

## Science News a Century Ago

### The Snake Nut Tree of Guiana

At a meeting of the Linnean Society held on June 6, 1837, two communications were read from Robert Hermann Schomburgk (1804–65), who in 1831–35 explored British Guiana on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society. The first of these dealt with several new species of Orchidæ found in Guiana, and the second with the snake nut tree. The nut, he said, was the size of a walnut, and when the kernel was opened, and the membrane removed, there was an appearance of a snake lying with its body coiled up, the head, eyes and mouth being very distinct. From this appearance, by some singular analogy, it was employed as a remedy for the bites of snakes, for which it enjoyed a considerable reputation. The colonists were unacquainted with the mode of its growth as they only found it on the banks of brooks and rivulets after floods, but imagined that it grew on a creeper by the side, which explained the reason that it was found on the low islands and in these situations. Having been informed of the whereabouts of the tree, Schomburgk visited it, but it was not sufficiently far advanced for him to recognize the class and order to which it belonged. The tree was of the first magnitude, its branches dividing at a height of 40–50 feet. It contained nothing remarkable except the fruit, which was not known to possess any medicinal properties.

Schomburgk, who was born and educated in Germany, was Government Commissioner for surveying and making boundaries in British Guiana in 1841–43, establishing the 'Schomburgk line'. In 1844 he was knighted.

### Vyse's Exploration of the Egyptian Pyramids

IN 1835–37, Colonel (afterwards Major-General) Richard William Howard Vyse (1784–1853) explored the pyramids of Egypt, and some of his discoveries were described in letters read to the Royal Society of Literature on June 8, 1837. The principal results of his exertions were the discovery of three large chambers in the Great Pyramid and the excavation of a remarkable mummy pit in its vicinity. The first of the newly opened chambers was 38 ft. 6 in. from east to west and 17 ft. 1 in. from north to south. This had been named the Wellington Chamber by Colonel Vyse, and he had had that illustrious name inscribed on its northern walls. The second chamber he had named after Nelson, and the third after Lady Arbuthnot, who was present at its discovery. The three chambers were above one another, and it was supposed their object was to lessen the superincumbent weight above the King's Chamber. A great quantity of drawings had been sent home to be engraved, including accurate sections of all the pyramids, and facsimiles of hieroglyphics in the newly discovered chambers.

### The Royal Astronomical Society

THE last meeting of the session of the Royal Astronomical Society was held on June 9, 1837, when several papers were read. Baily, the president, who was in the chair, communicated a paper on the non-existence of the star called 42 Virginis, the insertion of which into the British Catalogue of Flamsteed he attributed to an error in computation. Baron Zach had given, in his zodiacal catalogue, a

star which he called 42 Virginis, which, however, did not agree with the position given by Flamsteed, but what was very singular, this star also was not then found in the heavens.

Another paper was by Main, principal assistant at the Royal Observatory, on the position of the node, and the inclination of Venus. It appeared that Encke had altered the place of the node from the observations of the transits of 1761 and 1769, and this was found not to correspond with the best modern observations. Main therefore had undertaken the arduous task of determining these positions anew from observations made by Airy at Cambridge.

### Premiums offered by the Zoological Society

IN the *Athenæum* of June 10, 1837, it was stated that the Council of the Zoological Society had determined to offer annual medals, or equivalent sums of money, by way of premiums for subjects connected with zoology. The premiums for 1837 were to be awarded for the following: (1) For importing either a pair of musk oxen, or a specimen of the hippopotamus, male or female; or a pair of the *Ornithorhynchus paradoxus*; (2) to the breeder of the greatest number of curassows in the year 1837; (3) to the importer of a male and female Indian pheasant, of a species not already alive in Great Britain; (4) to the breeder of the best specimens of Indian fowls in the year 1837; (5) to the breeder of the most rare or most interesting foreign quadruped in the year 1837; (6) for the best essay on the care and treatment of the species of the genus *Felis* in confinement.

## University Events

ABERDEEN.—A capital sum has been given anonymously to the University for the foundation of a part-time lectureship on psychopathology. It is a condition of the gift that the lecturer shall not be an alienist and that the clinical work should be done at the Royal Infirmary. £500 has also been received from Lord Glanely for research in rheumatism.

CAMBRIDGE.—Dr. H. Hamshaw Thomas has been appointed reader in plant morphology; Dr. W. B. Lewis, of Gonville and Caius College, University lecturer in physics; Dr. H. Carmichael, of St. John's College, E. S. Shire, of King's College, University demonstrators in physics; and Dr. W. C. Price (Wales and Johns Hopkins), and Dr. E. A. Moelwyn-Hughes, of Corpus Christi College, University demonstrators in chemistry.

G. L. Clark, of Fitzwilliam House, has been elected to the Sheepshanks Exhibition for 1937.

It is proposed that a second assistant directorship of research in colloid science be established, and that the General Board be authorized to appoint in the first instance to this post Dr. J. H. Schulman.

The following have been approved for the degree of Sc.D.: B. H. C. Matthews, of King's College; R. S. Morrell, of Gonville and Caius College; G. C. Steward, of Gonville and Caius College; and L. R. Cox, of Queens' College.

LONDON.—The University enters upon its second centennium (the completion of its first hundred years was celebrated last July) with a student enrolment