

## British Association

# Who is Responsible?

from our Special Correspondent

*Durham, September 8*

THE luckless British Association, assailed as it is by financial troubles from within, is now being sued by two members of the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science on the grounds that the secretary, Dr Henry Turner, earlier this year circulated within his organization a statement announcing the intention of the BSSRS to intervene at this year's meeting at Durham in terms which, it is alleged, were defamatory of some members of the society. Earlier this week, the parties alleging injury also put out a statement protesting that the "hierarchy" of the British Association has been unresponsive to the real questions of the day and, for practical purposes, giving up the British Association as an organization beyond redemption.

The activities of the BSSRS—represented here by research students for the most part—have been diligent, amusing but often beside the point. Their activities began at the end of the opening ceremony last week, when several people enacted the perils of nerve gases. There has also been a stream of pamphlets and broadsheets denouncing the supposed irresponsibility of the British Association. Many members of the association were also present at the teach-in last Saturday, when the question for debate was the neutrality (or otherwise) of science.

The most constant reminder of the presence of the BSSRS has been the stream of interventions at the formal proceedings of the sections of which the British Association is composed and—fair play—most of these have been polite if not articulate. But many well-wishers must have been downcast at the factual inaccuracies with which the attacks on what is called the Establishment are larded. (One of the more tricky questions for the students—apparently unanswered—has been posed by the way in which Professor John Ziman, the president of the General Section, has consistently sported a button with the letters SRS for "Social Responsibility in Science".)

The organizers of the meeting, many of whom clearly appreciate the problems that the BSSRS is worried about, may have felt pangs of indignation, for some sections seem to have made an effort to bring social and environmental questions to the fore. Those devoted to sociological and general topics led the way by spending a day discussing the sociology of science. And the botanists, perhaps still smarting under last year's jibes that their subject is dying or dead, heard their president, Professor P. F. Wareing, speculating on how they could help to increase the world's production of food. The geography section devoted a morning to discussion of

population and development in the Middle East and another to the problem of derelict land. Durham, with its 16,000 acres of officially derelict land, is a fitting place for such a discussion, especially in view of the good work done already in reclaiming much of it (page 1082).

The environment, as might have been expected in European Conservation Year, received plenty of attention. Apart from an exhibition on water resources, and various individual contributions throughout the week, four sections, comprising biologists and geographers, combined to mount a large scale symposium concerned with conservation and productivity. For this, speakers from the Nature Conservancy turned out in force.

There was perhaps some justification for the impatience of the SRS group with the general reluctance to discuss political aspects of pollution, population and so on. Much of what was said about the need for conserving wildlife and fisheries seemed to have been heard more than once before. A broader discussion might not have proved too much for BA members, many of whom must be convinced conservationists in any case.

Putting man first, the sociologists spent a morning discussing public participation in planning, and an exhibition called Phoenix '70 illustrated public and private contributions to the social and economic development of the North-East of England. One of the more interesting of a generally uninspiring handful of displays was provided by Durham Constabulary and the local Home Office forensic science laboratory. It is good to know that X-ray crystallography, infrared photography, differential hologram interferometry and emission spectrography have useful applications in the apprehension of criminals. The police were also the subject of a morning's session opened by Professor M. Banton with his presidential address to the sociology section. Medicine was the topic for dissection during a general symposium on new doctors' dilemmas. Dr Henry Miller chaired a day of deliberations on transplantation, treatment of mental and physical abnormality and the misuse of drugs.

Clearly the BA is open to criticism for not giving more prominence to questions of social responsibility, but equally it is unfair to condemn it wholeheartedly, as this year's proceedings have shown. A worthwhile enterprise for the future might be a large scale symposium devoted to the topics that the SRS group were raising at Durham—warfare, the politics of pollution and so on. That at least should not prove too embarrassing.