

CORRESPONDENCE

"Drivel" on Katchalsky

SIR,—It is disheartening and distressing to read the outright drivel which has been appearing in both *Nature* and *Science* regarding the murder of Professor Aharon Katchalsky Katzir (for example, *Nature*, **238**, 361; 1972).

Virtually the entire population of the United States now regards the Vietnam war as a horrible blunder, and many of us have held that view since the war began. It is true that in the course of that war innocent civilians have been killed. However, the murder of civilians is not and never has been our Government's war policy. American soldiers are not ordered to kill civilians, and whenever they do so it is either a sick aberration or the result of a horrible error—all in the context of a military conflict.

To equate this wartime killing of civilians by error with the carefully planned, purposeful, braggartly, and wanton murder of random civilians by demented, true-believing zealots, certainly is the high point in sloppy thinking for these troubled times.

Yours faithfully,

WILLIAM A. PRYOR

*Department of Chemistry,
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803*

Scientists and Politics

SIR,—A recent editorial in *Nature* (**238**, 61; 1972) described in graphic detail the insulting treatment of Dr Zhores Medvedev at the recent International Congress on Gerontology in Kiev. The same issue of *Nature* also contains correspondence from Prof. John Ziman pointing out other nefarious practices indulged in by the Soviet Government with respect to their scientists travelling

abroad. These items are more especially newsworthy in the light of the observation that "in the past few years, the Russian authorities have been eager to encourage the use of Moscow and other Russian cities for international scientific conferences . . .". Further testimony to the hypocritical attitude of the Soviet bureaucracy towards international scientific exchange comes from the most recent IV International Biophysical Society Meeting in Moscow which seemed plagued with further examples of political interference.

I am a scientist who has occupied resident alien status in the USA for the past 7 years. Since my naturalization proceedings have not yet been fully completed, I reluctantly still carry a South African passport.

During the months preceding the meeting I faithfully complied with all deadlines for submission of abstracts, clearing of Intourist, and application for a visa to enter the Soviet Union. One week prior to my scheduled departure, the all-too-familiar rhetoric emanating from the Soviet Embassy in Washington led me to seek the assistance of a variety of official sources, including the US Office of the Foreign Secretary, the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics, and the Organizing Committee of the meeting. Despite the urgent and, to my knowledge, sincere efforts of these bodies, I was not issued the necessary visa. While the fact that I hold a South African passport might not be viewed with much sympathy in many quarters, this does not seem to me germane to the central question at large—denial by any government of any scientist's right to participate in an international scientific meeting anywhere in the world is a flagrant violation of one of the most fundamental tenets of scientific free-

dom and deserves the unqualified condemnation of that government's action.

Although my information at this point is second-hand, my enquiries during the days immediately preceding the meeting led me to understand that other scientists wishing to attend this meeting suffered a similar fate. I am thus forced to the sad conclusion that the time has not yet come when the Soviet Union can extend its scientific hospitality with candour and conviction, and I would emphatically echo the sentiment expressed in *Nature* that "scientific societies in the west should now seriously consider whether they should continue to participate in plans for holding conferences in the Soviet Union. . . ."

Yours faithfully,

ERROL C. FRIEDBERG

*Department of Pathology,
Stanford University Medical Center,
Stanford, California 94305*

Action at a Distance

SIR,—Is it not rather unfair to call action at a distance a mediaeval notion (in *News and Views*: "Elementary Particles and Cosmology", *Nature*, **238**, 69; 1972)? Surely the Schoolmen, who spoke for the Middle Ages on philosophical matters, denied that any such thing happens.

On the other hand, the notion that the future may have some influence on events, which may seem so strange today, would not have surprised the Schoolmen; for they believed in teleology.

Yours faithfully,

H. L. ARMSTRONG

*Department of Physics,
Queen's University,
Kingston, Ontario*

Obituary

Sir Gavin de Beer

SIR GAVIN DE BEER, who died suddenly on June 21, 1972, was a zoologist in the great tradition of Ray Lankester and Goodrich; essentially a comparative anatomist and embryologist, always evolutionary in outlook. His research was rigorous, never trivial in aim but adjusted to clarify important issues. His writing was scholarly and lucid,

mainly addressed, in its scientific aspects, to specialists or to undergraduates reading for honours at a university. He was, however, author of one of the best elementary textbooks on vertebrate zoology (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1928) ever written.

Gavin Rylands de Beer was born in 1899. He married Cicely Glynn, daughter of the Reverend Sir Hubert Medleycott, Bt, who survives him. He

was educated at the Ecole Pascal, Paris, at Harrow and at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was a Demy, and served as a Lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards in 1918-19.

On taking his final examination he was at once elected Fellow of Merton College, subsequently becoming Sub-Warden, and Demonstrator in the Department of Zoology at Oxford, where he was Jenkinson Lecturer in Embryo-



logy from 1926-38. From 1939-45 he served as Lt-Colonel in the Grenadier Guards, GSO Psychological Warfare. At the end of the war he became Professor of Embryology at University College, London, a position which he held until he was appointed Director of the British Museum (Natural History) in 1950. He resigned in 1960 and became a director of Thomas Nelson, Publishers. In 1967 he settled in Switzerland, whence at the time of his death he had just returned to live in England.

