Genial corrective

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The Royal Society and Its Dining Clubs. By T. E. Allibone. Pp. xv+457. (Pergamon: Oxford and New York, 1976.) £10.

EFFECTIVE pursuit of natural science demands much concentration. Dr Johnson once compared a course of chemistry in this respect with a course in walking the tight-rope, as a cure for Boswell's melancholy. Clearly, a Dining Club provides genial correctives for any excessive abstraction scientists may have to practice. This adds a distinctive relish to the long history of 'clubbable' Fellows of the Royal Society dining together. Dr Allibone's narrative is the present successor to earlier chronicles of the Royal Society's Dining Clubs. Two of these histories, by Sir Archibald Geikie and Dr Bonney only stretch down to 1901, so that Dr Allibone has had to grapple with some most memorable events in science as well as in world affairs. From his 'history' it is entertaining and fascinating to mark the uneven penetration of such events into the after-dinner discussions of the Club.

At the present time, the club numbers rather less than 100 members. Only a fraction come to dine on any one evening. It is also the custom for individual members of the Club to bring distinguished visitors, often from overseas, to a dinner. Quite often the President of the Royal Society is in the chair. Under the Chairman's guidance the talk ranges informally, over narrow specialist interests as well as widely in relation to the world at large. Week by week and year by year the Senior Treasurer for that year keeps records of those present, their dinner menu, and the heads of discussion, for storage in the club archives, which are kept private until the next history is due to be written.

Much praise is due to Dr Allibone for the way in which he has tackled this tremendous task. He makes it clear how formal continuity of the present Club can be traced back to 1743; but the Club can claim plausible links with earlier diners up to 1645. Samuel Pepys records his evident satisfaction with the fare as well as the discourse in the seventeenth century. Now, the club fare has become decidedly 'plainer' even if our thinking is 'higher'. It may be some mitigation too of any euphoria at present meetings of the Royal Society that dinners of 'The Club' now follow these, instead of preceding them as in Pepys' time.

With over 200 years of continuous archives to deal with, the present history has perforce concentrated much information in the form of nourishing pemmican, or sometimes by presenting well articulated skeletons from amongst the scientific worthies of the past. The long list of famous names cited makes the book valuable as well as fascinating. Different readers will probably let their imagination seize on different personalities to clothe, and Dr Allibone is to be congratulated that the choice provided is large. Thus it is striking to find that Henry Cavendish, who is often pictured as a millionaire scientific misanthrope, was one of the most assiduous diners. Clearly, a 'clubbable' man of his day. The colourful personality of Sir Joseph Banks receives rather lurid light from the record of his having purchased a silver bowl holding a gallon of punch and also of his having led a breakaway dining club into schism. When later he was elected President of the Royal Society, however, the schism was gradually healed. Then, too, there is the rather sad little note that Lavoisier in 1786 established a monthly dining club of scientists, the 'Philomatic Society', almost under the shadow of the guillotine.

This does raise the question (with one eye on Dr Johnson and perhaps one on Mr Pickwick) whether elite dining clubs (however chosen) are truly congenial only to the British temperament. One may hope that modern conditions of living will never extirpate such an amiable weakness or custom. So far as the Royal Society dining club is concerned, Dr Allibone's history will certainly help to perpetuate its remarkable longevity. □

Authentication in art

Harold Barker

Authenticity in Art: The Scientific Detection of Forgery. By Stuart J. Fleming. Pp. 164. (Institute of Physics: London and Bristol; Crane, Russak: New York, 1975.) £6.50.

THE majority of published books on authentication in the art world are concerned either with stylistic criteria or are purely anecdotal in character and do little to illustrate the significant contributions made by scientific methods of examination in this field, particularly during the past few decades. The author of this book, himself a scientist who has made noteable contributions to the development of thermoluminescence dating which has revolutionised the authentication of pottery, has set out to redress the balance and describe how scientific methods are applied to the detection of forgeries.

The book is divided into four main sections, the first of which provides a general introduction to the subject in which the author discusses the limitations of stylistic judgements; presents some early examples of the detection of forgeries; discusses different types of fake, the forger's technical approach and the errors and stylistic anachronisms which he is likely to perpetrate, and the role of surface examination by microscopy and ultra-violet fluorescence in uncovering forgeries. The other three sections are concerned with paintings, ceramics and metals, respectively. There is also an appendix devoted to X-ray fluorescence of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, radiocarbon analysis, and lead isotope analysis of ancient objects.

These sections are concerned much more specifically with scientific techniques of examination covering many case histories and ending with fairly extensive bibliographies which deal adequately with case histories but could perhaps have benefited by the inclusion of at least a few more references to the fundamentals of the scientific techniques used for the benefit of readers who may wish to widen their background knowledge. For example it is rather surprising to find no reference to Zimmerman's development of the fine grain technique of thermoluminescence dating in the section on ceramics nor any reference to a basic metallurgical text in the section on metals. Also, in this age of high specialisation, the expert, when writing outside his own field, is not immune from mistakes and misconceptions, sometimes of an elementary nature. Thus in the section on metals, one discovers a statement (p125) which assumes that the production of tin bronze is associated with a significantly lower temperature technology than that of copper alone.

It is also inevitable that any publication concerning the authentication of valuable objects must be somewhat circumspect in its treatment of the material in order to avoid possible legal complications. Thus in its reliance on published examples in which the results of scientific examination are unequivocal, the book tends to give the impression that scientific techniques are rather more certain in the answers that they can provide than is actually the case. In general, however, and in spite of these limitations, the book is an excellent introduction to the scientific detection of forgeries and a good source of references to the literature of authentication and associated scientific studies. □