

Nature in the Future

It ill becomes a journal to waste too much of its space on introspection, as John Maddox stressed in his last editorial (May 18 of this year). In the long run, *Nature* will prosper or not on the strength of its actual, not its avowed, editorial policy. Nevertheless, a new Editor may be excused a little public musing on what he sees for *Nature* if only because of the intimacy that exists between the journal and its readership and to which Mr Maddox alluded. Many of *Nature's* regular readers would expect a new Editor to explain himself though none should require him to show all his cards nor to deliver all his promises in the too-immediate future.

It is the quality of the papers submitted to *Nature* which ultimately controls its success or failure. Good as one hopes the journal will be from beginning to end, it is clear that a stream of second-rate scientific papers would be the quickest road to oblivion. Thus an Editor's first responsibility is to ensure that the standard of papers is high. This is, of course, a task which it would be impossible to perform without a diligent staff and a small army of patient reviewers, but at the centre of it lies the editorial question—"Is it a *Nature* paper?" No two people would agree on the definition of a *Nature* paper, but some common ground is clear. Many a thoroughly correct and readable manuscript has to be declined for lack of something which sets it apart as helping to see the world through a newer and better window. On the other hand room has to be found for the speculative paper in which cast-iron evidence cannot be adduced but which has the potential to open up new fields of research.

Two specific points should be made concerning scientific papers. The first is one of growing concern to all connected with the production of the journal—brevity. In *Nature's* centenary number (November 1, 1969) a few of the journal's most exciting papers were reprinted. It was something of a surprise to find that in the 1930's the Cockcroft-Walton generator could be announced in less than 300 words and the fission of uranium postulated in less than a page. Brevity was not confined to the physicist. In 1953, the structure of DNA was announced in one page. With some justification one can argue that science is now bigger, techniques are more complex, and so on. Yet *Nature* simply cannot in the foreseeable future expand to accommodate longer papers, nor is it all clear that readers would wish us to do so. Scientists-as-readers seem to demand more brevity than scientists-as-writers are prepared to give.

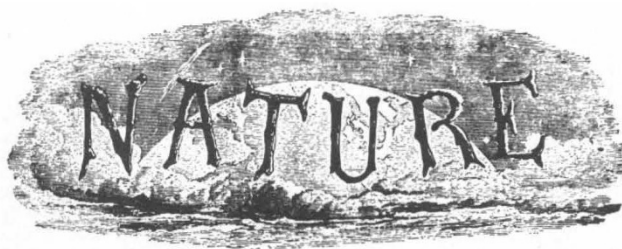
The second point is a personal dislike for papers in which all bets are hedged. A. J. Leibling, a highly perceptive observer of the press, used to write of the "ademonai-kodemonai" (Japanese for "on-the-one-hand-this-on-the-other-hand-that") syndrome amongst journalists with lots of possibilities to juggle stemming from one hard but at present uninterpretable fact. Americans will recognize this syndrome amongst their political commen-

tators. We would rather carry the simple observation unadorned than have it smothered in unhelpful ademonai-kodemonai.

Reassurance ought to be given to those who view the change to one *Nature* per week in January 1974, announced recently, as reflecting some radical switch in editorial policy. This is not so. Many ingredients of course have gone into the making of this decision and the editorial view is only one of them. But it has been clear after many conversations with contributors and readers that there was a preference for a unified weekly. The amount of space for contributions will remain roughly the same as that which is now available in the three journals.

Scientific papers are our bread and butter, but it will be obvious that the amount and quality of the jam has also improved over the past few years in coverage and exposition of science and its news and politics. The aim will be to increase the scope of these sections and to prevent their developing into bland reporting. Fine words, but what do they mean in practice? *Nature's* news gathering facilities around the world must grow in the next year or two, as it is increasingly necessary to understand the scientific scene away from the trans-Atlantic axis. Furthermore, *Nature* must be an open journal, reflecting the sense of community which is still very strong amongst scientists. In the long run much of *Nature* is simply scientists talking to scientists about things which have a broad interest. Opinions differ about what constitutes "broad interest" and we can make no claim that the exposition and opinion sections of the journal give a uniform and totally balanced coverage. But the remedy to that is in the hands of readers. If you think there is more to tell or another side to a story, let us hear it.

100 Years Ago



A day will come when every great Administration will have its Consulting Committee, composed almost exclusively of men of science, and then many mistakes will be avoided, and many forces utilised which are at present lost. But in order that such an institution should be born and developed, it is necessary that the function of Science be universally comprehended and accepted. To attain this result is one of the chief aims of the French Association.

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