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Whither the Natural History Museum?

IN his account of the thinking behind the new exhibition schemes, Dr Miles has posed clearly for the first time a fundamental dichotomy that exists in the concept of the role of the museum. The Department of Public Services has taken an unequivocal stand that its duty is primarily to serve the general public, and more than that, not to provide mere displays of the materials housed, but to communicate ideas and concepts.

The fundamental issue was summarised succinctly at the meeting by Professor T. S. Westoll. If one sees the role of the museum as one of social engineering, then one follows one route, by implication that of Miles' current policies. But if one sees it as a unique place in which to collect together in a systematic way what is contained in the natural world then clearly the national collection as a repository, with public galleries exhibiting those materials, will develop in a very different manner. It was evident that Miles' conception took no account of the needs of students but was aimed primarily at young people with no knowledge of biology and he saw his main task as one in which he would motivate them to learn. As a body, an audience of both professional and amateur palaeontologists, zoologists and geologists was in the main unsympathetic to Miles' thesis.

By far the most disturbing aspect of the discussion which followed Miles's talk was the strong impression of a serious breakdown of communication between the Museum's Department of Public Services and the scientific staff of the Natural History Museum, such that one of the world's leading ichthyologists on the museum staff was provoked to protest publicly at the recent removal of the fish exhibits to make way for the Human Biology Exhibition. It is known that the Museum's dinosaur expert would much have preferred a completely modernised Dinosaur Gallery, emphasising the natural history of these extraordinary creatures, rather than the entirely new exhibit, largely concerned with reptile relationships, which is now being constructed in the Central Hall. The museum has announced its forthcoming publication on the new dinosaur exhibit and yet its own expert is not involved in its production. This in spite of the fact that as well as being acknowledged as a world expert, he is one of the most experienced people around at communicating his subject to young people and the general public.

Dr H. W. Ball, the Museum's Keeper of Palaeontology, has publicly stressed on numerous occasions that the museum has the responsibility to curate, conserve and display the material objects in its charge.

It has always been assumed by people outside the museum, it now transpires mistakenly, that the public galleries reflected the responsibilities of the museum's

scientific staff working in conjunction with the exhibition staff. The fact that the new exhibition scheme seems to be going ahead in spite of serious opposition from the scientific side of the museum is surely a matter of deep concern.

The rigid dichotomy posed by Miles between the needs of the general public on the one hand and university students and teachers on the other is assuredly false. The late lamented dinosaur gallery was a case in point. It served the needs of the general public but also those of students. A still extant example of the same thing is the fossil mammal gallery. This scholarly exhibition is filled with genuine specimens with explanatory diagrams and models accompanying them. The essence of visiting this gallery is that one can see for oneself the actual evidence on which models and restorations have been based. Visitors have the possibility of deriving their own concepts, drawing their own conclusions. This exhibit can be visited at different stages in life, from a small child, to the general adult public and to advanced students. At each level something of real value can be gained.

Once it is conceded that it is an appropriate role for a national museum to be concerned with aspects of social engineering by promoting concepts that happen to be current in the present climate of opinion, then a most dangerous precedent is set, which has sinister implications. Suddenly it becomes possible to visualise museums contributing to the indoctrination of the more inarticulate sections of the community. Just so long as natural history museums are primarily concerned with displaying the materials in their charge, there is always the possibility that the facts will shine through the prevailing dogmas.

The new scheme as epitomised in the Hall of Human Biology leads to the grave suspicion that henceforth natural history specimens will become simply three dimensional illustrations of a given narrative aimed solely at "an audience that is representative of the general public". In my opinion the museum should be nearer to scientific literature than to the media.

The Natural History Museum's new exhibition scheme raises such fundamental issues that it deserves to have the fullest possible public discussion and for this to be effective it is essential that the views of the museum's scientific staff should be fully heard, together with those of teachers and students in schools and universities both here and abroad, who are intimately concerned with the signal service that the museum has provided in the past.

We can only hope that sufficient pressure can be brought to bear to curb the activities of the Public Services Department and to ensure the survival of the museum's reputation for scholarship in its public galleries. □