

Letters to the Editor.

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Museums and the State.

I HAVE read with deep interest the leading article entitled "The State and the National Museums" which appeared in NATURE of March 11. As a zoologist my interest is chiefly centred in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, and I most heartily agree with the statement that "the development of the Natural History Museum has been grievously hampered by the persistent attempt made to fit it to a system devised . . . especially for the great library [at Bloomsbury], which has, in fact, always tended to overshadow the rest of the museum."

Historically, as you point out, the museum at South Kensington is the offspring of the mother institution at Bloomsbury, but the daughter is now fully grown up, and should be completely free from parental control. It seems quite anomalous that a man chosen for his knowledge of antiquities and literature should be the supreme head over the greatest collections of animals and plants which exist anywhere in the world.

Few Englishmen have any adequate idea of the value of the asset represented by these collections. Most of them, like Lord Sudeley, whom you quote, regard the museum merely as an instrument of popular education. But this is only one of its lesser functions. Its main value lies in the fact that it is the repository of type-specimens of the majority of the determined species of animals and plants. In these days of the energetic development of newer lines of research in zoology, it must never be forgotten that systematic zoology is the basal science, the pre-requisite for successful advance in any other branch of the subject.

Just as it is necessary that standard measures of length, weight, etc., should be stored in some central repository, so it is necessary that there should be a central institution in which every biologist should be able to determine accurately the species with which he is working. The agriculturists of Mauritius are bothered by an insect pest which they regard as identical with one of the common insects of the island. Measures are taken for its extermination, and these prove unsuccessful. It is then discovered, on reference of the matter to South Kensington, that the pest is a foreign one accidentally imported from the West Indies! Examples of this kind could be multiplied indefinitely, but one more may suffice. The fishery authorities of South Africa desired to introduce the herring into their coastal waters, but the experts at South Kensington were able to point out that, although different species of herring exist in various parts of the world, in both northern and southern hemispheres and east and west, yet all these species are confined within the limits prescribed by two isotherms of annual temperatures, and that South Africa lies outside these limits; so that if herring were liberated near its coast, they would, if they survived, at once swim southward into cooler waters.

The supreme government of the two museums at Bloomsbury and South Kensington is vested in three principal trustees, viz. the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Speaker of the House of Commons, not one of whom has any necessary connection with or knowledge of science.

The scantiness of this knowledge may, indeed, be gauged by the scornful remarks made by the Speaker during the war in reference to the alleged purely

academic interest of studies on Microlepidoptera at the very time that the War Office was imploring the aid of specialists in this department in fighting a pest which was destroying its stores of biscuits.

The article in NATURE advocates placing the museum under the control of a Government Department—"Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes." It seems to me that the ideal of the present Government, viz. a small committee of broad-minded men, is the correct one; only the *personnel* requires to be changed.

It has been cynically observed that the constitution of the present committee was chosen at a time when the Archbishop, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Speaker were the three men in England least likely to be bribed. If for them were substituted the presidents of the Royal Society, of the Zoological Society, and of the Geological Society, the control of the museum would be in the hands of a committee of scientific eminence, and one peculiarly susceptible to the pressure of scientific opinion.

In view of the unique importance of the collections, it is surely essential to have a distinguished man of science presiding over each division of the collection, and for the services of such a man the museum ought to be in a position to pay generously. In the past the museum has been far better served than it deserved to be; it has, in fact, exploited the scientific enthusiasm of young men. In the long run, however, low pay will evoke inferior service. As the present holders of positions in the museum die or resign, clever men will be reluctant to step into their places if to do so means to embrace a life of poverty. A governing body such as I suggest would be in a far better position to estimate the real value of the services of these experts than one which is too much inclined to regard them as a set of obscure academic recluses.

E. W. MACBRIDE.

Royal College of Science, Zoological
Department, South Kensington,
London, S.W., March 12.

THE leading article in NATURE of March 11 on "The State and the National Museums" directs attention to a reform the need for which has been increasingly felt by those especially interested in our great national museums. Your summary of their haphazard history explains why their relation to the Government is out of date; why between them there is an overlap which, despite the advantage of competition, causes waste and inconvenience and is a hindrance to efficiency; and why our Museum of Natural Science is administered by a board of trustees planned—so far as it was planned and has not been a fortuitous aggregate of distinguished men—in reference to the library and departments at Bloomsbury. The titles of the museums are a product of this erratic growth and misleading to the public; the Natural History Museum is actually the British Museum of Natural Science, since, according to recent usage (*cf. e.g. Webster's Dictionary*), natural history is restricted to zoology, or perhaps to biology, while the adjacent museum is the British Museum of Physical Science.

Dissatisfaction with our museum administrative system has been clearly growing for years, but there has been no particular opportunity to secure reform or to organise a sufficient body of opinion to convince the Government of its need. Now, however, the establishment of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research has provided an organisation to which the management of the scientific museums might be appropriately entrusted.

The suggestion, however, to extend that Department so as to include all learning and research requires cautious consideration, since it would throw on that