

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

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International Catalogue of Scientific Literature.

THE Conjoint Board of Scientific Societies, some time last year, appointed—by what mandate is not clear—an International Catalogue Sub-Committee “to obtain information regarding the extent of the use made by scientific men of the present International Catalogue of Scientific Literature, and to obtain recommendations for possible improvement.” The sub-committee consisted of Dr. Chalmers Mitchell, Mr. C. V. Boys, and Mr. E. B. Knobel, in addition to the official members. The sub-committee appears to have gone outside the terms of reference and to have reported “that it was advisable to consider suggestions for an alternative scheme.” On February 25, the secretary of the sub-committee sent out a circular letter to certain scientific and technical societies, from which I reproduce the three opening paragraphs:—

“A sub-committee of the Conjoint Board of Scientific Societies has been for some time engaged in considering the future of the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature.

“As the outcome of several meetings the sub-committee is prepared to recommend that all papers and books dealing with both pure and applied science should be catalogued by authors and subjects, and that it is more practicable for such a catalogue to be prepared by a single country than by an international organisation.

“In order to bring this about, the sub-committee is considering a plan for the establishment of a central institution in London which shall assemble all the material required to be catalogued, and shall prepare from it cards showing (1) author; (2) title; (3) date and full references; (4) branch of science.”

It will be noted that the committee has quietly put the International Catalogue and its organisation aside, and has acted as if the former were a negligible quantity and the catalogue defunct!

The history of the International Catalogue is briefly as follows. In 1893 the Royal Society was memorialised to take into consideration the preparation of complete author and subject catalogues, by international co-operation, in continuation of the society's Catalogue of Scientific Papers, which the society did not propose to continue beyond the century. The proposal being viewed with favour, the Royal Society solicited the opinion of scientific workers all over the world. There was practically but one reply—that such catalogues were essential, and almost universal agreement that the only way of carrying the work into execution was by international co-operation. Representative committees were appointed, and after two years of very hard work a scheme was prepared which was forwarded abroad, together with the invitation to attend the first international conference on the subject. This was held in July, 1896. Two subsequent international conferences were held in London in October, 1898, and June, 1900. All three were highly representative. Ultimately it was decided, at the third conference, to establish the catalogue as an international enterprise. Work was begun in 1901, and has been continued up to the present time. The organisation has grown steadily in weight and efficiency, and at the beginning of the war there were thirty-four

regional bureaux in operation. The harmony which has prevailed throughout among the nations is one of the most remarkable features of the enterprise: notwithstanding the complexity of the work, there has not been the slightest friction. I believe no other international enterprise of like magnitude has been called into existence or worked more smoothly.

There is no doubt that the original establishment of the organisation was effected almost solely owing to the prestige of the Royal Society. The society has always been the responsible publishing agent, and is therefore financially liable.

The one chief difficulty in the way, which has retarded the work, has been the lack of working capital, owing to the fact that most Governments will only pay for the volumes after delivery. This has been met in part by a rather heavy loan from the Royal Society, on which interest has to be paid. The late Dr. Mond was one of the most ardent supporters of the catalogue and a convinced believer in international co-operation as the only effective means of producing a satisfactory result; he bequeathed a large sum to the Royal Society. I know that one of the chief objects he had in mind was to enable the society, when the bequest became available, to release the international enterprise from its indebtedness, and generally to promote the undertaking.

As war went on, it became necessary for the society to evaluate its responsibilities towards the catalogue. It was decided that the society could not guarantee the publication of the catalogue beyond the fourteenth issue. An issue consists of seventeen volumes, each dealing with a separate science. The fourteenth issue is now being published, and it is noteworthy that special contributions in aid of publication have been made by the Carnegie Foundation of New York, by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, and by certain private donors.

The Royal Society has also undertaken the direct control of the enterprise during the period of the war. Early last year it was intimated to workers abroad that the future of the catalogue must be left for the decision of an international council to be called as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace.

Why the Conjoint Board has intervened is not clear. It certainly has no right to give the catalogue its quietus. That it should have taken the action it has *without ever consulting the international organisation* passes belief. I attended the meeting of the board on Wednesday last, and protested most strongly against the discourtesy the sub-committee has displayed towards our Allies and the neutral countries concerned in the enterprise.

It is unnecessary to dwell on the special need at the present time of maintaining and cementing relationships that have been so happily established, and to comment further on the unhappy policy adumbrated by the sub-committee.

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Mercury's Perihelion Progress.

IF Mercury sweeps up solar matter in its course round the sun—such matter as yields the Zodiacal light, for example—there will be no effect on its transverse or centripetal acceleration, but it will experience tangential retardation. This, if uniform, so that $m = a + b\theta$, would give a spiral character to the orbit; but if the sweeping up were periodic, with the planet's