

A reticent and diffident man, Harkness used to say he devoted almost as much time to shunning publicity as to studying philanthropy. A widow survives him, but no children. WILLARD CONNELLY.

[It has been announced that Mr. Harkness has left the bulk of his estate, which is believed to exceed 100,000,000 dollars, in trust to his wife. After her death it is to be divided among twelve institutions including: the Commonwealth Fund, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, Harvard University, Yale University, and Atlanta University.]

WE regret to announce the following deaths:

Prof. Alexandre Desgrez, a member of the Section of Free Academicians of the Paris Academy of Sciences, and professor of medical physics in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Paris, on January 20.

Prof. S. J. Hickson, F.R.S., emeritus professor of zoology in the University of Manchester, on February 6, aged eighty years.

Mr. H. I. Smith, formerly chief Dominion archaeologist and assistant director of the Canadian National Museum, aged sixty-seven years.

## NEWS AND VIEWS

### Horace Bénédict de Saussure (1740-1799)

ON February 17 occurs the bicentenary of the birth of the celebrated Swiss naturalist and geologist Horace Bénédict de Saussure. He was born at Conches, near Geneva, in which city he passed most of his life and in which he died on January 22, 1799. As a boy he was a diligent collector of plants and minerals, being stimulated in his studies by his uncle, the naturalist Charles Bonnet (1720-93). At the age of twenty he made his first tour to the glacier of Chamoinix, an excursion regarded generally as dangerous. This was the beginning of his many journeys in the Western Alps and his travels in England, Germany, Sicily and Italy. At the age of twenty-two he was given the chair of physics and philosophy at the Academy of Geneva, and this post he held until 1786 when he resigned and was succeeded by his pupil Marc-Auguste Pictet (1752-1825). Among his earliest writings was a volume on electricity published in 1766. Year by year he extended his knowledge of the Alps, and in 1787 on August 2 with Michel Cachet he ascended Mont Blanc. The first Englishman to make the ascent, Mark Beaufoy (1764-1827), reached the summit a week later. In 1788 Saussure spent about a fortnight on Col du Geant and between 1789 and 1792 climbed Monte Rosa, the Breithorn, and other mountains. The upheaval in Switzerland due to the revolutionary movement in France drew him for a time into political life, but in 1794 most of his activities were brought to an end by a stroke of paralysis. From this he never really recovered.

Saussure's great work "Travels in the Alps 1779-1786" was described by von Zittel as a model of clear language, exact observation and cautious reasoning. His "glowing descriptions of the Alpine world removed the prejudice against the 'Montagnes Maudits', and awakened a feeling of enthusiasm for the infinite wonderland of beauty and delight in the higher altitudes of the Alps. Apart from his achievements in science de Saussure may be regarded as the pioneer of a practically new cult in human enjoyment, the love of mountain climbing". As a geologist de Saussure's aim was to observe, and to observe accurately. He

examined the mineral composition of the rocks and studied their topographical, meteorological and physical relations on the mountains. He improved the hygrometer and the anemometer and devised a cyanometer and a diaphanometer for comparing the degrees of transparency of the atmosphere at different altitudes. Half a century after de Saussure's stay on the Col du Géant, J. D. Forbes visited the same spot and in 1843 he wrote in his "Travels through the Alps of Savoy" that "No system of connected physical observations at a great height in the atmosphere has ever been undertaken which can compare with that of de Saussure. At any time such self-denial and perseverance would be admirable; but if we look to the small acquaintance which philosophers of sixty years ago had with the dangers of the higher Alps, and the consequently exaggerated colouring which was given to them, it must be pronounced heroic".

A biography of de Saussure was published by Dr. Douglas Freshfield in 1920 and was reviewed by Prof. T. G. Bonney in NATURE of February 10, 1921.

### Evacuation and the Schools

LORD DE LA WARR's recent speech as President of the Board of Education in the House of Lords in reply to a motion by the Archbishop of Canterbury has been sent out as an announcement of the Board. It is a timely recognition that educational affairs in Great Britain are not as they should be, and that improvements are needed at once. Granting that the wholesale evacuation of children was a necessary and difficult process, more pains should have been taken to cope with the problems to be faced, one of which, now urgent, is an increase of illness at this time of the year. Every schoolmaster knows the dangers of the Easter term. Things have been done in a hurry and in alarm which should certainly be undone. An important school in a non-danger area was closed until further notice and reopened when better sense prevailed; much of the commandeering or use of school buildings for Government officials or civil defence was unwarranted, and its extent has been reduced.