TRUTH IN FICTION

Because I am a relatively heavy reader of both fiction and nonfiction, but preferably of the latter at this time, my friends often recommend books to me. Most recently, "Scientists and Engineers: The Professionals Who Are Not" was brought to my attention, not for its literary merit, but for being about scientists and engineers in an industrial environment, a subject of great interest to me.

The book jacket, unfortunately, gives no information on the authors, Louis V. McIntire, Ph.D., and Marion Bayard McIntire. L.V.M. was listed, however, in "American Men and Women of Science, 12th edition. His Ph.D. was in chemical engineering, and he has had about 20 years experience in the industrial environment, presumably as a chemical engineer.

"Scientists and Engineers: The Professionals Who Are Not," by the statements on the jacket and in the introduction, and indeed, by the title itself, connotes, implies, and declares that the lot of scientists and engineers is a sorry one. The fictional characters were carefully chosen to delineate how sorry the lot is for scientists and engineers in every level, except the very top, in the imaginary company, LoChemCo., Inc.

Although there is a smidgen of truth in the fictionalized accounts of each of the characters portrayed, the characters and incidents are about as real as those Horatio Alger wrote about. Alger, as I remember his books I read more years ago than I like to admit, was, however, a better novelist than the McIntires, whose literary talents seem to be attuned to television soap operas.

The subject of professionalism, especially at this time, is too important to dismiss this book categorically because it lacks literary merit. I feel strongly that the research chemist, in particular, is an excellent protagonist for a qualified novelist—i.e., one with high literary abilities and with an intimate knowledge of research chemists as they function today within a viable industrial environment.

We do not live in the "best of all possible worlds." Nor do we live in the worst of all possible worlds. We do, however, live in a changing world, and we would be remiss not to influence changes to our advantage. Knowing the facts as they really are in any environment that we might want to affect is not so easy, and predicting what effects a change will induce is even more difficult. History is replete with many examples in which changes were effected successfully, but even though the battles were won, the war was lost. During the 1930's, movie houses employed a large number of musicians. Demands for higher pay and control of the number of musicians to be employed became hotly fought over issues. The musicians won the fight, but shortly thereafter the movie house orchestra slowly and irrevocably disappeared. Unfortunately, the seed does not always produce the anticipated flower.

The ills of our profession emphasized in this book are: nonexempts have more job security than exempts, exempts can be fired almost at whim, exempts must work whenever and wherever they are needed with nothing for overtime, cronyism is the most important factor in "getting ahead," the creative scientist is never rewarded or recognized, patents are assigned unfairly, to disagree with your "boss" on a technical matter even once is to be relegated to the shelf, the only happy exempt employee is one who plays the stock market wisely and successfully, women scientists are hired and employed capriciously, research scientists and engineers are used as strike breakers, they are transferred against their wishes, their professional societies are run by the chiefs of industry and of the academic world and only for the good of industry, and the industrial environment is a series of frustrations for scientists and engineers.

That some of these ills have existed, and possibly in some companies to some extent do exist, is true. What the McIntires overlooked is that no company saddled with the ills of their LoChemCo. could long survive today or even for any time during the past 25 years. A company such as LoChemCo. would not have been able to employ or hold onto good scientists and engineers, and any company that subjected its scientists and engineers to the McIntires' "Perils of Pauline" would soon reside in oblivion, and deservedly so. The mixture of hyperbole and black and white incidents does little to enhance the reader's understanding and appreciation of the real world of the scientist and engineer in the industrial environment.

Two solutions for the ills catalogued by the authors are: creative legislation and political alliance with unions. All we need to do now is to work out the details.

I do not mean to imply that everything is fine, but rather to point out that saying "there ought to be a law" is not the answer, and that truth in fiction is a more powerful way of posing the question.

HERMAN SKOLNIK