

The Apocalyptic

EDITH EFRON'S remarkable *The Apocalyptic: Cancer and the Big Lie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 589 pp., \$19.95) is the story of a scandal within a scandal. It is worked out in detective story fashion, with Miss Efron, a consummately able researcher, zeroing in after the perusal of thousands of documents on the culprits who have been misleading us about the extent of the cancer threat. Her book does not make for light reading, for it is densely packed on every one of its pages. But it is a richly rewarding study of misuse of the press by scores of people, both in government and out, who pretend to speak in the name of science.

The big overall scandal that engages Miss Efron's attention before she gets into the meat of her book is the one perpetrated by the environmentalists who think the earth is doomed by capitalistic industrialists who put profit ahead of human life. Her "apocalyptic" include Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, Rene Dubos, Paul Ehrlich and George Wald,

as well as a group of scientists at MIT who conducted a famous study for the Club of Rome. In her *Silent Spring* Miss Carson portrayed nature as good and attacked industrial man as the great defiler of our soil and atmosphere. Barry Commoner, the biologist, made the "ecological crisis" the burden of his testimony before the Muskie Committee, claiming that our capitalistic industrialists and pesticide-using agriculturalists were destroying the world's ecosystem. In a book titled *The Poverty of Power*, Commoner said that socialism offered the only way out. The report done by MIT scientists for the Club of Rome purported to prove that if we did not mend our profligate consumption, the earth would be running out of fuels and minerals by the year 2,000 A.D.

The universal doomsayers set the stage for Edith Efron's second scandal, the propagation of the theory that ninety per cent of our cancer is due to industry-made chemicals that get into the food we eat, the water

we drink, and the air we breathe. This, in Miss Efron's extremely well-documented opinion, is the "big lie" she refers to in her title.

Miss Efron knows as well as anybody else that many artificially made chemicals are dangerous. But the idea that nature itself is pure and only man is vile can't stand up for a moment against the evidence that Miss Efron summons from her vast reading. The world is full of natural carcinogens that pre-date the birth of all our modern chemical manufacturing companies. Silicates and "asbestiform minerals" are widespread in our bedrocks. Our mines are full of radon, a radioactive gas. We get skin cancer from the sun. Our foods, whether organically grown or not, contain elements that could be cancerous. Miss Efron's list of natural carcinogens takes up many pages. What she demonstrates is that everything is chemistry, and much of chemistry, both natural and man-made, can be dangerous if genetic dispositions combine with circumstances to cause cells to go hay-wire in a still unexplained way.

When Miss Efron says, "there is nothing we can breathe, eat or drink without encountering carcinogens," it made me wonder how the human race has come as far as it has. Isaac Berenblum, who discovered there was such a thing as anticarcinogenesis, provides a hopeful answer. There are cancer inhibitors. And to

set a carcinogen in dire motion a "promoter" may be necessary. If the "promoter" can be evaded, there will be no cancer. The whole thing is extremely complex. Yet our laws are based on what might be called "one-on-one" theory. "Regulatory" science is not like true science: it demands black-and-white answers to questions that still baffle even the most careful of our laboratory workers.

Questionable Tests

The whole business of using animals to test for carcinogens poses many conundrums. What will cause cancer in mice may not necessarily induce tumors in rats or hamsters. If there can be differing susceptibilities in animals, how can we generalize about man? Then there is the question about high and low dosage. In one experiment on the sweetener cyclamate, test animals were given the human equivalent of 552 bottles of soft drinks a day. Herman Kraybill, a dissenting member of the National Cancer Institute, says the data drawn from such tests as related to man "are almost science fiction."

Despite random variations, and the opinion of many scientists that two or three species of animals should be used if a test is to be considered anywhere near conclusive, OSHA considers that "a substance may be classified as a Category I Potential Carcinogen on the basis of

scientifically evaluated positive results . . . in a single mammalian species in an adequately conducted long-term bioassay . . ." So the mice have it all on their lonesome. And Congress listens.

The scandal, as Miss Efron sees it, is that our scientists have not spoken up to refute the simplistic notions about cancer and cancer prevention that have been spread by the apocalyptic. They have not told the world that a study of various societies shows no correlation between the rise of industrialism and the prevalence of cancer. The dinosaurs had cancer. Socialism is no cure, nor is Third World rusticity. A study of cancer in Ethiopia and Chad would

be meaningless simply because millions in those countries are dying of malnutrition before they could ever contract the diseases of old age.

Miss Efron, who wrote *The News Twisters*, has been extremely critical of the press—the "media"—in the past. Curiously she does not blame newspapers and television for misreporting on cancer. Reporters are dependent on official sources for their cancer news. When government agencies lead reporters down the garden path, it is the duty of scientists to protest. That they have failed to counter the "apocalyptic" is the true scandal. Edith Efron's book should do much to correct the situation. Ⓢ

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