

de Briey, territorial administrator and assistant provincial commissioner, Belgian Congo; L. Borremans, agricultural adviser, Belgian Embassy in London; A. Muhlenfeld, head of the Department for West Indian Affairs, Netherlands Ministry for the Colonies; Sir William Hunt, formerly lieutenant-governor, Southern Provinces of Nigeria.

This Commission of Research held in all eight meetings, the first on January 2 and the final one on April 10. The verbal discussions were supplemented by valuable notes contributed by the members and others on the various aspects of the questions involved.

The final session was devoted to the adoption of a series of resolutions embodying the Commission's recommendations as to the measures necessary to deal with the problems discussed, these problems having been considered under five main heads as follows:

1. The native custom of shifting cultivation.
2. Bush fires, and the native custom of burning the bush.
3. Grazing.
4. Soil erosion, and reservation of forests.
5. Regeneration of poor or exhausted soils.

On each of these problems the Commission put forward its analysis of the position and its practical proposals for measures to cope with that position.

The proceedings and findings of this Research Commission are being circulated by the Royal African Society to the Governments mentioned and to the neighbouring and other Governments concerned with Africa, in the hope that agreed principles, both of doctrine and of practice, may be regarded as having emerged from the Commission's deliberations, and that this may lead to a new concerted effort to rid Africa, and other tropical countries, of a scourge which, unless dealt with, threatens the very habitability by mankind of large portions of the earth's surface.

The Royal African Society,
Imperial Institute, S.W.7.
Aug. 27.

E. N. CORBYN.

Paracelsus and "Basil Valentine"

To honour the memory of Paracelsus, who died four hundred years ago, the Institute of the History of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins University has issued four of his treatises in English translation. In a review of this volume in *NATURE* (May 9, 1942, p. 510) the statement occurs that Paracelsus "borrowed much, without acknowledgement, from Basil Valentine". To many of us who have formed a definite picture of Paracelsus's character, plagiarism would seem to be the last fault of which he might be rightly accused, and as this imputation (which has been frequently made since the seventeenth century) nullifies to a certain extent the purpose of the memorial volume, it might be permitted to ask whether this slur upon the character of the great man is well founded.

More than fifty years after Paracelsus's death, treatises somewhat similar to his began to appear which purported to be based on the manuscripts of a nebulous personality called Basil Valentine, who was supposed to have lived in the fifteenth century. The tremendous reading of the famous German historiographer of chemistry, H. Kopp, has failed to detect in the richest libraries any trace of such manuscripts or any contemporary reference to the man, and nothing has

come to light since. On the contrary, many of the arguments Kopp uttered tentatively to show that the treatises of the so-called Basil Valentine had been written after Paracelsus were strengthened and enlarged by recent studies; of special importance was the discovery, in 1925, by F. Fritz of a book forming clearly a link between Paracelsus and "Basil Valentine".

To assume that Paracelsus was in possession of copies of "Basil Valentine's" writings, that he (who so much despised literary tradition and based everything on his own personal experience and philosophy) used them secretly for gaining credit without a single one of his many embittered enemies discovering and exposing this fraud, and that these manuscripts then vanished completely with the exception of the copies which about 1600 were put into print and then disappeared too—that does not seem a plausible hypothesis. The boot is evidently on the other leg: those of "Basil Valentine's" works which show similarities with Paracelsus's ideas and discoveries were rather composed by a man living in the later part of the sixteenth (and not in the fifteenth) century, who was familiar with the writings of Paracelsus but anxious not to disclose his indebtedness to this inspiring reformer. The pretence of high antiquity, the only argument in favour of the alternative hypothesis, is so common in alchemistic literature that one can scarcely give it any weight in face of such strong evidence to the contrary.

We have no reason to doubt that throughout his life Paracelsus was faithful to the proud maxim he inscribed to two of his portraits: "*Alterius non sit qui suus esse potest.*"

University,
Durham.

F. A. PANETH.

I AM grateful to Prof. Paneth for pointing out a very misleading—if not entirely false—statement. The Paracelsus question is so obscure, and still so controversial, that it was only on re-reading Dr. Bayon's article in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* of November, 1941, that I realized how strongly the opinion of specialists has turned against the "Basil Valentine" hypothesis. It would have been better to have said: "Some have thought that Paracelsus borrowed . . ."; better still to have said nothing at all about Basil Valentine. For, in the days before universal printing and stringent copyright, to borrow was no sin. The habit was common, and did not seriously reflect upon the borrower's honesty, particularly in a work not specially intended for publication, unless originality was claimed or the amount borrowed extensive.

Furthermore, I was concerned, not with an involved and obscure point of literary controversy, but with the value of Paracelsus's doctrines. A little about these would have been more to the point than a reference to the "Valentine" controversy. I hold that Paracelsus did more for science and philosophy than is generally allowed; far more indeed than Dr. Bayon, for example, would put to his credit. It is true that his work was wild, erratic and mixed with fancy and superstition; in other words, he was not a strictly scientific man. This fault has brought upon him much scorn and criticism, some not altogether deserved. But with all his violence and crudities, he is rich in inspiring suggestions, and I am truly sorry if any word of mine has harmed the reputation of a thinker for whom I have a great and sincere admiration.

W. H. S. JONES.