

obituary

Lancelot Hogben, FRS, populariser of science and author of *Mathematics for the Million*, died on August 22 at Wrexham Hospital in North Wales. He was four months short of his 80th birthday.

Hogben was born in Southsea of aggressively devout Calvinistic parents, educated in the public schools of Portsmouth and was one of the first batch of County Scholarship boys to enter Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied zoology. The condescension with which he says he was met left deep and ineradicable mental scars. There, he met and was deeply impressed by the philosopher Bertrand Russell. They remained friends until Russell's death. The influence of Russell—in addition to playing a determining part in Hogben's decision to go to gaol as a conscientious objector in the First World War, although possessed of exemption papers—provides the thread of continuity that ran through the astonishingly wide range of subjects to which Hogben made major contributions. He took nothing on trust, and he explored the fundamentals of each discipline before he expounded it. It was this insistence on knowing what he called the "logical credentials" of each subject that made him—like J. B. S. Haldane—one of the very great "popularisers" of science in the tradition of Clerk Maxwell and Michael Faraday.

After graduation from Cambridge he was lecturer in zoology at Imperial College, London (1919–22); assistant director of the Animal Breeding Research Station, Edinburgh (1923); lecturer in experimental physiology, Edinburgh (1923–25); assistant professor of zoology, McGill (1925–27); professor of zoology, Capetown (1927–30); professor of social biology, London

School of Economics (1930–37); Regius Professor of Natural History, Aberdeen (1937–41); Mason Professor of Zoology, Birmingham (1941–47); during much of this time he was seconded as Colonel to the Directorate of Biological Research, later called Directorate of Medical Statistics, at the War Office, to work with his onetime mentor, and friend, the late Professor F. A. E. Crew; Professor of Medical Statistics, Birmingham (1947–61); Honorary Fellow in Linguistics, Birmingham (1961–63); Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Guyana (1963–65).

Besides numerous articles in scientific and medical journals (many of fundamental importance) he wrote a wide range of books ranging from textbooks on zoology through the immensely influential *Primers for the Age of Plenty*, of which *Mathematics for the Million* is perhaps the best known, books on language and linguistics, including *Interglossa* (a blueprint for an international language) and *Astroglossa* (for interplanetary communication) to a hilarious and educative tale, all in words of one syllable, called *Whales for the Welsh*. His two Conway Memorial Lectures, "The Retreat from Reason" and "Authoritarianism and Science" deserve re-reading in the present scientific climate. Hogben was a true polymath. He was honoured with the Keith Prize and Gold Medal of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a Croonian Lectureship.

That is just the bare bones of what Hogben had achieved. What of Hogben the man, funster, punster, controversialist, socialist, enemy, teacher and friend? That Hogben could be awkward, irascible, impossible and sometimes unreasonable seems, from the frequency with which it has been recorded, to be incontrovertible. He did, however, keep these aspects of his

character in the main for those whom he considered were, in virtue of their position, of equal or superior status. He castigated unmercifully what he regarded as meretricious or intellectually dishonest, but he had patience with the obtuse if he thought they showed a genuine desire to comprehend what he had to impart. He was not very good at what he delighted to stigmatise as "oral intercourse", preferring the written word. Possibly this was because his own speech was "laconic"—terse and pithy but with whole paragraphs elided—and it took some time to become proficient in interpreting this.

He had an enormously stimulating influence on young scientists, both in his own Department and in others. Birmingham University certainly owed much to him. He would also defend the student interest against illiberal oppression by the dinosauric hierarchy. One instance of this happened at a meeting of the Senate at the University of Birmingham towards the end of the war period. There was a move afoot to cut down the autonomy of the Students' Union, ostensibly because a used contraceptive had been in a fire bucket after a dance. One professor, who for years had almost ruled the Senate, said that, speaking as a father, he was horrified to think that he had sent his daughter to a University where such things were used. Hogben replied that, speaking as a father and a grandfather, he would have been horrified if he thought that he had not. Report has it that after a moment's stunned silence the Senate suddenly dissolved into laughter and the whole episode was seen for what it really was. The next day the President of the Students' Union came to thank Lancelot for what he had done, and the long tyranny of the fossilised one was for ever broken.

announcements

Award

Maurice Strong, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, is to receive the **Audubon Medal** from the **National Audubon Society** for his role in making the environment an international concern.

Appointments

Professor Michael Sela is to be the next president of the Weizmann Institute of Science.

The University of Adelaide has appointed **Professor Colin J. Driscoll** to the Waite Chair of Agronomy in the Waite Agricultural Research Institute.

Miscellaneous

The second edition of *Collected Tentative Rules and Recommendations of the IUPAC-IUB Commission on Biochemical Nomenclature* is now available for distribution. Copies can be obtained from:—The American Society of Biological Chemists, Inc., 9650 Rockville Pike Bethesda, Maryland 20014.