

News and Views

"Gmelins Handbuch der anorganischen Chemie"

PROF. RICHARD J. MEYER, having reached his seventieth year, has recently resigned his position as editor-in-chief of the eighth edition of "Gmelins Handbuch der anorganischen Chemie". His name as a research worker in the field of the rare earths, as an authority on the chemistry of scandium, and as a member of the International Commission on Atomic Weights is well enough known, but there can be no doubt that for many years to come his name will be especially honoured in connexion with the editorship of the new "Gmelin". This handbook, in its seven previous editions, had been valued by generations of chemists as a most comprehensive reference book on inorganic chemistry, but little was done to help the reader to winnow the chaff from the wheat. When, in 1921, the German Chemical Society took over the sponsorship of the eighth edition and entrusted it to the care of Prof. Meyer, it was decided to introduce, without sacrificing the completeness of the references, not only the necessary criticism, but also to give due prominence to the role which physico-chemical considerations now play in questions of inorganic chemistry. Since the last edition, in 1906, the number of publications to be considered has enormously increased; and as the German Chemical Society wished the term 'inorganic chemistry' to be understood in its widest sense, thus including material valuable also for the neighbouring sciences of metallurgy, mineralogy, geology and physics, it was obvious that practically a new work would have to be written, on such an ambitious scale that publication would only be possible if substantial financial assistance were forthcoming from the chemical industry in Germany.

THIS is not the place to describe what has so far been achieved. More than forty parts—dealing with some twenty-five elements—are already printed, providing authoritative and clearly arranged information on the topics discussed. It is safe to say that there exists no other comparable work on inorganic chemistry in any language. This, of course, does not detract from other publications which may have the combined virtues of being completed, shorter and cheaper; but in the critical quality of the work, undertakings on a smaller basis can scarcely hope to compete with the staff of forty chemists and fifteen technical helpers working under Prof. Meyer, in direct contact with various departments of the German Chemical Society. Prof. Meyer deserves the thanks of chemists of all countries for having organised and so successfully started the volumes, which are destined to be the 'Beilstein' of inorganic chemistry. One of his oldest co-workers, Dr. E. Pietsch, has now been asked to take his place as chief editor, and it is hoped that in eight years the monumental work will be completed.

British Patent Law: Defects and Remedies

DR. HERBERT LEVINSTEIN has done a service to chemical industry by directing attention, in an address on "The Grant of Trading Monopolies" delivered on March 6 to the Institution of Chemical Engineers, to the failure of our patent system to follow the political and industrial changes that took place after the passing of the Statute of Monopolies in 1623. The original ideal of the avoidance both of "idleness . . . and the drawing out of our treasures for foreign manufacture" contemplated the establishment of a new home industry as a corollary to every grant. Yet in 1932, while less than 17,000 patents in all were sealed, some 13,000 applications were made by foreigners who are not compelled by law to work their patented inventions in Great Britain. It is Dr. Levinstein's opinion that this is a defect now of relatively minor importance, since import duties have caused the foreign manufacturer to establish works in Great Britain. He suggests that a further defect is to be found in the fact that patent grants are esteemed so lightly that more than half are abandoned when a renewal fee of £5 becomes payable, and less than 4 per cent are maintained for the full period. Patent litigation he also finds too costly because it is too lengthy, and reminds us that an important chemical action recently occupied the courts for some 74 days and cost well over £100,000!

THE defects which Dr. Levinstein attributes to our patent system call, in his opinion, for reforms which are in substance the same as those suggested by the "Business of the Courts Committee", the third and last report of which was recently issued. Dr. Levinstein deprecates any curtailment of the right of appeal but submits that much time and money would be saved if, prior to trial, both parties were called on to prepare and to exchange documents setting out their case and the gist of the expert evidence they proposed to produce. He insists that the grant of patents should be enormously curtailed and, to this end, would empower the Comptroller of the Patent Office to deal with questions of subject matter, common knowledge and utility. This reform is more likely to be acceptable than his arguments in support of it, as he implies that the Comptroller should save the inexperienced applicant from himself, and inexperience can exist in a firm that has taken out 430 patents. He would like to see the Comptroller empowered to issue under suitable conditions a qualified "certificate of validity", and many in industry would be glad to get some sort of official guarantee of the validity of their grant, having in view Dr. Levinstein's statement that in 22 patent actions fought in the years 1934 and 1935, 13 patents were held invalid. Dr. Levinstein's last suggestions are non-contentious. He would like to see every chemical engineer with a sound working knowledge of patents and patent principles.