

Letters to the Editor

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NOTES ON POINTS IN SOME OF THIS WEEK'S LETTERS APPEAR ON P. 609.

CORRESPONDENTS ARE INVITED TO ATTACH SIMILAR SUMMARIES TO THEIR COMMUNICATIONS.

Robert Hooke and his Contemporaries

SOME among us, long interested in the life and times of distinguished scientific and literary personalities of the mid-seventeenth century, would fain retain the opinion that Henry Oldenburg was eminently fitted to occupy the special post that was assigned him; moreover, that his very detachment from the realms of experimental adventure and inventiveness actually facilitated and did not invalidate remarkable services, securing freedom, with a responsibility of high order.

Yet we find the reviewer of "The Diary of Robert Hooke" (*NATURE*, Sept. 7, p. 358) writing as follows: "I, for one, have the impression that he [Oldenburg] was an oblique, intriguing and toadying individual, jealous of Hooke's fame and earnings" (p. 360).

As a possible antidote to the implications of this conclusion, it is opportune to refer readers of *NATURE* to an article on Henry Oldenburg which appeared in this journal forty-two years ago (November 2, 1893), the author of which had an immediate and close intimacy with relevant documents, though not, it is true, with the lavender entries of an unpublished diary.

It may be found perhaps, on reference thereto, that the epithets "oblique" and "toadying" applied to Oldenburg cannot be sustained except at some sacrifice of historical propriety and appropriate justice.

The circumstance that no portrait of Hooke is extant is probably associated with his fickle physical condition. Certainly, he would have been a most difficult, wayward 'sitter'. We may, however, believe that Evelyn was sorry that Hooke did not occupy a place in that gallery of celebrities in which he himself was so interested. T. E. JAMES.

59, Sharp's Lane,
Ruislip.

In his account of the extraordinarily intriguing, human and intimate part of the "Diary of Robert Hooke", published in *NATURE* of September 7, Prof. Andrade has suggested that the biographer, Richard Waller, "apparently had little personal knowledge of Hooke or his intimates". This may have been the case during the earlier period before 1680, but entries in the later Diaries, which I have recently transcribed and printed, show that Waller and Hooke were fellow members of a coffee-house coterie, that met almost daily at Jonathan's. It was the habit of Hooke to abbreviate the names of his friends, and many were the talks and walks in which Hooke mentions the companionship of "Lod", "Cur", or "Wall", either into the country or to attend book-auctions held in the vicinity. That no official portrait of Hooke was painted for the Royal Society, and that

no obituary notice appeared of him in the *Philosophical Transactions*, may be ascribed to the fact that his death was immediately followed by the election of Newton to the presidential chair, and Newton is known to have been unfavourably inclined towards Hooke. The neglect was in part remedied when Waller printed the "Posthumous Works" of Robert Hooke in 1705.

R. T. GUNTHER.

The Old Ashmolean,
Oxford.
Sept. 17.

MR. JAMES'S letter is of interest as recording that he personally does not agree with my opinion of the character and temperament of Oldenburg, but it has little objective content. In my article I referred briefly to some of the facts on which I base my conclusions: the affair of the watch, where Oldenburg, who had a (secret?) financial interest in a rival invention, went out of his way to decry Hooke's achievements, and certainly went beyond what he would have known: the undoubted political, although no doubt innocent, correspondence with foreigners, which he denied: the opinion of Sydenham. I may further point out that in his correspondence with Spinoza, extending over the years 1661-76, in which the scientific discoveries of the day are freely discussed, and the names of Boyle and Huygens occur again and again, there is only one reference to Hooke's work (to the "Micrographia", without mention of Hooke's name).

As for the question of jealousy, I am by no means alone in my opinion. To quote but one authority, Prof. More in his recent "Isaac Newton" says, *à propos* of Oldenburg's mischief-making between Newton and Hooke, "The motive for the advice [to Newton] may have been a sincere interest in his friend's welfare, but it was undoubtedly influenced by the evident jealousy which existed between himself and Hooke. As a consequence of his own antipathy, he exaggerated the Curator's [Hooke's] irascibility and gave the impression that matters were worse than they actually were. This time he succeeded." Elsewhere Prof. More has occasion to animadvert on reprehensible activities of Oldenburg.

If Mr. James would show that the points to which I have briefly referred cannot support my view of Oldenburg's character, and would state that there is nothing in the letters to Boyle which can be called toadyism, it would be more to the point than a vague and somewhat offensive insinuation that I have sacrificed historical propriety, and it would then be worth while for me to adduce other support.

The reference to the old article in *NATURE* (November 2, 1893) is curious. This article was unknown to