

# NATURE

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## THE HOUSING OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES

AT a time when plans of reconstruction are being everywhere projected, it was fitting that Sir Henry Dale, in his presidential address to the Royal Society (see NATURE, December 4, p. 649), should put in a claim for more adequate and dignified accommodation for science. Men of science do not require to be told how meanly housed are many of the scientific societies in Great Britain; they can be forgiven a feeling of envy towards their colleagues in other lands where science has been made to enjoy an honoured place in the scheme of national life. It is pertinent to inquire why this should be. We believe that the real root of the matter is that false philosophy which refuses to regard science as a normal way of life in a modern community. To say this does not mean that we claim priority treatment for science; we demand no more than a recognition of the debt which any modern State owes to scientific endeavour.

That this debt is not admitted and honoured may be partly the fault of scientific men themselves. They have sometimes been too prone to seek refuge in a sort of splendid intellectual isolation; they have neglected—some would assert wilfully—the methods of advertisement which art and the drama, music and literature, have employed to stake their claims in the life of the modern State. Speaking a language which is not always understood by ordinary people, they have suffered from being misunderstood; and such a state of affairs is made the easier when the machinery of government and the organs of public opinion—the Press and radio—are guided by men who have too frequently been denied a scientific background to their education.

In general terms, Sir Henry Dale gave some indication of the debt which Great Britain owes to science in war. The Press at once seized upon his words, that to-day the United Nations are superior to their enemies in scientific achievement; the man-in-the-street, had he not read those words, would have been the first generously to recognize that science in war has given life and property a greater protection than was known when enemy bombers raided his towns and cities nightly. At some other time, no doubt, Sir Henry Dale will tell our people how much greater can be the achievements of science in peace, and particularly in those vital years which will follow victory, when great works of reconstruction will have to be carried out on a world-wide basis. Such a pronouncement will hearten all those who have faith in the future.

But the efforts of scientific men to assist in the fabrication of a better world merit a frank admission of the claim for better accommodation for the scientific societies. These societies were founded to enable men of science to meet together to discuss common problems, and the part which they have played in the advancement and dissemination of scientific knowledge is incalculable. The State recognized the importance of the societies in 1778 when it granted the Royal Society accommodation in Scmer-

set House; and Sir Joseph Banks, in his presidential address of 1780, boldly declared that the Society's new home was a "generous recognition by the sovereign of the services which science had rendered to the state". Later, the State admitted the claims of some of the younger societies for accommodation, and still remains in the status of their landlord. We can deplore the lost opportunities of the middle years of the last century, when for a moment it seemed as though London was to be ennobled by a great centre for science. That was one of the grand visions of the Prince Consort; and none was more eager to clothe it with reality than Sir Charles Barry, the architect. The latter's scheme, propounded in 1859, for the development of the Burlington House site, indicates how much London lost by its rejection by the Government of the day. Science lost too; but it is very doubtful whether even Barry's scheme, designed as it was in the grand manner, would have met present-day needs. No one then suspected that the Chemical Society would increase its membership from about 500 to 5,000: as Sir Henry Dale observed, no one then suspected even a future for physics! Increase in membership and better facilities for publication have resulted in an expansion of libraries which was unthought of in the days when the societies moved into Burlington House.

What is the solution? In the first place, the State must be made to appreciate that science has a right to adequate and dignified accommodation in the metropolis. We can but reiterate the words of Sir Henry Dale. "I do not think that we must stand by and allow the claims of science again to go by default. A fear of overstatement, a passion for critical accuracy which is part of the very spirit of science, may make us reluctant advocates. If necessary, however, we must be ready to remind all who may be concerned of the part which the British scientific effort has played in making it possible now to plan at all, with confidence, for our own civic and national reconstruction. But for science, we may remind them, the very different plans which our enemies were so recently making for our future might already be taking effect".

Sir Henry is right in thinking that the claim will, no doubt, be frankly acknowledged: it will certainly be by the ordinary man, but only when he is educated to know more about the nature of the claim. That this can be done has been abundantly proved in the U.S.S.R., where science has a real 'news value' in the Press and over the radio: it is an experiment which might properly engage the attention of scientific men in Great Britain. The scientific societies would not fail to benefit from it.

In the second place, any scheme for the rehousing of the scientific societies must leave room for expansion. The experience of the past has shown us that adequate accommodation to-day becomes inadequate accommodation to-morrow. No doubt a certain amount of rationalization can be effected, for example, in libraries and publication activities, thereby preserving a proper economy of space. But what is imperative is that the State shall immediately tackle this pressing problem. Again to

quote Sir Henry Dale: "I think that we have the further right to expect that the home of science, in this capital city, will have a dignity symbolizing its value to the nation and empire, and enabling us to hold up our heads in the company of other countries, whose scientific academies, not more famous than ours, have so long been housed more worthily, and with a more generous recognition of their due place in an enlightened people's scale of cultural values". These are words which ought to be pondered by those who are now engaged in framing a policy of replanning for London.

## THE BRITISH SCIENTIFIC INSTRUMENT INDUSTRY

ONE of the immediate results of the harnessing of the whole of the man-power of Great Britain to the war effort has been to engender an almost universal appreciation of the vital part played by scientific instruments in a nation's life. No longer is the scientific instrument an obscure device to be used only by the expert and to be understood only by the specialist. Rather, to the men and women of the factories and of the Fighting Services, it has become a familiar and essential tool, the use of which makes them masters of complicated mechanisms and processes and enables them to achieve, both in the workshop and in combat, a most satisfying degree of precision. The nation has, in fact, become instrument-minded, and this should hearten those who, by the written and the spoken word, have in recent times pleaded for a more vigorous application of science to our national life. For the scientific instrument is one of the main vehicles by means of which the fruits of science are made available to the ordinary citizen, and the general public has, as never before, first-hand evidence of the value of the application of science as it appears concretely embodied in the scientific instrument of daily war-time use.

The circumstances and conditions of the War should have compelled the nation to make the maximum use of its scientific knowledge and of its scientific personnel, and it is not surprising that a belief should have become general that they could be employed equally advantageously when the nation is confronted with its post-war problems even if the nature of these can only be conjectured. In consequence, reports have been prepared dealing with improvements in scientific education, with the provision of the right type of technical personnel for industry, with the necessity of increasing the scale of both academic and industrial research, and with many allied subjects. A point to be observed is that if the high hopes entertained of the adequate use of scientific knowledge in the future are to be realized, if research activities are to be markedly increased, if the scientific control of industrial processes is to be fully developed, and if scientific education is to be modified so as to provide an effective channel for the infiltration of scientific knowledge into the national life, an adequate supply of scientific instruments, suited to each and every purpose, must be available.