

SCIENCE NEWS A CENTURY AGO

Baron de Prony, 1755-1839

ON July 29, 1839, the distinguished French mathematician and engineer, Gaspard-Claire-Francois-Marie-Riche, Baron de Prony, died at Asnières, near Paris, at eighty-four years of age. For many years he had been the senior member of the Corps des Ponts et Chaussées and was famous both as a writer and a constructor. Born near Lyons on July 11, 1755, he had been trained under Perronet, "the Telford of France", at the École des Ponts et Chaussées, and afterwards became his assistant. With Perronet, too, he visited England. During the Revolutionary era, Prony formed one of the commission entrusted with the reformation of the French weights and measures and with the great survey of France. In connexion with this he organized and trained a body of computers for forming the logarithmic tables required, the result being seventeen large volumes of tables, afterwards deposited in the Paris Observatory. In 1798 he was raised to the rank of inspector-general in his corps and soon afterwards succeeded Chezy as director of his old school.

Though he declined to join the group of scientific men who accompanied Napoleon on his expedition to Egypt, Prony was employed by Napoleon on many considerable works in Italy, and with Count Fossombroni was entrusted with the drainage and improvement of the Pontine Marshes. His principal literary work was his "Nouvelle architecture hydraulique" published in 1790-96. He was one of the first professors of the famous École Polytechnique and one of the first members of the Institut de France. In 1817 he was made a member of the Bureau des Longitudes, in 1818 the Royal Society elected him a foreign member, in 1827 he was made a baron and seven years later a peer of France.

Dumont d'Urville's Voyage in the *Astrolabe*

ON July 30, 1839, Captain Dumont d'Urville wrote from the *Astrolabe*, then at the island of Mindanao: "Our navigation since the 2nd of July, the day of our departure from Singapore, has been fertile in results. We have touched at Sambas, in the island of Borneo, closely reconnoitred the islands of Natunas, Balambangan, Banguay, and the northern portion of Borneo. Finally we have passed four days in the road of Sooloo. The people of these several places have acquired from our communications clearer notions in relation to the flag and power of France: they desire much to see the rest of our ships. I am about to spend a week at Samboangan. I shall depart there on the 6th of August, and reckon on reaching Port Jackson about the middle of December."

Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge

ON August 2, 1839, this Society sent out a letter from its headquarters, 59 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, signed by Lord Brougham, which said: "It is the wish of the Committee of the Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, to establish a correspondence among the various Mechanics' Institutions in England, and between them and this Society, so that neighbouring institutions, by dividing the travelling expenses of lecturers among them, may diminish the cost of each course of lectures; that one set of apparatus, or collection of models or specimens of natural history, or even one set of books, may serve for many institutions; and that local collections and

duplicates from libraries and museums, may be interchanged all over the country".

By the issue of an annual report, correspondence and the interchange of suggestions, it was hoped to make the experience of one institution serve as a guide to others, and by collecting information to be able to issue an annual summary on the progress of adult education in Great Britain.

To further these objects, the Society called a meeting of representatives of institutions in London and neighbourhood which was attended by about forty, when a committee of delegates was appointed.

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge existed from 1827 until 1846. It published a series of cheap books on science, history and literature, and also the *Penny Cyclopaedia*.

UNIVERSITY EVENTS

EDINBURGH.—At the graduation ceremonial on July 19 the honorary degree of doctor of laws was conferred on Dr. F. H. A. Marshall, fellow and dean of Christ's College, Cambridge, and reader in agricultural physiology in the University of Cambridge. On the previous day, Dr. Marshall declared open in the Edinburgh University Settlement the Wilkie Memorial Library, which has been established in recognition of the great interest which the late Sir David Wilkie and Lady Wilkie took in the work of Settlement.

LEEDS.—Dr. E. C. Stoner, reader in physics, has been elected to the recently instituted chair in theoretical physics.

The following appointments have also been made: Dr. N. H. Chamberlain to be lecturer in textile chemistry; Arthur Johnson to be assistant lecturer in weaving mechanism; Dr. C. S. Whewell to be assistant lecturer in finishing and research assistant in the Textile Department; J. W. Roderick and W. A. Linning to be lecturers in engineering; J. F. Gaunt to be research assistant in dyeing; Dr. J. Stubbs to be temporary research assistant (for bracken investigation) in the Agricultural Department.

Prof. F. A. E. Crew, director of the Institute of Animal Genetics, Edinburgh, has been invited to deliver the Clive Behrens Lectures in the Agricultural Department during the two years 1939-1941.

LONDON.—W. G. Barnard has been appointed, as from October 1, 1939, to the University chair of pathology tenable at St. Thomas's Hospital Medical School. Since 1931 he has been consultant histologist to the London County Council and pathologist-in-charge of the London County Council Central Histological Laboratory, Archway Hospital.

The title of reader in medicine in the University has been conferred on Dr. E. F. Scowen in respect of the post held by him at St. Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College.

The degree of D.Sc. have been conferred on the following: Miss Daphne Atkins (Bedford College), Miss M. C. Brough (University College), Dr. W. H. Linnell, University reader at the College of the Pharmaceutical Society, and J. A. B. Smith (Imperial College of Science and Technology).

R. M. Calder has been re-appointed to the Graham scholarship in pathology for a further period of one year from November 1, 1939.