Among his honours may be mentioned Knight (1954), Fellow (and Darwin Medallist) of the Royal Society, DSc (Oxon), Hon. ScD (Cantab), Hon. D-ès-L (Lausanne), Hon. D de l'Univ (Bordeaux), Chev Lég d'Hon.

One of the most remarkable features of de Beer's work is the unflinching high standard of scholarship that he maintained in spite of the diversity and scale of his output. He wrote 16 books and 110 articles on zoology, 5 books and 40 articles on the history of science, 9 books and 52 articles of a biographical character, 9 books and 80 articles on Switzerland, 3 books and 12 articles on military affairs, modern and ancient, and 3 books and 18 articles on a series of varied topics. The industry and learning involved seem overwhelming, especially in a man who found time for wide artistic and general interests; he was a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

De Beer's researches on comparative anatomy and embryology were particularly concerned with the vertebrate head, especially its segmentation. To this subject he made notable contributions. They were much assisted by his method of producing large-scale models in plaster of Paris, each built up from a sequence of microscope slides. His collection of these reconstructions, representing different stages in development, not only threw light upon fundamental vertebrate anatomy but pro-

vided teaching material of great value. In particular, they demonstrate the developmental stages from the chondrocranium to the bony skull. In carrying out that work he especially studied a number of sharks, primitive and specialized bony fish and the shrew. Related to the same subject was his investigation of the pituitary from the lamprey upwards, upon which is based the evolutionary sequence of that organ as accepted today.

More difficult to evaluate in its contribution to modern zoology was the rise of experimental embryology under the leadership of Ross Harrison and Hans Spemann, so fully described by de Beer in books and articles. It may be hard to realize how greatly that subject dominated zoological thought in the 1920s. Those establishing it then may perhaps have laid a foundation upon which the superstructure is in the main yet to be built.

During the decades when he was Director of the Natural History Museum, although deeply involved in administration, de Beer was bringing together the materials for his great *Atlas of Evolution* (Nelson, London). This, however, was not published until 1964.

Though comparative anatomy and embryology were the principal subjects of his research, he read widely and was keenly interested in all aspects of zoology and its history. In particular, he was fascinated by the work and writings of Darwin, upon which he threw much light; and he produced a reprint of the sixth edition of the *Origin of the Species*, the last to appear during its author's lifetime, to which he added a discriminating preface. He hailed the experimental study of evolution in wild populations, a subject developed during the last forty years or so, as the fulfilment of Darwin's hopes.

De Beer was essentially a man of culture; and he who was himself a distinguished scientist looked with no favour upon those whose interest is limited to science. Indeed, he personified a type more frequent in his youth, when the aim of education was to educate rather than to qualify candidates to pass examinations.

Among his many biographical, historical and other writings, those dealing with Hannibal's march into Italy have aroused special interest. They seem to have solved the age-old problem of the route by which the general brought his troops and his elephants across the Alps.

No assessment, however brief, of de Beer's life and character should omit reference to his outstanding ability as a linguist. He spoke German almost perfectly, his Italian was fluent and polished and, without raising a doubt,

he could pass as a Frenchman in France.

Casual acquaintances tended to find his encyclopaedic knowledge poured out on the widest variety of topics rather daunting in conversation, unless they realized that his interest in their remarks, if worthwhile, could be as keen as in anything he was saying himself. Those who knew him well discovered that in his friendship they possessed something enduring, for he was always to be relied upon, always the same.

Announcements

University News

Professor A. C. Turnbull, Welsh National School of Medicine, has been appointed Nuffield professor of obstetrics and gynaecology in the **University of Oxford**.

Appointments

Mr W. B. S. Walker has been appointed a part-time member of the **UK Atomic Energy Authority**.

Miscellaneous

The 1971 **Kalinga prize** for the popularization of science has been awarded to **Professor Pierre Auger**.

The Polish government has awarded the Knights' Cross of the Order of *Polonia Restituta* to two Soviet biologists, **Academicians Pavel P. Luk'yanenko** and **Vasilii N. Remeslo**, for their work in developing the high-yielding strains of wheat 'Mironovskaya-808', 'Avrora' and 'Kavkaz', which together now account for some 25% (by area) of all Polish wheat growing.

The **Ramsay Memorial Fellowships** trustees have made the following awards of new fellowships for the year 1972-1973: a general (British) fellowship to Dr P. J. Derrick at University College London; a Glasgow fellowship to Dr D. N. J. White at the University of Glasgow; a Canadian fellowship to P. J. Young at the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory of the Royal Institution; two Netherlands fellowships to Mr Yoe Han Thoeng at Royal Holloway College, University of London, and Dr J. F. M. Aarts at University College London, respectively; a New Zealand fellowship to Mr Charles R. Clark at the University of Stirling; a Spanish fellowship to Dr R. M. Utrilla at the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory of the Royal Institution. The trustees have renewed the fellowships of Dr F. M. Benoit, Dr P. Chamberlain, Mr B. L. Dickson, Dr S. Uemura and Dr L. V. Woodcock for 1972-73.