

The Linnean Society

A History of the Linnean Society of London
By Lieut.-Colonel A. T. Gage. Pp. 175 + 11 plates.
(London: Taylor and Francis, 1938.) 5s.

THE hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Linnean Society of London, which is being celebrated on May 24–27, is a very suitable occasion for the publication of its history. Several previous attempts to compile the history of the Society had been made, but they did not come to fruition. In Colonel Gage, the Society was fortunate in finding not only an energetic and faithful historian, but also one whose intimate knowledge of the Society and its archives rendered him peculiarly fit to put on record the growth and development of the Society and the vicissitudes through which it has passed.

The hundred and fiftieth anniversary is an occasion for the fellows to praise great men and the fathers that begat the Society, that triumvirate James Edward Smith, who had purchased the Linnean collections and books, Samuel Goodenough and Thomas Marsham, for many years president, treasurer and secretary of the Society respectively. But just as many infants pass through very critical periods in their lives, so the Linnean Society, after some years of initial prosperity, found its meetings becoming poorly attended and the subscriptions of its fellows less regularly paid. To crown these difficulties, the president, Sir James E. Smith, moved from London to Norwich in 1796, taking the Linnean collections and books with him. This was like removing the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple. To counteract these difficulties, some active fellows urged the obtaining of a charter for the Society, and this display of energy as well as the enhanced prestige which the Society obtained thereby, had the desired effect, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century the Society had attracted more than two hundred members.

Smith, though absent from London, remained president of the Society for forty years, until his death in 1828, when his executors offered to sell to the Society the collections and library of Linnæus, together with other specimens and books acquired by Smith, for the sum of £5,000. With great difficulty, but with superb courage, the Society managed by various expedients to raise the necessary funds and thus regained possession of the collections, the free use of which, while their president lived in London, had formed a centre of attraction for the fellows and had inspired the name of the Society.

There were other difficult times to live through. The hiving off (in 1826) of the Zoological Society no doubt took away some members and prevented some potential ones from joining, though the main object of the new Society was the maintenance of a Zoological Garden rather than the furtherance of scientific zoology. This is indicated by the election of Thomas Bell, professor of zoology at King's College, to the presidency of the Linnean Society in 1853, though he was for eleven years a vice-president of the Zoological Society. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that he was one of the most active presidents the Society has ever had. He introduced the idea of annual presidential addresses and also the discussion of papers after they had been read at the general meetings.

Other critical periods were due to internal dis-sension on questions of procedure and some on policy, as when the admission of women to the Society was being urged and ultimately agreed upon in 1904. In connexion with this innovation, Colonel Gage shows conclusively that it was not made, as has been suggested, with a view of improving the finances of the Society.

The continued prosperity of the Society may be summed up in the words, slightly altered, which the president Carruthers used when referring to the centenary meeting. "The story of the Linnean Society during the last 100 years is the history of Biology". The names of such leading fellows as James Edward Smith, Robert Brown, Bentham and Hooker, Wallace and Darwin, and all they stood for, more than justify the existence of the Society. Its future prosperity and usefulness depend upon its power to adapt itself to new conditions and to the further development of the biological sciences. Colonel Gage does not merely praise the past, he is rightly critical of many actions of former presidents and councils, and future members of the latter will do well to study the history now under review. It may enable them to avoid possible difficulties, and in addition they will find much valuable information in the later chapters of the history, which deal with the publications, the library and the finances of the Society.

The future fellows of the Society, like the present ones, will, we are sure, be deeply grateful to Colonel Gage for his careful and painstaking history, carried out with courageous determination in spite of considerable set-backs due to ill-health. It will remain an enduring memorial of the handiwork of a faithful and discerning fellow of the Society.