

News and Views

The Race Problem

THE analysis of factors contributing to popular judgment in discriminating between races, which appears in another column of this issue of NATURE (see p. 635), agreeing substantially with the views expressed by Prof. Julian Huxley in his Friday Evening discourse before the Royal Institution on March 27 (see NATURE, April 4, p. 570), also lends support to his contention that a serious effort should be made to put an end to the propagandist exploitation of pseudo-scientific inference, depending upon the use of the term 'race', in political and nationalist activities. It is problematic, however, whether any pronouncement following on an international inquiry, which Prof. Huxley suggests as a possible remedy, would be effective, whatever the course adopted to secure that it should be widely known and generally accepted. Apart from practical difficulties, which are considerable, but of course not insuperable, clearly such a pronouncement, if it is to go beyond the fact, which is patent, that scientific terminology is being abused, must be based upon some agreement as to the meaning of the term, of which it attempts to regulate the use. It is open to question whether such agreement could be attained at present among representative students of man—students of man's structure, descent, heredity, varieties and distribution—even without entering upon the thorny problems of racial psychology and culture. If, however, the major objective of such an inquiry were the purely scientific aim of clarifying current ideas on race among anthropologists, even though it ended indecisively, or, as is not impossible, in a deadlock—*Germania contra mundum*,—it would clear the way, at present blocked, for rapid progress in racial studies. It might even be found desirable that a term of coinage now so debased should be eliminated entirely from scientific use. In the meantime, it is a function of science to expose ruthlessly on every occasion loose thinking and an inexact terminology; and perhaps, in this way, the pitfalls of 'race' can best be brought home to the man in the street.

Fire-Walking

BULLETIN II of the University of London Council for Psychical Investigation consists of a report on two experimental fire-walks in which the preparation and performance were submitted to careful observation. Of the many accounts of fire-walking in different countries, this is the first to give a detailed description of the preparation of the fire, the internal and surface temperatures, and the times of contact of the skin with the embers. For the first time, therefore, an estimate of the magnitude of the performance can be made: it does not consist of wandering amongst flames with a look of exaltation, but of four rapid steps on charcoal at 430° C. with an average time of contact of half a second per step. Nevertheless,

amateurs are not able to equal this, and the two who tried to imitate Kuda Bux developed blisters after only two steps. In attempting to account for the greater immunity from burning of Kuda Bux, chemical treatment need not be considered, since very careful tests were made to exclude this possibility.

Two hypotheses require examination, apart from obvious factors such as skill in the manner of walking, knowing the correct stage during the combustion of the fire at which the ash (which might adhere to the feet) must be raked, and, after a suitable interval, the attempt made. First, the increased immunity may be due to practice, for it is well-known that constant handling of hot materials produces an insensibility to heat which is accompanied by an absence of reddening and blistering although the skin may not appear in any way abnormal. Secondly, it is possible that a certain induced mental state is required, for it has been observed that under hypnosis, for example, very unusual bodily reactions may occur. This would account for the elaborate ritualistic preparation adopted in many countries and for Kuda Bux's assertion that 'faith' was necessary. Kuda Bux's own preparation appeared to consist merely in reciting a few lines from the Koran. One thing is certain: if the fire-walk is performed regularly the first hypothesis cannot be excluded. Whether or not the second hypothesis must be made in addition is a question that requires further research. The bulletin contains an extensive bibliography and nineteen plates which illustrate clearly the conditions under which the experiments took place.

Prices for Electric Supply

THE paper read by Prof. Miles Walker to the Institution of Electrical Engineers on April 2, discussing the prices for electric supply in Great Britain, will interest all who try to see the reasons for the great disparities in the prices charged. It would naturally be thought that low prices would only be found where distribution costs per unit are low. But this is not the case, for they are found also in residential areas where higher prices might reasonably be expected. As an example, Prof. Walker quoted the Oxford supply, where a company had been in existence for about forty years; when, in 1931, the supply was taken over by the municipal authorities, drastic reductions were made in the cost of supply. The result has been that the total net income earned is now a greater percentage of the total capital involved than when the prices were high in 1931. In other words, if the company had had the courage to reduce the prices from almost the highest in the country to almost the lowest for that kind of district, it would have been able—provided it managed as well as the corporation—to pay a slightly larger dividend. In Prof. Walker's opinion, the main