PETER MEDAWAR, *Memoir of a Thinking Radish. An Autobiography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. xi + 209, illus., £ 12.50.

Sir Peter Medawar was one of the most influential biologists of the last two decades. His discovery of acquired immunological tolerance established a scientific basis for the development of skin grafting and organ transplantation, and won him the Nobel Prize in 1960. He was for a number of years Director of the National Institute for Medical Research, the largest medical research organization in the British Commonwealth. He was elected to the Royal Society and to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, was knighted, and received numerous other honors besides. He was forthright as well as compassionate, and his advice and counsel was sought by governmental and other institutions in Great Britain and abroad, particularly in trying situations, as in a much published case of scientific fraud in the United States. He was well-spoken and witty, handsome and of imposing presence. Most of all, he was known for his profound and beautifully written essays on science and scientists, collected in volumes such as *The Art of the Soluble* (1967) and *Pluto's Republic* (1982).

In *Pluto's Republic* he set his views about the biographies of scientists thus:

> The lives of scientists considered as Lives, almost always make dull reading ... It could hardly be otherwise. Academics can only seldom lead lives that are spacious or exciting in a worldly sense. They need laboratories or libraries and the company of other academics. Their work is in on way made deeper or more cogent by privation, distress or worldly buffetings. Their private lives may be unhappy, strangely mixed up or comic, but not in ways that tell us anything special about the nature or direction of their work. Academics lie outside the devastation area of the literary convention according to which the lives of artists and men of letters are intrinsically interesting, a source of cultural insight in themselves. If a scientist were to cut his ear off, no one would take it as evidence of a heightened sensibility; if a historian were to fail (as Ruskin did) to consummate his marriage, we should not suppose that our understanding of historical scholarship had somehow been enriched.

These words are cited at the start of *Memoir of a Thinking Radish*, and so are the equally disparaging views of two great contemporary scientists (both of whom eventually succumbed to the temptation of publishing autobiographic memoirs). The biochemist Erwin Chargaff wrote: 'a scientific autobiography belongs to a most awkward literary genre. If the difficulties facing a man trying to record his life are great – and few have overcome them successfully – they are compounded in the case of scientists, of whom many lead monotonous and uneventful lives and who, besides, often do not know how to write'. The molecular biologist and Nobel laureate Salvador Luria says the following: 'A scientist's biographer deals with much duller material than does a

chronicler of Kings ... I have found most biographies of scientists remarkably uninteresting and their autobiographies even more so'.

The contrived title (an amalgam of Pascal's 'thinking reed' and Falstaff's 'forked radish') is Medawar's device to disguise that the book is the writing of a scientist, something justified by the statements quoted above. S T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* ('a work I enjoyed as much as I should like my own readers to enjoy this' p. 3) is the kind of autobiography he sees as a model. 'The pure narrative I have reduced to the very minimum, confining myself to those aspects of my life which seem to me to throw some light on the human comedy or the human predicament – very often the same thing. This, then, is a book of opinions which my life can be regarded as a pretext for holding' (p. 3).

The prose is elegant, the story edifying, and occasionally amusing or instructive. Medawar derides snobbery (an 'infirmity of manners', with a 'generally destructive effect upon English social life and our position in the world' p. 4) and successfully avoids it. Scientific notions and discoveries are reduced to a few paragraphs here and there, and are conveyed in simple and clear language. The 'two *s*, two *d*', to whom the book is dedicated, are only briefly referred to, but Jean, his wife, for whom he expresses endering devotion, tenderness, and admiration (and on whom he was by 1972, when I first got to know them well, physically dependent as the result of a devastating stroke), is a more frequent subject. Distinguished scientists turn up at various relevant places, and so do some humanists and philosophers, most notably Sir Karl Popper, whose scientific and political philosophy Medawar so much admired.

Memoir of a Thinking Radish is among the very best autobiographies of scientists I have ever read. At the end, however, I retained the conviction that Medawar's strictures (and Chargaff's and Luria's) befit this literary genre.

FRANCISCO J. AYALA, *Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology University of California Irvine, CA 92717, USA.*