

Making a show of it

Carole Stott

For Instruction and Recreation: A Centenary History of the Museums Association. By Geoffrey Lewis. Quiller Press, 46 Lillie Road, London SW6 1TN: 1989. Pp.98. £9.95, \$16.

MUSEUMS in Britain have reached a watershed. Gone are the days when every city proudly supported its own museum, and industrial benefactors insisted that entrance should be forever free; gone too are the days of tightly packed showcases when children were told to "be quiet".

promotional activities are only the public face of the museum world. Has anything really changed behind the façade? The Museums Association originated in the 1880s when a handful of curators met to try to develop the full potential of museums. The spur was the recent Education Acts and the shackle the miserly one-penny rate that cities were allowed to spend. The original members of the association were concerned both about inadequate financial support and the aims of their institutions. Education was high on their list of priorities, and changes in display techniques and a circulating school-loan system were their first initiatives. Training and 'proper salaries' for curators were proposed, as well as schemes for cataloguing and sharing knowledge of museum collections.

But museums have become victims of their past successes. Today's visitors are more sophisticated and less easily impressed than were their grandparents. Expectations of a museum visit have changed.

To mark the centenary of the Museums Association, Geoffrey Lewis has produced a slim volume that charts the progress from those early days to the present. The style and format are redolent of the modern easy-to-read 'museum speak' label. Each new subject is appropriately headed and self-supporting — early membership; annual conference; the diploma; legislation; the association today — and there is little here to provoke thought or debate. Museum libraries and diligent curators should have copies of the book (the bibliography alone is worth the asking price), but it is hard to imagine that it will catch the attention of a wider audience. And that is a shame.

The Museums Association has surely missed a golden opportunity to help in making itself more accessible to the general public. Centenaries are times both to reflect on the past and point the way to the future. Why isn't the Association blowing the fanfare of success, and celebrating everything that is good in the museum world? Perhaps its members realize only too well that the concerns of the 1880s are still here in the 1990s. The financial cake is small and the largest slice

seems more often to be spent on stopping the rain coming through the roof of the building — often a museum-piece in itself — than on enhancing and studying the collections that it houses.

What do we want from our museums, and from their curators? How do museums fit into the fabric of contemporary life and educational policies? How much are we prepared to spend? These questions need thoughtful answers, sooner rather than later. □

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Inside story

Richard W.E. Watts

The Metabolic Basis of Inherited Disease, 6th edn. Edited by Charles R. Scriver, Arthur L. Beaudet, William S. Sly and David Valle. McGraw-Hill: 1989. Two volumes, pp. 3,006 plus index. \$215, £155.

THE first edition of this book, published in 1960, broke new ground and soon established itself as a major work of reference for clinicians, biochemists, pathologists and an increasing range of biomedical investigators. It is now a classic, recognized, respected and, above all, widely read wherever problems in relation to the "inborn errors of metabolism" or, to use the parlance of the late twentieth century, "molecular medicine", arise in the clinic or the laboratory.

Judged against this background, Scriver, Beaudet, Sly and Valle had a difficult furrow to plough. They have done it well, digging it deep and straight to produce an up-to-date, comprehensive book which, however, is still clearly recognizable as the sixth-generation descendant of Stanbury, Wyngarden and Fredrickson (latterly plus Goldstein and Brown). In this new edition, there are many new contributors, 31 new chapters and major revisions everywhere. Those who are fortunate enough to own the earlier editions should not discard them, as the editors wisely asked their contributors to regard the earlier editions as archives for the older material. Furthermore, the comparison of individual chapters in the different editions provides a fascinating view of how, where and when knowledge in the field has moved forwards.

As in the previous editions, the material in the new volumes is largely organized around particular diseases, individual chapters being preceded by useful summaries. The discussions of the areas of biochemistry relating to a specific disease, or groups of diseases, are detailed, authoritative and well-focused. Genetic and

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REASONS

Victoria and Albert Museum, London — inappropriate exposure.

On average, a new museum opens in Britain every two weeks. Competition is now the name of the game. Museums are forced to welcome everyone; they are in the show-and-tell business. All the senses must be catered for in a 'hands-on' experience, not least taste — a priority is getting the punter into the café and gift shop with its chocolate bars, jars of jam and key-rings all incongruously placed alongside miners' lamps or dinosaur kits.

The 1990s-style exhibit displays and the