

(reprinted with permission from *New Scientist*, 20 February 1975)

## **The age of power**, by J. H. Stephens (Peter Davies)

By Walt Patterson

Once upon a time there was a vogue for the gee-whiz, gung-ho approach to popular writing about technology. In recent years the approach has swung around to favouring debunking, muck-raking and scaring the wits out of lay readers by recounting all the hazards, malpractices and cock-ups which technology has fathered. It is refreshing to read a book with some of the old gee-whiz about it, by a man who is obviously exhilarated by technology without being blinded by it. In this book J. H. Stephens offers a lively romp through the technologies of energy supply, tempered by acknowledgement that all is not necessarily rosy in this garden of delights.

He is clearly a communicator, and a good one; he writes bright, uncluttered prose, conveying ideas and concepts readily and without ambiguity. He begins by describing energy as it reveals itself in our own bodies, anchoring understanding on a firm foothold for those unversed in physics. He surveys the historical background briefly but without any staleness, and then plunges into the contemporary scene with gusto.

He gives brief commentaries on electricity, nuclear power (both fission and fusion), environmental pollution control, energy economics (again with emphasis on electricity), the design of energy facilities, accidents associated with energy production (it is sobering to recall that the Vaiont dam disaster, in October 1963, killed some 2000 people), feats of energy engineering (Longannet power station, Aswan High Dam, and the Forties oil platforms), and alternative sources of energy supply, and concludes with a look to the future called "Entropy in the crystal ball".

So long as he stays with the descriptions of the engineering he is both entertaining and informative. He indulges in occasional backhand references to what he labels "naturalists", who seem to be less impressed by the technologies than he is; and he gives very little space to the social and political context of energy - which would admittedly overtax his available space severely.

As an introduction to energy technology per se, *The Age of Power* is cheerful and wideranging; but a newcomer to the field would be well advised also to seek out some other writers to fill out the context. Mr Stephens observes, while chiding the "naturalists", that "There is no reason why standards of care for the atmosphere, the oceans and amenities generally should not improve greatly - what else is economic growth for?" I can think of a few other possibilities; suggestions on a postcard only please.

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