3 The Popularisation of Science

Two men in a pub, one has just come from a science lecture and talks of the world before Adam:

This yer radium, Charlie, is reely life. On’y life is raely a jelly, what you find in the sea. So this jelly is radium, you see, on’y they can’t find the jelly, an radium is scarce, so they invented electricity. And there’s radium in electricity, if they could on’y find the way to get it out. But there ain’t no jelly in it – see?!1

This imaginary scene from the Clarion of 1905 is a neat vignette of the gulf between the science of the laboratory and the science of the street, home, factory or, indeed, pub. The mishmash of invention, electricity, radium and ‘jelly’ (protoplasm) exposes some of the more dominant themes in the popular imagination. The garbled account is what many have now come to expect from popularised science, and then was obviously common enough for it to be a source of humour. However, the science lecture, although still popular, was having to compete with other media as a source of perceptions and understanding of science, and not just the media but the very world in which people lived.

It was, as many commentators observed, a ‘scientific age’. The late Victorian and Edwardian general public could hardly avoid science even if they had wanted to. The impact of technology upon everyday life would, in a rudimentary way, have given them first-hand experience of scientific innovation, at least in its applied form. Dramatic feats of engineering and the increasingly widespread use of electricity, particularly for lighting, were transforming the environment. An expanding rail network provided an efficient distribution system for a revolution in retailing, while technology not only cheapened traditional products, but also created new ones such as the bicycle, sewing machine, phonograph and camera, which, if not bought, could be eyed avariciously in the shops.2

Also unavoidable were the many advertisements for patent medicines. Appliances and applications, pills and potions, remedies and restoratives were all on offer to help keep body and soul together. In a single issue of Pearson’s Magazine we can find:
Noses – the only patent nose machines in the world. Improve ugly noses of all kinds. Scientific yet simple. Can be worn during sleep...

Or, to build up vitality and strength:

The ‘Ajax’ battery is a scientific device for saturating the nerves and vitals with a steady, unbroken current of electric life, without the least shock or unpleasant sensation.

One would also find the ‘Turvey cure for drink and drug habits’, a phosphoric remedy from ‘Dr Lalor’ called ‘phosphodyne’, and ‘Spermin’, an organic essence from the ‘Organo-therapeutic Institute of Professor von Poehl and sons’. There were others, and they were all in addition to the magazine’s regular advertisements for Eno’s fruit salts, Kutnow’s, Wincarnis, Tatcho, Zam-Buk and Beechams Pills.

Recreation could also have brought the public into contact with science, in a more institutional setting, although how effective this might be was open to debate. It was reported that zoos were becoming increasingly popular, with the animals being given more room, and the move to realism in taxidermy had transformed many museums ‘from dreary sepulchres into palaces of pleasure’, an opinion, it has to be said, that was not shared by everyone. ‘The very word “museum” sends a cold chill to the heart’, wrote one contributor to the Clarion. ‘We know those museums. We know the depressing cracked clay pitchers, the dismal miscellaneous armour, the withered butterflies and beetles gone to seed.... We know them, and dread them like taxes and long sermons.’ Likewise the state of British aquaria gave cause for concern. Many were without fish, some did not even have any water. As one observer noted, a remnant of school Latin should at least bid the visitor to expect water somewhere in the definition, but at some leading aquariums there was none to be found: ‘He finds instead a musical hall, the walls in the distance being ornamented with a dado of tanks, with or without – mostly without – water in them, and one or two, maybe, containing an emaciated fish.’

Much more exciting would have been the ‘living picture shows’. Furthering the traditions of the magic lantern show, natural history and scientific ‘interest’ films were an important part of early British film culture. Charles Urban was to the fore in producing this type of film, making series like Natural History, Marine Studies and Unseen World (this last employing new techniques in microcinematography). The continuing interest in scientific films can be seen in the numerous bird studies in film-makers’ catalogues, the nature films of F. Percy Smith, and the