

## The New Men

*C.P.Snow*

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The book was hard to get hold of. I ordered it on Amazon but it never materialized even after a long delay and finally even the company tired. Then I ordered another older edition a used one to be sent to Chile, but it was lost in the mail, and so I got a Kindle on a Black Friday and finally got to read it.

One striking thing about a Kindle is that there is so little text on each page compared to that of a book that you wonder whether the text has not actually been abridged, and hence bowdlerized. There is only one way to find out, namely to compare with the book. Could it be that Kindle versions are actually shortened to save readers time? Well-meaning actions are usually the worst.

In this book we are introduced to Lewis Elliot's younger brother, of whom we so far have had no inkling. The main protagonist and narrator of the series takes an almost paternal interest in his sibling, the age difference being so large that rivalry is not an issue. He wants him to be successful, but will he be? He is a physicist, but has he enough talent for a career? His advisor Luke, whom we have met before in 'The Masters' I believe, finds him competent enough but not of the top tier, maybe he can make a career at a provincial university?

And so comes the war and it changes everything. Elliot is up in the government working directly under a minister, an older affable gentleman by name of Beville and of aristocratic descent; so he is to some extent able to shape events. A group of scientists are assembled at Banford, outside Stratford-upon-Avon, where they try to effect fission in order to make a bomb. The possibility of a bomb, releasing huge amount of energy frozen in matter, is of course not a secret, but the practical way to do so is. Thus there is a commitment to greatest circumspection. The brother Martin comes to work under his former advisor Luke believing that the latter has a very good plane to succeed, and that will of course be good for his own career. Now the teams at Banford cannot of course compete with the American one, to which many British scientists are drawn, and I suspect that it is pure fiction, but that is not a problem in a fictional context, and it gives the author an opportunity to address the issues of making a bomb, not only of the moral kind. Is it defensible to make one in view of the political and military ramifications of such an awesome invention? The scientists are of mixed minds, on one hand it is, as Oppenheimer famously phrased it, a sweet scientific problem, on the other hand they want to wash their hands of the guilt which is associated with it. In short, they both want the cake and eat it. Snow remarks, through his main character, that it is a fundamental difference between the engineers and the scientists, the former are docile and do what they are told to do without demurring, a job has to be done and they are happy to do it; the scientists on the other hand are rebellious, or at least like to think of themselves as independent thinkers and spirits, and are riddled by qualms. In addition to this there is the issue of leakage and betrayal, which makes the scientists uneasy. After all scientific knowledge is public

and knows no boundaries, and the pledge to secrecy is felt as unnatural and restrictive. To identify colleagues as traitors make little sense, national boundaries are irrelevant, and to take it seriously amounts to a patriotism, not to say nationalism, which ought to be outdated. Many of the scientists also have transnational ambitions and visions and see the Soviet Union as the light of the future. In this morass of politics and science Martin Eliot comes out very well. He knows how to navigate and how to turn events to his advantage, something seen by his older brother as despicable, although he has of course also warned him from taking rash steps putting his carrier in jeopardy, as when he suggested writing a letter to the Times taking moral exception to the development of the bomb. But there is after all a big difference between passive caution not to damage yourself and active pursuit. In fact it goes so far that Martin is being offered the directorship of Banford, something he has striven for a long time and masterminded, including stepping on many bodies, including that of his advisor (who as part of the experiments meets with an accident and receives a near lethal dose of radiation). But when he is given the prize he sought, he gets cold feet and turns it down, and instead decides to return to academia, where he no doubt will be constrained to an undistinguished career lacking the necessary talent.

Although focused on one problem, the book belongs to the weaker and less engaging in the series.

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