

NATURE

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CONTENTS

	Page
National Parks in Britain	853
Origin of the Universe. By Prof. E. A. Milne, F.R.S.	855
Science and Humanism. By Sir Arthur Keith, F.R.S.	856
Origin and Growth of the Royal Society. By Thomas Martin	857
Applied Chemistry. By Prof. R. P. Linstead, C.B.E., F.R.S.	858
A Study of Ibo Life. By J. O. Field	858
New Evidence on the Structure of some Proteins from Measurements with Polarized Infra-red Radiation. By E. J. Ambrose, Dr. A. Elliott and Dr. R. B. Temple	859
Nuffield College, Oxford. By D. N. Chester	862
The Genetical Society	863
Obituaries:	
Sir Wyndham Dunstan, K.C.M.G., F.R.S. By Dr. S. E. Chandler	864
Sir Robert Robertson, K.B.E., F.R.S. By Arthur Marshall	865
Dr. W. J. Perry. By Prof. Daryll Forde	865
News and Views	866
Letters to the Editors:	
High-Energy Electron Accelerators as Pulsed Neutron Sources.—Sir John Cockcroft, C.B.E., F.R.S.; J. C. Duckworth and A. W. Merrison	869
Effect of X-Rays on the Incorporation of Carbon-14 into Desoxyribonucleic Acid.—Prof. G. Hevesy, For. Mem.R.S.	869
Surface Transport of Liquid Helium II.—R. Bowers and Dr. K. Mendelssohn	870
Strengths of Metals.—Dr. H. Lipson and Dr. A. R. Stokes	871
Absorption of 12.5-mm. Wave-length Electromagnetic Radiation in Supercooled Water.—Dr. J. A. Saxton and J. A. Lane	871
A Photo-electric Wool Staplemeter.—H. Goot and R. E. Belin	872
Drug-Resistance Shown by Trypanosomes Following 'Antrycide' Treatment.—S. G. Wilson	873
Influence of Streptomycin and Mineral Salts in the Action of Ribonuclease.—Dr. G. Ceriotti	874
Origin of Hyaluronidase in the Rat Testis.—Dr. Ove Riisfeldt	874
The Histochemical Test for Alkaline Phosphatase.—Dr. F. Jacoby and B. F. Martin	875
Synthesis of New Azlactones from Thiophene Aldehydes.—Bernard F. Crowe and Prof. F. F. Nord	876
Thermal Decomposition of Hydrogen Peroxide in the Vapour Phase.—A. B. Hart	876
Vibrations of an Infinitely Long Chain of CH ₂ -Groups and the Infra-red Spectrum of Polythene.—L. Kellner	877
Metallic Oxides as Barrier Treatments for Prevention of Attack by Light on Cellulose.—S. L. Perti, S. K. Ranganathan, Dr. T. S. Subramanian and L. R. Sud	877
Preparation of Ferric Succinate Jellies.—Dr. Satya Prakash and Dr. S. P. Mughran	878
Genetical Differences in Taste Sensitivity to Phenylthiourea and to Anti-thyroid Substances.—H. Harris and Dr. H. Kalmus	878
Aerobic Metabolism in Nematode Parasites of the Alimentary Tract.—Dr. W. P. Rogers	879
<i>Lymnaea stagnalis</i> as an Intermediate Host of <i>Fasciola hepatica</i> .—S. B. Kendall	880
Symptomatology of Virus Diseases Induced in Cacao by '2-4,D' Treatment.—Prof. R. Ciferri	881
Nutritional Requirements of <i>Drosophila</i> .—Dr. Michael Begg	881
Pregnancy Test using Male Anura.—J. Aznar-Ferreres	881
University Education in Natural Science.—Prof. H. Graham Cannon, F.R.S.	882
Another Little-known History of Botany.—Dr. Agnes Arber, F.R.S.	882
Effect of Light on the Combustion of Hydrocarbons. By Prof. R. G. W. Norrish, F.R.S., and D. Patnaik	883
Optical Properties of Solid Thin Films. By Prof. S. Tolansky	885
Physical Society: Annual Meeting. By S. Weintraub	886
The Smithsonian Institution: Report for 1947-48	886
Lichens of Antarctica	887

