

# international news



THIS year's summer meeting of the British Association (BA) in Stirling, four days of lectures devoted to science ranging in purity from the geology of Scotland to witchcraft, was deemed a great success by its retiring President, Sir John Kendrew. More than 2,000 members attended this unique forum, the best attendance for seven years.

Dr Magnus Pyke, Secretary of the Association and Chairman of Council, (pictured above) sees the BA as a "peripatetic university; it obtains its strength from movement". Certainly, to judge from those in attendance, it seems to recruit many of its officers and much of its following from towns which have been host to the association in the recent past. The ambience does seem to be very important and was a major factor in the success of this year's venue, as a result of "the intellectual richness of Scotland".

There was no feeling of nostalgia for the BA meetings of the past, at which many new results were communicated. Sir John made it clear that though original work would be very welcome, "the process of communicating science has changed completely since the early days of the BA". Dr Pyke feels that the function of the BA is to communicate a policy of social responsibility. Dear to Dr Pyke's heart are the working parties and their reports. But (as the reports reflect) Dr Pyke is adamant that the association should not adopt a radical role. "We don't want to tear down ICI" he told *Nature* vehemently. "We are hear to make the facts clear;

## The British Association at Stirling

period." He stressed that it is the aim of the BA to educate members of the public so that they will be placed in a position from which they can exercise their rights as informed voters.

But it is interesting to consider whether those present really constituted a random section of the non-scientific public that Dr Pyke is trying to reach. The meeting, and the publication of the report on Biomedical Advances that had preceded it, received a fair amount of press coverage and Sir John felt that there had been an encouraging amount of responsible reporting. Without doubt the BA has been actively promoting itself in the recent past and at last seems to have realised that it is the only way that it can reach the wide public audience with whom it claims to communicate.

There was certainly an age gap in those attending the meeting. Most were either under 25 or over 50 and the small middle-aged group of active scientists seemed to be there to organise or to speak. Schoolchildren seemed much in evidence, both organised and disorganised, and some of the more fortunate undergraduates and schoolchildren had managed to get grants from their local

education authorities. In addition of course there were teachers, government and industrial scientists (with a sprinkling of academics) and the mild elderly ladies who go each year simply for enjoyment.

In fact, schoolchildren seem to be the part of the population which the BA reaches most effectively. Young members are joining local BAYS groups at a rate which is beginning to cause administrative headaches, and Dr Pyke wryly admitted that the situation was becoming embarrassing. Many members of Council, notably Sir Lincoln Ralphs, are enthusiastic about the interest shown by the young, but Dr Pyke himself has been criticised by both the youngsters themselves and by many BA officials, for his lack of interest in the juvenile membership. There was certainly little provision for them at this year's conference.

Whilst it must be admitted that Dr Pyke, in his role as Chairman of Council, has provided an immensely important element of continuity in the organisation of the BA, it is sad that his enthusiasm does not seem to extend beyond his individual view of the current welfare of the association. There will come a time when, like it or not, Dr Pyke and his generation will have to leave and it would be as well to prepare for that contingency. It would be a pity if, after the successes of the current resurgence, the BA has to spend yet another period in the doldrums for lack of encouraging their future membership now.