

# NATURE

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## IMPORTS OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL BOOKS

AS one of the measures deemed necessary for the reduction of British expenditure overseas, and particularly for the conservation of 'dollar' resources, an announcement from the Board of Trade early last autumn re-introduced the system of licensing imports of books and other literature. Certain classes of books were completely excluded, and others, including scientific and technical books, were admitted up to a limiting money value. During the War, the licensing had, of course, been in operation; but there was the additional need at that time for extreme economy in the use of shipping space, which made restrictions almost inevitable.

Now that import licensing has again been in operation for some months, it is time to take stock of the position. From the first it was obvious that the restrictions, although directed against foreign books generally, would affect chiefly the supply of American publications, for these formed the greater proportion of the literature imported into Great Britain, especially in the fields of science and technology. This made the position particularly serious, for there was a shortage of such literature due to the difficulties of the war years. During that period, potential writers of scientific and engineering text-books in Britain were mostly occupied in work which claimed their whole time and attention, and much of it was done under conditions of secrecy which are only now being relaxed. Further, stocks of standard books had steadily diminished, and lack of labour and of maintenance in the printing works of the country, as well as shortage of paper, prevented—and still prevents—publishers from replenishing them. Thus new works were few and far between, and older books were only available from time to time and often in small numbers, a circumstance which in itself has led to higher costs of production through the increased proportion of overhead costs chargeable to each volume. With the lifting of war-time restrictions, a steady flow of American books into Britain began; they were welcome, in that many war-time developments of science and industry thus became known for the first time outside the small numbers of those who had been directly concerned in them.

The general terms of the restrictions, so far as they affect scientific and technical publications, were stated in an article in *Nature* of October 4, p. 448. Publishers in Britain are granted licences to import foreign books in bulk up to the value of 100 per cent of their pre-war imports; in applying for licences, titles of individual books and country of origin must be quoted.

The position of the individual who wishes to purchase a foreign book is, however, not so widely known. Under the present regulations and so far as American scientific and technical literature is concerned, anyone may place an order for books, journals and periodicals with publishers or their agents in the United States, provided the book or journal is imported as a single copy through the post. This permits monthly parts of scientific journals to be

sent to individuals, libraries, etc., in Great Britain. Application for the necessary dollars for purchase money must be made to a bank, or for a money order at a post-office. The order for books, etc., can be sent directly to the United States by the purchaser, or on his behalf by a bookseller, provided the latter is willing to apply for the currency and to arrange for the book or journal to be sent by post directly to the address of the individual placing the order. Within the framework of the general policy of restricting imports of books, the licensing authorities are doing whatever they can to meet the needs of individual purchasers.

Hence the main difficulties at present met by the individual in Britain wishing to purchase American scientific and technical books or to subscribe for American learned periodicals are twofold: he has to make application for the necessary currency, and it is very unlikely that he will be able to examine a book before purchase. In any event, there is bound to be delay in supplying his need.

That an enormous reduction in British expenditure in the 'dollar' areas of the world is necessary will not be gainsaid. Books and periodicals have already made a contribution by the adoption of 'austerity' production methods, including poorer quality and thinner paper, smaller type, smaller margins, etc.; it is sufficient to turn back to a pre-war issue of *Nature* to realize at a glance some of the economies which have been made. The whole policy of restricting the flow of literature should be reconsidered in the light of world affairs.

From the long-term point of view, there never was a time when the free flow of information was so important for world peace and progress. In the turmoil following a great war, the interchange of literature can be a potent factor in promoting mutual understanding and tolerance; and it can prepare the way for the wider knowledge which can only come from the personal visits possible in more settled conditions. In this connexion, there is always the danger that a system of individual licences, although it may be devised solely with the view of controlling expenditure, may become in effect a form of censorship. Whatever the present intention, there seems little to prevent the over-zealous or the doctrinaire who may hold the reins of authority from discriminating against a particular book. This aspect relates particularly to historical and cultural literature, and its significance should not be overlooked at a time when rival political ideologies are threatening to divide the world more effectively than ever before. It is not so important in the field of technology, where the restriction is more likely to be imposed by the exporting country; but the very possibility that a form of censorship can grow out of a licensing system tends to arouse suspicion.

Turning now to the short-term view, there is a strong case for the removal of restrictions on the import into Britain of scientific and technical literature, particularly that from the United States. Publication of recent scientific and industrial developments has been lagging increasingly behind during the war years; and now, when the emphasis

is on more and more production, and economy in man-power and processes, it is essential that the most up-to-date information should be available with as little delay as possible. In his presidential address to the Royal Society on December 1, Sir Robert Robinson quoted figures showing the serious time-lag in the publication of the Society's own papers; and he added that other societies were in worse case. The columns of "Letters to the Editors" in *Nature* reflect a similar delay. The President of the Board of Trade has undertaken to assist publications devoted exclusively to research by providing the paper required for prompt production of communications; though there will be difficulty in obtaining labour to enable them to make full use of this concession. Meanwhile, however, there is considerable material of significant value in books and periodicals, of American origin in particular, likely to be of immediate service for the progress of knowledge, in the drive for increased efficiency and in the training of students and technical workers.

It is often said that up-to-date literature is one of the most important tools of the research worker. This is an under-statement; new books and current periodicals are the life-blood of a progressive society. It is hard to believe that the potential value of the knowledge and experience incorporated in books has been weighed against the saving of dollars achieved by limiting imports of literature into Britain to 100 per cent by value—ignoring the substantial increase in prices—of pre-war imports, apart from such purchases as individuals may choose to make.

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## TRANSMISSION IN NERVES

### Die Signalübermittlung im Nerven

By Prof. Alexander v. Muralt. (Lehrbücher und Monographien aus dem Gebiete der Exakten Wissenschaften, Band 14: Reihe der experimentellen Biologie, Band 3.) Pp. 354. (Basel: Verlag Birkhäuser, n.d.) 38.50 Schw. francs.

PROF. v. MURALT and his collaborators in Bern have taken up and developed the technique for the isolation of single frog's nerve fibres invented by the Japanese, Kato and Tasaki. As a result of optical and biochemical investigations of great technical ingenuity he has developed theories about the mechanism of conduction in nerve which might be described as unorthodox. The basic unit of conduction is supposed to be the internode of medullated nerve fibres, and v. Muralt believes that each is separated from the next internode by a transverse membrane at the node of Ranvier. Unfortunately his pictures do not provide decisive evidence of the existence of transverse membranes crossing the entire axon at the node. The optical appearances which they show are well known to histologists and are usually considered as representing the abrupt end of the myelin layer. His belief in the existence of this membrane was strengthened by the observation that in dying fibres it was sometimes seen to be blown out in the direction of one segment or the other. But the figure demonstrating this effect is not convincing and would be taken by most to show a modified portion of myelin