NATIONAL PARKS IN BRITAIN

WHILE the National Parks Bill received an unopposed second reading in the House of Commons, the course of the debate indicated that some modification might be expected at the committee stage. Dr. Hugh Dalton, indeed, on April 1 went so far as to suggest that members who had ideas on the functions of the commission or the planning authority or any other matters that had been discussed might possibly find their ideas accepted, perhaps in modified form, during the committee stage. There may well be a brisk response to this encouraging, if unusual, pronouncement, though it may be a matter of opinion whether the two most important points on which criticism fastened—the composition of the park planning authorities and the powers of the National Parks Commission—are really committee points as Mr. Dalton suggested.

The Bill makes the National Parks Commission responsible for the preservation and enhancement of natural beauty in England and Wales, and particularly in the areas to be designated under the Act as national parks or as areas of outstanding natural beauty, and for encouraging the provision or improvement of facilities for enjoying the national parks and the opportunities the parks afford for open-air recreation and the study of Nature. Nevertheless, the Commission is to be wholly advisory, and there appears to be no provision for making its advice effective or even to ensure that local authorities act on its recommendations; further, as Sir Arthur Salter pointed out, the Commission is to be advisory in matters upon which it is most unlikely that its advice would prevail against contrary interests.

The full significance of this weakness is only apparent when it is realized that the administration of the national parks and execution of the proposals of the National Parks Commission is to be entrusted to the local authorities, either to the planning board of a single authority, or to a joint board where the area of the proposed park falls into several counties. If the Minister decides to dispense with a joint board, the local planning authorities concerned must have a separate committee to deal with any land in their area which is within the boundaries of the park. At least one quarter of the members of the joint boards, advisory committees or special committees appointed for the purpose must be appointed from persons nominated by the Minister after consultation with the Commission. The preparation of development plans for an area including any part of a national park is to be the responsibility of the local planning authorities, who are to be allowed one year after a national park order made by the Commission comes into effect to formulate proposals, which they must discuss with the National Parks Commission.

Such procedure does not warrant optimism that national parks will come into being at an early date. Moreover, the urgency of the problem arises largely, if not primarily, from the action of Government departments which, as was stressed on all sides in the debate, neither the National Parks Commission nor the local authorities will have powers to

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resist. This, however, as the Hobhouse Committee insisted, is the major threat to national parks in Britain, and its reality has been emphasized by what has been happening in regard to Dartmoor and other areas while the Bill has been under debate. There is no confidence, indeed, in the ability of the Minister of Town and Country Planning to resist such pressure. Mr. Dalton's statement in the debate that something like what is proposed in the Hobhouse Report, namely, the submission of matters in dispute to a permanent group of Ministers, is already the practice, might have been better received if the evidence were more convincing that Service departments are not allowed to be judges in their own cause.

In view of Mr. Dalton's statement that an inter-departmental committee of senior ministers is already operative, it is difficult to understand the reluctance of the Government to adopt openly a recommendation which would go far to restore confidence in the genuineness of its support for national parks. As it is, Mr. Silkin, in addressing a meeting of the Ramblers' Association on April 10, still burked the plain fact that if the conservation of Nature and of natural beauty is to mean anything, at some point a National Parks Commission or an inter-departmental committee of Ministers must have the right to over-rule a particular ministry. The Government itself apparently refuses to recognize the implications of the conflicting demands of so many kinds, all based on genuine national interest, for our limited resources of land; and the failure to co-ordinate, in particular, the Services demands for training areas exacerbates a public opinion which, although it fully recognizes the vital importance of setting aside a proper proportion of land for that purpose, rightly declines to admit that each particular demand can be discussed in isolation or without regard to other national interests.

