

BOOK REVIEW

THE ASCENT OF A CHEMIST

Peter Day, *On the cucumber tree: scenes from the life of an itinerant jobbing scientist*.

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reviewed by Robert G. W. Anderson*

Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9AL, UK

A few introductory remarks concerning the nature of autobiography are in order before tackling Peter Day's *Scenes*. This genre of writing is a much discussed topic in the literary world, and the meanings encompassed by it are not as easy to define as might be thought. Questions have been asked about the relationship between the fictive and the historical, 'design' and 'truth', *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.¹ Other key questions concern the autobiographer's main objective. Is it to ensure that there survives an account of the past, as the author would have it remembered? To correct those supposed inaccurate perceptions held by others? To recount historical events that might otherwise be forgotten? No autobiography could be a straightforward personal history, whatever that might be. It can be truthful, from the point of view of the author, although where autobiographies and biographies of the same person exist, they rarely tell the same story. What is emphasized by the writing and what is omitted can be revealing. Autobiographies are written by relatively few people, with works by scientists being particularly rare. In Peter Day's case, we are told where his was conceived: the Nehru Centre in Bangalore. Just why it was undertaken is something about which readers must make judgements of their own.

Peter Day is known as a scientist who has conducted significant research in inorganic chemistry and who has held important administrative roles. He was born and brought up in fairly modest circumstances and, being bright, was given a leg-up (as many were in the Britain of the 1950s and 1960s) by being sent to a grammar school where he benefited from teachers who were dedicated to their task. A State Scholarship was duly won, and he earned a Major Open Scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford, where he was dazzled by the mannered Warden, Maurice Bowra. His chemistry needs were well looked after by his tutor, R. J. P. ('Bob') Williams. He stayed on after his undergraduate degree to take an Oxford doctorate, although he conducted his research at the Cyanamid European Research Institute in Geneva, where he came under the spell of Klixbull Jorgenson, with whom he worked on photoconduction in molecular crystals. He returned to Oxford to a junior research fellowship at St John's College (here being dazzled by an after-dinner port-circulation device). Quite shortly afterwards he went to the USA for spells at the Bell Telephone Laboratories at Murray Hill, New Jersey, followed by IBM's Thomas J. Watson's Research Center at Yorktown Heights, New York, where he joined a team working

*rgwa2@hermes.cam.ac.uk

in the new field of molecular electronics. In 1988 Day was appointed Assistant Director (and Director the following year) of the French–German–UK Institut Laue-Langevin at Grenoble, which provided scientists with a source of neutrons. The joy of research was to become the grind of administration, and there were plenty of elephant traps that needed to be avoided. Those that were unavoidable included difficult relationships with unions, corroded grids in the nuclear reactor (which led to a three year shut-down), and general problems over French chauvinism and bureaucracy. After three years, Day returned to Britain to become Director of the Royal Institution in London. Once again there were problems to be tackled, including a dangerously threatening financial position and a historic building that had not been adequately maintained. There were compensations, however: the pleasure of introducing the young to science, and the formalities of the Friday Evening Discourse which involved dressing up and entertaining the upper crust. In 1998, after the disappointing refusal by the Millennium Commission to assist with an ambitious building programme, Day stood down as Director and returned to Oxford and to his research.

This autobiography is of a ‘warts-and-all’ rather than a ‘papering-over-the-cracks’ type, and Day can be quite self-critical. He is forthright in his condemnation of those who made life difficult or who he felt were not up to the job. Clearly he had little time for his predecessor at the Royal Institution, although it may be

surprising that he has fewer harsh words for his successor (who was required to leave her post abruptly) other than to say that her overhaul of the building was less ambitious than he had planned. Day seems genuinely surprised by what he has achieved, not infrequently harking back to his humble origins. He displays delight at the quaintness of some British institutions and offers criticism of burgeoning administrations. Eating well and being abroad are particular pleasures. Of some aspects of his life he records little—his own teaching, for example. Here I have to reveal that I was one of his early pupils at St John’s (perhaps I and my colleagues made little impression). The book ends with a pleasing rural idyll, the Days having bought a holiday home in the foothills of the French Pyrenees.

What has *On the Cucumber Tree* to do with all this? Deriving from the Hungarian expression *Az Uborkafan*, it means ‘to be on the make’.

NOTE

- 1 Francis R. Hart, ‘Notes for an anatomy of modern autobiography’, *New Lit. Hist.* 1, 485–511 (1969–70). See also Wayne Shumaker, *English autobiography: its emergence, materials, and form* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1954), and William C. Spengemann, *The forms of autobiography: episodes in the history of a literary genre* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1980).