

Supplement to NATURE

No. 2897



The Centenary of Huxley.

THE centenary of the birth of Thomas Henry Huxley on May 4, 1825, is an event which may very appropriately be marked in a special way in NATURE. The first issue of this journal, in November 1869, opened with a translation by Huxley of Goethe's rhapsody "Die Natur"—an introduction which compelled thought and the full meaning of which was, therefore, not widely understood. He referred to this in an article entitled "Past and Present" contributed to the issue of November 11, 1894, and suggested that if such a prose poem was not intelligible to many readers it was because "At that time, it was rare for even the most deservedly eminent of the workers in science to look much beyond the limits of the speciality to which they were devoted, rarer still to meet with any one who had calmly and clearly thought out the consequences of the application, in all the regions into which the intellect can penetrate, of that scientific organon, the power and fruitfulness of which, within their particular departments, were so obvious." With the exception of a critical review in the *Nineteenth Century* of Lord Balfour's "Foundations of Belief," the article was the last pronouncement of his faith in biological evolution and the idea of human progress through the use of scientific knowledge. A few months later, on June 29, 1895, he passed into the stillness of death.

So long ago as 1874 Huxley was included among our "Scientific Worthies," and Dr. Ernst Haeckel then gave an appreciative account of his biological work. Some of the aspects of this work are displayed in the articles with which leading authorities in particular fields have favoured us for this commemorative issue of NATURE; and most of our volumes afford further evidence of its value. The range of his papers extended literally from Medusæ to man, and at both these limits his observations and interpretations endure as permanent points of reference. He was only twenty-five years of age when he returned from his voyage as assistant surgeon and naturalist on the surveying ship *Rattlesnake*, yet his work was of such merit that he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in the following year, and at twenty-seven was a Royal medallist, member of the Council of the Society, and in the very front of British scientific men. The hundred or so papers recorded in the Royal Society Catalogue, and the four volumes of his collected scientific memoirs, are a sufficient

monument of his original contributions to science, without reference to his essays, addresses, and other publications.

However great the significance of this work, Huxley's influence extended far beyond the field in which it was understood. In the mind of the public he takes his place among great thinkers not because of his scientific papers but because of his advocacy of the use of scientific methods and results. "There are," he said, "two things I really care about—one is the progress of scientific thought, and the other is the bettering of the condition of the masses of the people by bettering them in the way of lifting themselves out of the misery which has hitherto been the lot of the majority of them." It is not often that a scientific leader associates himself so closely with problems of citizenship and civilised society; and there are some who think that the time devoted by Huxley to mankind might have been given more profitably to science. If he had done so, the list of his original papers would have been extended, but public recognition of scientific truth would have been delayed for a generation. For the intellectual freedom and social position which we possess to-day, we have to thank Huxley's public work, and not his contributions to the publications of learned societies.

Just as light is invisible until it comes in contact with matter, so scientific discovery has to touch human life before the majority of people can see it. Huxley made science of human interest whether he was describing a piece of chalk or applying scientific methods to considerations of social advance or religious doctrine; and it is on this account that his memory is cherished wherever men believe in progressive knowledge and the making of their destiny through it. There is no one to-day upon whom his mantle may be said to have fallen, yet the need of declaring his message is as great as ever it was. What was once a gospel to be proclaimed from the housetops has become almost an esoteric cult, and its disciples leave the throbbing world outside their temples to look after itself. There is plenty of didactic science, but little of the vital spirit of scientific truth or of the guidance which scientific methods may afford the community. The best tribute that could be paid to Huxley upon this occasion of his centenary would be to follow him along the road he trod so fearlessly with his face always towards the light.

U