The whole point of the argument for national parks is that there are some areas in which the claims of amenity and of natural beauty must come first; even such a vital interest as defence cannot come first all the time, or there will be nothing left to defend. It could be wished that, in introducing the Bill, Mr. Silkin had shown more clearly that he recognizes amenity or natural beauty as a national need and a public interest, and that its claims have to be weighed along with other public interests—the need for food, for water, for electric power, minerals, military training and the rest. In conservation areas its claims must be given more than the usual weight: in national parks they must preponderate and only be over-ruled in some grave and dire emergency.

Some encouragement may be drawn here, however, from Mr. Silkin's reference to a wider function of the Commission which goes beyond the recommendations of the Hobhouse Committee. The Commission is to be responsible generally for directing attention to any question affecting natural beauty in any part of England and Wales, and will also be responsible for selecting the other areas of natural beauty to which special powers are to apply. These areas will normally be smaller in extent than the national parks and, for that, or some other reason, therefore unsuitable for

designation as national parks. That function cannot be adequately discharged unless there is full harmony of purpose between the Commission and the planning committees to whom the executive powers are to be entrusted. If the parks are administered by joint boards or, in the single-county areas, by the special committees to which Mr. Silkin referred, it is not impossible that, in the hands of men and women who care deeply for the purposes the Bill purports to serve, we may see real national parks and not merely local authority parks. What should be remembered is that the proposed composition of the joint planning boards or special committees places a heavy strain on the loyalties of the members appointed by the local authorities—a strain that could reasonably be argued as invidious.

While that contention finds some support in what, for example, has been manifested already in local council elections in the Lake District, it should still be remembered that the main threat to the preservation of natural beauty comes from public authorities, whether they are local or central. The National Parks Bill does, indeed, provide the means for the claims of natural beauty to be advanced as a public interest. Whether representations will be effective against claims of other public interests, both local and central, appears to depend less on the organisation established by the Bill than on our ability to administer its provisions with the determination and imagination which will realize the capacities for good which are undoubtedly inherent in the Bill.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in regard to the further duty to be laid on the Commission of selecting the long-distance footpaths. That duty is complementary to the duty placed on the county councils of conducting within three years a survey of all the public paths in their area, and preparing a draft map showing existing footpaths or bridle-ways. Some county councils, such as those of Essex, Hampshire and West Sussex, have already taken a keen interest in footpaths and done much of the surveying and signposting required. Moreover, their work has already demonstrated how far success in this field depends on co-operation with the urban districts, parish councils, private landowners and voluntary organisations such as the Ramblers' Association and the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society.

The progress which some counties are already able to report in this field is one reason for hope, especially as it has indicated practical examples of co-operation between public authorities and voluntary organisations, and some of the financial difficulties in regard to maintenance which hitherto have been responsible for reluctance to implement long-distance footpaths such as the Pilgrims' Way, the coastal paths or the proposed Thames riverside walk from Teddington to Cricklade. The National Parks Commission's selection in this field must clearly be accompanied by recommendations in regard to the cost of maintenance in the Pennine Way and similar proposals are to materialize. The financial clauses of the Bill provide for national contributions for that purpose, as well as to the Nature Conservancy.

So far as Nature conservation is concerned, the Bill supplements the powers conferred by royal charter on the Nature Conservancy and gives local authorities the necessary powers to set up local Nature reserves. Powers to acquire land compulsorily are conferred on the Nature Conservancy where it is expedient in the national interest that the land should be managed as a Nature reserve, or where there has been a breach of any agreement prejudicial to its management. Nevertheless, it is clearly intended that here also the normal method of acquisition or management shall be by voluntary agreement; and the full purpose of Nature conservancy as defined in the Bill—the provision of special opportunities for the study of, and research into, matters relating to the fauna and flora of Great Britain and the physical conditions in which they live, and for the study of geological and physiographical features of special interest, as well as the preservation of flora, fauna or such geological and physiographical features—will only be achieved with the full understanding and co-operation of all those concerned, whether private landowners or occupiers, local authorities, or Government departments.

