

The Art Of Science

Edinburgh launches its first festival of science in April, in a brave attempt to demonstrate that science can be just as appealing as concerts and cabaret. It is a daring move - and not the kind of thing that most city councils dream up - because so few people see science as part of our culture.

The arts may be riddled with class divisions, but things are worse when it comes to science: almost everyone regards it as arcane and alien, detached from political and economic concerns, the exclusive preserve of the 'expert'.

The Edinburgh International Festival of Science and Technology, from April 3-12, will try to explode such myths through a mixture of lectures, tours, demonstrations and exhibitions. Lecturers chosen for their lively delivery will range from critiques of psychoanalysis and the exclusion of women from medicine to how it felt to play golf on the moon or make a Muppet work. The festival will display science projects by Lothian region schoolchildren of all ages in an attempt

racism, sexism and militarism. Yet, Firth argues: 'It is not inconsistent to be an orthodox scientist and to be extremely concerned about the world, as research in climatology shows. We are hoping to build on the greater public awareness of the environment now to draw people in.' A series of guided tours of the city's botanic gardens, for instance, advertised as 'Travel round the world in 48 hours', will give people a real sense of the diversity of plants.

Edinburgh city council has also awarded its first 'Edinburgh medal' for science, worth £5,000, to Abdus Salam, the physicist who won the Nobel prize in 1979 and an outspoken proponent of global co-operation in science.

Amid the popular science will be the predictable messages. The Scottish universities have done their best to demonstrate that they have toed the government line by seeking to develop contract research and 'technology transfer'. Industrialists will promote careers in science - even for women - haunted by the spectre of a severe shortage of trained technical staff by the next decade. And with Europe and 1992 just over the horizon, Scottish industry will be told to think in terms of a single market.

But neither industry nor the European Commission has yet exploited the full potential of this new celebration of science; the festival has received only about £130,000 from industrial sponsorship (of which £100,000 came from a single source, the Royal Bank of Scotland), backed up by £65,000 from the city council. But 'scientific literacy' and the 'public understanding of science' is becoming increasingly respectable on the Right, and in future years the festival will become more 'technocratic' in character, with more emphasis on trade exhibitions and company PR promoting the benefits of technological products. It is high time for those on the Left to travel to Edinburgh to discover the joys of science. •
Gail Vines



to 'catch them young', as director Howard Firth puts it.

The festival steers clear of the 'negative' side of science, says Firth. Theoretical critiques from the Left have tended to reinforce the notion that science is irretrievably sullied by capitalism,