

Our Electronic Oracles

Men, Machines, and Modern Times, by Elting E. Morison (M.I.T. Press. 235 pp. \$5.95), proposes that we become an experimental society with respect to new technology. Spencer Pollard is a professor of economics at the University of Southern California and an arbitrator of labor-management disputes. He is the author of the recently published *"How Capitalism Can Succeed."*

By SPENCER POLLARD

ELTING E. MORISON, a professor of management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writes in the tradition of Elton Mayo. His special interest lies in what new machines do to us and how we can control them so that they will serve us as individuals rather than dictate to us how we shall live. Dr. Morison begins with Schumpeter's concept of the "gale of creative destruction" blowing through modern society, and repeats Aldous Huxley's question: "What are you going to do with all these new things?"

In considering the uses of the most dramatic new machines, computers, Professor Morison is optimistic, since history shows us, he says, that men have learned to live with new machinery at least as well as, and probably a good deal better than, with one another. But he has a word of caution. Earlier forms of machines resisted human ignorance and stupidity. "Overloaded, abused, they stopped work, stalled, broke down, blew up, and there was the end of it." When a computer is asked a foolish question, it does not collapse but answers the fool according to his folly. Dr. Morison's illustration is this:

Hamlet had a problem which he defined for himself as follows: What happened to the late King of Denmark, and what should he, Hamlet, do about it? Framing the question accurately—a good program—he took it to a ghost, the most sophisticated mechanism in the late sixteenth century for giving answers to hard questions. From the ghost he got back a very detailed reply which included a recommendation for a specific course of action. Responding to these advices, Hamlet created a political, social, moral, and administrative mess that was simply hair-raising. The trouble was that he had got the right answer, the answer he

deserved, to a question that was totally wrong. He had asked about his father when he should have asked, as any psychologist will tell you, about himself and his relations with his mother.

The major proposal in the book is that we should become an "experimental society." This would mean that rather than rushing in to install the latest technology in any area of life, we should set up a series of experimental situations, using new machines in various situations, and comparing the results, to find out which set-up is the most favorable to the development of ourselves as individuals. Suitable subjects for such treatment would be the means of transport, the organization of cities, the control of traffic, the care of the sick, and the

process of education. Such experiments might convince us not to teach students in groups of 2,000 in auditoriums wired for sound. They might persuade us not to move old people from their accustomed neighborhoods into the boredom and isolation of concrete apartment blocks in the suburbs. Dr. Morison is sure that the experiments would show our human preference for smaller units than we now have in cities, corporations, apartment houses, universities, and schools.

It is interesting to note the kind of research that is undertaken by industrial philosophers such as Dr. Morison. They spend their lives scrutinizing a few situations as aids to their reflections rather than making large statistical surveys. Professor Morison has included in this volume his detailed case studies of innovations in naval gunnery, naval propulsion, and the convoy system, and a long essay on the Bessemer innovation in steel-making, which he calls "almost the greatest invention."

This is an interesting book, and it is comforting to know that M.I.T. values philosophy as well as technology.

The Fine Art of Swindling

The Vulnerable Americans, by Curt Gentry (Doubleday. 333 pp. \$4.95), is a compendium of the chicaneries with which consumers are bilked. George Schwartz is associate professor of marketing at the School of Business Administration, University of Massachusetts.

By GEORGE SCHWARTZ

CURT GENTRY'S *The Vulnerable Americans* is an encyclopedia of practically every dishonest scheme that businessmen and enterprises have used to enrich themselves at the expense of naïve, trusting persons, many of whom fall for chicanery because they are under the illusion that they can get something for nothing. A portion of the book also details practices used by employees and others to defraud such business enterprises as department stores and banks, telephone, insurance, and credit card companies. "Never before in the history of the U.S.," asserts Mr. Gentry, "have so many been swindled so often in so many different ways out of so much—with so few protesting voices."

The stratagems he cites are indeed despicable, reflecting adversely on the U.S. business community. They include short-weighting, the use of deceptive

slogans, deceptive advertising, deceptive pricing, deceptive packages, deceptive expedients to gain entry into a potential customer's home, and many other ruses. The relevant regulatory agencies, as Mr. Gentry observes, are all but impotent either because adequate legislation does not exist or because the agency does not receive sufficient funds to protect buyers fully from unscrupulous sellers.

The Vulnerable Americans can help consumers to protect themselves. Unfortunately, it may also serve as a source of new tricks for unethical businessmen who are not sufficiently creative in devising their own.