These parts of the Bill are all linked up naturally with the wider and more controversial question of public access to the open countryside. Given that the Government is in earnest in its determination to stop the piecemeal encroachment of Government departments and make the establishment of national parks really effective, whether the purpose of national parks is achieved depends on public understanding and co-operation. There must be no confusion in the public mind between the different purposes of national parks and Nature reserves; the reasons for the different conditions of access must be clearly understood. Moreover, as was repeatedly emphasized in the debate, national parks in Britain, unlike those in other parts of the world, cannot be divorced from ordinary rural life. In them farming, rural industry and afforestation must function as nearly to normal as possible, and accordingly rights-of-way and public access to open country involve responsibilities and duties. The building up of a higher code of conduct on the part of those who enjoy the new opportunities, and the observance of that code less through penal enactment than under the compulsion of a public opinion that fully understands the reasons for the code, is a far surer way of securing the essential *rapprochement* between townsman and countryman.

This lies at the root of the whole matter; it is a disturbing feature in the life of Britain to-day that estrangement between townsman and countryman so readily arises. Numerous factors contribute to that discord; a significant recent example was the failure of farmers in Derbyshire to join with the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the Ramblers' Association in opposing the extension of the Hope Valley cement works, although the taking of good farmland for clay-pits was the most vulnerable part of the scheme. The reception of Mr. Silkin's Bill in the House of Commons, however, testified to the existence of a large amount of goodwill and understanding on all sides. Strongly as the claims of agriculture were pressed, they were not

advanced to the exclusion of other interests, and the whole spirit of the debate encouraged the hope that a satisfactory compromise between all interests will be found provided the Government deals resolutely with the tendency of Government departments to advance piecemeal proposals and attempt settlements which ignore other interests.

If the goodwill shown in the debate continues during the committee stage, the Act going to the Statute Book may satisfy most of the aspirations so widely entertained since Lord Addison's Committee first explored the question of national parks in 1930. Whatever the form of the Act, much will inevitably depend on Government action, public understanding and the establishment of a fresh harmony between townsman and countryman. Nothing could contribute more to the creation of the right atmosphere than a clear lead from the Government on the vexed question of land for the Services. Given this, and the imaginative and energetic exercise by the National Parks Commission of its functions of publicity and the provision of information services, there may be created a public understanding which will prevent the abuse of rights-of-way and access; further, by easing, if not removing, the clash of loyalties which the entrusting of the administration of the parks to local authorities at present involves, the Act will give Britain a system of parks and reserves which are, in fact and in spirit as well as in conception, truly national.

151

ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE

L'Hypothèse de l'atome primitif

Essai de cosmogonie. Par Prof. Georges Lemaître. (Les problèmes de la philosophie des sciences.) Pp. 203. (Neuchâtel: Éditions du Griffon; London: H. K. Lewis and Co., Ltd., 1946.) 8 francs; 10s.

PROF. GEORGES LEMAITRE is the eminent relativistic cosmologist (at one time a pupil of Eddington) who in 1927 independently discovered a solution of Einstein's gravitational equations which made the curvature of space depend on the time and so gave an explanation of the expansion of the universe of nebulae. Actually he was anticipated by A. Friedmann, who had in 1922 and 1924 discovered forms of the fundamental metric of the homogeneous universe which involved the time; but Lemaître himself has always given the credit for the discovery to Friedmann, even to the extent of barely doing justice to himself. Lemaître's paper, which was published in Belgium, was overlooked by Eddington at the time; but it was due to Eddington that the Royal Astronomical Society published a translation of Lemaître's paper in 1931. In the present volume, Lemaître reproduces *seriatim* five addresses delivered by him on various occasions between 1929 and 1945, the title of the last of them giving its name to the present volume. There is also an inspiring preface by Ferdinand Gonseth, the distinguished professor of philosophy at Zurich. Though there are a few mathematical formulæ in the text, the style is that of semi-popular exposition, and detailed mathematical explanations are confined to an appendix.