is the small dinner party at which the guests are selected for intelligence and talent. Satisfying, yes. Thorough and efficient, perhaps not.

Originally, of course, a symposium had more to do with potation than with science. Plato's *Symposium*, or the *Drinking Party* is a tribute to the undergraduate impulse to get drunk and talk about Truth, Beauty, Love, and Sex. (After being cast out into the real world, however, the post-graduate suffers a sea-change. He tries to conceal being drunk while talking about Office Politics and Money...and thinking about Sex.) It is, however, just as well that in modern times the symposium in its original form has been confined to the hotel bar after the sessions. Remaining alert through an afternoon in the artificial dusk of a lecture hall is hard enough without the metabolic burden of ethanol—and a woodland susurrus of inebriate snoring in place of crickets in the gloaming.

Still, one must appreciate the intimacy and the freedom of exchange in the archetypal symposium. It is pleasant, for example, to hear a captain of industry praise the fairness of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and add, "The FDA isn't perfect; but then, neither is my wife." To learn that the top executive of one company is already choosing a successor. That the chief of another is a mechanical engineer, or that executives in general are working hardest at hiring marketing talent to build on scientific foundations. It is instructive to hear Englishmen boast of the quality of English science and bemoan the social barriers that make an outcast of the scientist who seeks to commercialize his science. Or that the Japanese *can* do good original science.

The combination of scientific savvy and cold-eyed commercial calculation is exhilarating...and rare. Yet ours is not the only age in which people have combined a lively interest in science with success in industry. One of the first learned societies was Birmingham's Lunar Society, founded in 1766 and named for the full moon which lit the members' paths home after a night of natural philosophy. Its members shared commercial success, scientific curiosity, and Nonconformist views. Among them were James Watt and Matthew Boulton, owners of the local steam-engine works; the chemist Joseph Priestley; Erasmus Darwin, uncle of Charles and author of an early theory of evolution by natural selection; and the printer John Baskerville (who designed the typeface used in these pages). Their contributions endure.

We saw some of the same powerful pragmatism in our roundtable guests, and we hope to see similarly strong attitudes in our guests in New Orleans on January 20. (If you have not come across a notice of this meeting, please seek out the advertisement in this issue.)

Any gathering of people dedicated to science is a scientific society of sorts. Traditions, standards, and loyalties are passed on from person to person. Information flows, as it does elsewhere, fastest along the lines of friendship and acquaintance. (Not surprisingly, commercial biology has added some standards of its own to the canons of academia. Scientific papers submitted by industrial laboratories are composed with the market, not peer review, uppermost in mind. Whether or not the papers review well, and despite exasperating omissions of "proprietary" data, for the most part they *work*.)

The moon will be gibbous, about a week shy of full, for the New Orleans meeting. One hopes, though, that the light of the Lunar Society will illuminate the way. At any symposium, the spirit is more important than the phase of the moon, the location, the food, or even the wine. One thinks of Chaucer's clerk of Oxenford: "...Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach."

—Douglas McCormick