

News and Views

Bicentenary of David Rittenhouse

ON April 8 occurs the bicentenary of the birth of David Rittenhouse, the American astronomer, who has been described as "a true product of American genius and toil, and the highest embodiment of the pioneer spirit in science during the colonial period". The eldest son and the third child in the family of a farmer of Norriton, about twenty miles from Philadelphia, as a boy he began work on the land, but the gift of some tools and mathematical books stimulated his interest in mechanics and science. While still a youth he set up as a clockmaker, and at twenty was studying Newton's "Principia". Though in after years he devoted much time to mathematics and physics, his first important work was in astronomy. He made the first transit instrument and the first orrery constructed in America, in 1768 began the erection of an observatory at Norriton, and the following year took a prominent part in observing the transit of Venus. One of the earliest members of the American Philosophical Society, he contributed nineteen papers to its *Transactions*, in 1775 he delivered an oration on the history of astronomy, and, on Franklin's death in 1790, was chosen president. From 1777 until 1789 he was treasurer of the State of Pennsylvania, and from 1792 until 1795 master of the Mint of the United States. He received honorary degrees from Harvard, Princeton, and Pennsylvania Colleges, and in 1795 was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. His death took place in Philadelphia on June 26, 1796, and he was buried in the Presbyterian churchyard in that city.

Dr. N. E. Brown

THE University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, has conferred the honorary degree of D.Sc. on Mr. N. E. Brown, formerly assistant in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in recognition of his work on the South African flora. At the request of the Moss professor of botany in the University, and to mark the conferment of the degree, Sir Arthur Hill formally presented Dr. Brown to his old colleagues in the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, on March 19. In the course of a short address, Sir Arthur said: "Dr. Brown was on our staff for forty-one years, from 1873 until 1914. He was elected an associate of the Linnean Society in 1879, and in 1921 he received the Senior Captain Scott Medal for scientific research in South Africa from the South African Biological Society. I need not detail his many contributions to South African botany, as they are so well known to all botanists, but it is interesting to record that the following eminent South African botanists warmly supported the proposal that Dr. Brown should be honoured by South Africa: Gen. the Right. Hon. J. C. Smuts, Dr. I. B. Pole Evans, Prof. J. W. Bews, Prof. R. S. Adamson, Prof. R. H. Compton, and Dr. John Muir."

Taxation of Imported Books in Australia

AS recorded in NATURE of Feb. 20, p. 271, a deputation representative of national libraries, universities, professional institutions in Australia and the Council

for Scientific and Industrial Research waited on the new Prime Minister, Mr. Lyons, early in February and pleaded for remission of the emergency taxation on imported books imposed by the late Labour Government. The revenue from this source in the current financial year ending on June 30 is estimated at about £75,000 from primage tax and £55,000 from sales tax. It was urged that the continuation of these taxes would result in a far greater loss in efficiency to the whole community than a loss of £130,000 would represent to the Government. Book prices are now so high that students are being forced to cease purchasing technical works and to rely more on libraries; but, unfortunately, the libraries are failing them. That in Sydney, for example, was obliged recently to cease its subscriptions to no less than 100 journals, and in the near future it is feared that a further 150 will have to be sacrificed. Other striking examples of the unhappy results of this taxation were quoted. Mr. Lyons, in reply, agreed with all the main contentions of the deputation, and offered slight relief in cases of exchange publications and certain historical materials for libraries. For the rest, he frankly pointed to the disquieting financial position of the Commonwealth and asserted that attainment of budgetary equilibrium is the only hope for universities, scientific societies, and the whole country. The book tax revenue must remain for the present. Sheer necessity is driving the Government to this unfortunate device, and to others also, which admittedly and inevitably will to some extent undermine the efficiency of the nation. Such a reply, while quite understandable, leaves a serious problem to be faced by educational and scientific organisations in Australia.

New Emulsion Sensitive to the Infra-red

FOR some time past, photographic materials sensitive to radiation between 7000 Å. and 9000 Å. have been available. The sensitivity of these plates has, however, not been high. The Ilford Company has now produced a plate which possesses a comparatively high sensitivity for this region of the spectrum. With a subject illuminated by two 1500-watt gas-filled lamps at a distance of about eight feet and screened by filters cutting off radiation of shorter wave-length than 7000 Å., the exposure is about half a second with the lens working at *f.* 4. Such photographs, taken in the dark, serve as an excellent demonstration of the existence of invisible radiation; the public, already accustomed to the idea of ultra-violet rays, thus becomes familiar with the infra-red. The practical use of these plates is, however, considerably greater than that of demonstrating the actinic power of the infra-red: in astronomical and geographical recording, their power to respond to the unscattered radiation coming through mist and haze from very distant objects makes them particularly valuable.

The Sherman Hoyt Cactus House, Kew Gardens

THE outstanding feature of the Royal Horticultural Society's Show at Chelsea in May 1929 was the