

## In retrospect chosen by Carl Djerassi

### The Struggles of Albert Woods

by William Cooper  
(1952)

On 24 March 1994, before a full house at the Royal Society of Literature, London, a panel under the chairmanship of the biologist Lewis Wolpert debated the issue: "Are writers too ignorant about science?". As one of the participants, I tried to argue that 'science-in-fiction' is a literary genre distinct from science fiction; that, although rare, it had an honourable tradition, especially in the United Kingdom; and that its most appropriate authorial practitioners should be insiders (meaning scientists), as the genre's most distinguishing features are accuracy and plausibility.

Admittedly, I had an ulterior motive, having already published two science-in-fiction novels. Still, Wolpert needed no convincing, and William Waldegrave, the British cabinet minister then responsible for science, also seemed persuaded (both had sampled my work), while the novelist Maggie Gee remained diplomatically neutral. It was the crime novelist P. D. James who disagreed: she was no scientist and knew little about science, she announced proudly, but had always known where to get scientific information if she needed it for her novels.

My hackles were raised subliminally. Because science-in-fiction deals not only with science, but more importantly with scientists too, I felt that a clansman can best describe a scientist's tribal culture and idiosyncratic behaviour. "Take C. P. Snow", I started to say, but then stopped. Everyone starts with Snow, notably with *The Search* (1934, revised 1958). "In fact, take William Cooper", I continued. "Take *The Struggles of Albert Woods*, which is far superior to *The Search*."

To my surprise, several people in the audience grinned, including a white-haired elderly gentleman with an officer's clipped moustache. Interpreting the grins as sniggers, I decided to defend both Cooper and my impeccable judgement by pointing out that, whereas Snow had no sense of humour, Cooper's was abundant. Seeing more grins, I proceeded to outline some high points of Cooper's novel: how Albert Woods, who, after gaining a first-class honours degree in chemistry from a redbrick university, started research on the 'untypical Wurmer-Klaus Reaction' (to organic chemists, a clear allusion to the 'abnormal Reimer-Tiemann Reaction'); and how this was the speciality of Oxford's reader in experimental chemistry, 45-year-old F. R. Dibdin, a man obsessed with obtaining an F.R.S. after his name. (As Cooper pointed out, given the then-existing pool of British research scientists, the odds were a measly 20 to 1 of being elected a fellow of the 500-member Royal Society. "At the age of 30 the thought of being elected is inspiring; at the age of

45 the thought of not having been elected is agonising.")

Dibdin, the brightest star in the Wurmer-Klaus firmament, eliminates the potential competitor Woods by inviting him to join his Oxford group. Misnaming him 'Bowls', Dibdin promptly cuts him down to size. "You've made a very good start, but that doesn't mean you're bound to make a good finish." Dibdin, in Cooper's words, "had no capacity at all for doing experiments... but was most ingenious in inventing experiments for other people to do. Dibdin's school had more irons in the fire per man than any other school in the country." But Woods, a superb experimentalist, finishes his project within a year. In a scene hilarious as well as realistic, he presents Dibdin with his first journal manuscript. Instead of the expected perfunctory comments, Woods is confronted with a *fait accompli*:

"I see you've put your own name at the top of the paper, Mr. Woods." His eyes looked sad and thoughtful. "I always make it a matter of principle to put my name as well on every paper that comes out of the department."

"Yours?" Albert said incredulously.

"Yes," said Dibdin, still sad and thoughtful. "I make it a matter of principle, Mr. Woods. And I like my name to come first — it makes it easier for purposes of identification." He rounded it off. "First come, first served."

And Cooper is not reluctant to bring in sex. To wit: "Nobody could ignore the imagination, enthusiasm, fervor, and most of all, palaver, with which Albert conducted his affairs with Thelma. The two-seater Morris-Cowley was a symbol of them all." There follows a playful description of the limitations of a Morris-Cowley front seat:

"Oh!" cried Thelma, with her eyes closed in excitement. The door of the motor car flew open and Albert fell on to the floor. Hotly he picked himself off the hand brake and gear lever and got back again. He was rough and powerful in his haste. "Oh," cried Thelma, this time with her eyes open. Albert felt her quivering beneath him and thought it was passion. His face was close to hers, his voice thick and breathless as he said: "Sometimes I'm terribly animal."

Thelma did not speak. She was shaking with laughter.

Realizing that people might think that the novel was only a light romp through science, I pointed to the wit and timeliness of many of Cooper's observations: how to get elected to the Royal Society; how not to achieve a desired knighthood; how to attract graduate students and then to exploit them; how such suffering exploitation is perpetuated once the earlier victim reaches his own pinnacle of power; the

pros and cons of academia chasing after industrial money; "the bane of the organic synthesizer's life — being able to make something but not enough of it for the making to be a practical proposition"; and the ultimate expression of grantsmanship: "it was not the first time a scientist had confidently said he had done some experiments when he had not."

It is impressive how accurately Cooper describes the chemistry scene, considering that he graduated with third-class honours in physics from Christ's College, Cambridge, and then spent much of his life in the Civil Service Commission (where his path crossed Snow's, as it had at Cambridge).

Stylistically, the text is interspersed with charming Trollopian asides to "Dear Reader". For instance, in preface to a sexual scene, Cooper writes: "May I point out that anyone who knows he or she is bound to be shocked can save us all embarrassment by the simplest manoeuvre — just skip. Albert's life becomes perfectly respectable a little later, so if you feel the preliminary twinges of moral indignation, now is the time to take the remedy. It is better to skip than to burst."

Of course, I realized that if I continued to push the virtues of Cooper's novel, I would never get to my own, which would defeat the ultimate objective of my appearance on the panel. So I proceeded to graze on my own literary pasture. But later on, after re-reading the novel, I was struck by how much I still remembered after four decades. Only the charming, non-saccharine, Trollopian ending had faded from my memory.

After the debate, we mixed with the audience over drinks. That's when the moustachioed gentleman, whose earlier grin had derailed my intended focus on my first novel, *Cantor's Dilemma*, was introduced to me by another grinner. "Professor Djerassi, meet Harry Hoff." I had assumed that Harry Summerfield Hoff, alias William Cooper, had long been dead. Instead I had the rare pleasure of shaking the hand that had written *Albert Woods* some 40 years earlier. Carl Djerassi is in the Department of Chemistry, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305-5080, USA. Web address: <http://www.djerassi.com>