My main objection to Gentry's compendium is that it is itself guilty of deception: A foreigner or an ingenuous citizen of this country could well infer from the book that all businessmen in the United States are crooks whose principal activity consists of bilking naïve, unsuspecting consumers. The truth of the matter is that millions of Americans are engaged in selling products and services, and the bulk of them make a useful contribution to our society.

Business enterprises in the United States have utilized the country's resources in such a way that not only do we have the highest level of living in the world, but as a nation we are able

to help millions of indigent people. Moreover, the prospects are that, barring a nuclear war, U.S. business enterprises will use our resources even more effectively, with the result that incomes will continue to rise, and many families will enjoy even greater material well-being.

Our world in general and the business world in particular are, of course, imperfect. We need and should support individuals who wish to make these worlds better. But this reviewer doubts that the reformer is helping to improve conditions when he himself is guilty of half-truths. The significant difference between the bona-fide scholar and popular writers like Vance Packard and Curt Gentry is that the scholar will present all of the facts bearing on a situation he is investigating and from them draw his conclusions. Such studies, however, do not sell millions of copies.

THERE WAS A SAYING in Virginia that only a Randolph was good enough for a Randolph. Few families figured more prominently in the early history of the colony and the nation. Thomas Jefferson had a Randolph mother. John Marshall had a Randolph grandmother. The first president of the Continental Congress was a Randolph, as was the first Attorney General of the United States.

And St. George Tucker had three Randolph stepsons, one of whom, John Randolph of Roanoke, was one of the strangest, perhaps most brilliant, characters in American history.

For a short period as Jefferson's floor leader in the House of Representatives, John Randolph was a powerful and positive force in national politics. However, after breaking with his Presidential cousin, his influence was never more than that of a dangerous gadfly whose sharp sting could inflict mortal harm. To Benjamin Rush he seemed "a mischievous boy with a squirt in his hands, throwing its dirty contents into the eyes of everybody that looked at him." Among his targets were the two Adams Presidents, and his destructive aim was uncannily accurate.

During his more than a quarter century in Congress, Randolph, aided by liquor and narcotics, grew more and more eccentric. Some attributed his weird behavior to sexual impotence. He brought his dogs into Congress; he fought needless duels with Henry Clay and others; he became so fussy about the proper use of English that he rose in wrath from his deathbed to correct his doctor's pronunciation—"OmniPo-tent, sir, read it *always* omniPotent, sir!" were virtually his last words.

—From "America's Political Dynasties."

This Country's Ruling Clans

America's Political Dynasties: From Adams to Kennedy, by Stephen Hess (Doubleday, 736 pp. \$7.95), demonstrates that "hereditary aristocracy" has played a far larger role in our government than is generally admitted. Margaret L. Coit is currently studying New England's ruling families for a forthcoming book on Massachusetts.

By MARGARET L. COIT

THERE is nothing new about the Kennedys.

Those concerned about the constant presence of a Ruling Family upon our national scene will find little cause for comfort in Stephen Hess's panoramic portrait, *America's Political Dynasties*. That Horatio Alger is dead is no secret; that he may never even have existed is the theme of this book. The facts of history are at variance with the American myth, and the Kennedys are a lot closer to the way things really are than Horatio Alger ever thought of being.

Ironically, Mr. Hess cites both Senator Edward Kennedy and historian Arthur M. Schlesinger as feeling that dynastic succession is both undemocratic and un-American. For Mr. Schles-

inger himself is the heir to what might be called a historical dynasty, not only through his father but by virtue of his Bancroft connections on his mother's side.

Mr. Hess also quotes sociologist E. Digby Baltzell, who saw the election of President John F. Kennedy as significant not because of his Catholicism but because it signified "a trend" towards the rule of an élite in America. Mr. Hess sees not so much a trend as a pattern, dating back in fact to the first President Adams, whose social antecedents were looked upon as dubiously by the Proper Bostonians of his day as those of the Kennedys are by their descendants. In both cases, aristocracy was in the formative phase.

Fifteen political "dynasties" are studied in this book. The author could easily have cited innumerable others if he had gone below the national scene; but his book, already long, would have broken all bounds had he included, for instance, such mixed dynasties as the Rockefellers and the Peabodys, or nonpolitical dynasties like the Calders, whose artistic talents have flowered through four generations.

But the evidence is impressive enough. Harrisons and Stocktons have held office in one long, unbroken line. There is nothing new about "bands of brothers":



"And do be careful, dear, not to start a war by accident."