

successful use of recombinant vaccinia virus to control rabies in Belgium. Commentaries summarize meetings on "biosafety" monitoring, and nitrogen fixation in Russia.

Judging quality is a very subjective matter. As one-time chief editor of a mainstream microbiology journal, I would have rejected a few of these papers as too preliminary or inconsequential. I would also have been more meticulous over terminology, avoiding, for example, the use of the term 'viable' in two different senses. Rapid publication need not mean sloppy writing. But, as if to balance some indifferent editing, several papers are both fascinating and impeccably presented.

Microbial releases are a matter of some public anxiety, and of considerable research activity, and it helps all concerned to have relevant papers gathered together rather than scattered among diverse journals of general and applied microbiology. But releases will become routine and anxieties will recede; whether the niche occupied by this journal will remain for long is another question. □

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■ As *Nature* went to press, it learned from Springer that *Microbial Releases* is to cease publication at the end of the year.

## Slices of the synthetic cake

*Leslie Crombie*

**Natural Product Letters.** Editors-in-chief Atta-ur-Kahman and E. Wenkert. *Harwood Academic*. 4/yr. \$258 (institutional); \$65, £43 (personal).

SINCE its inception as a recognized branch of science more than a century-and-a-half ago, the study of natural products has provided an important dynamic to organic chemistry. This journal claims to cover all aspects of research in the chemistry and biochemistry of naturally occurring compounds of land and sea, and of plants, microbes and animals, along with structure elucidation, synthesis, experimental biosynthesis and methods used in these areas. Research papers on the boundary between chemistry and biology — fermentation chemistry, plant tissue investigations and so on — are also considered. This is indeed a large slice of the organic chemistry cake.

The wide coverage places the journal in direct competition with many established outlets for the type of material it wishes to

attract, and prospective authors and readers need to assess the advantages or disadvantages of the new publication relative to other journals. I was hampered by a shortage of information in making comparisons. For example, it is not clear to me if submissions are independently refereed, a process I regard as essential in any good journal.

The first four-part volume is of modest length (310 pages) and is spread over 1992 and 1993. Except for the year of publication, however, each issue is undated and it is impossible to work out average publication times. The first volume contains 52 communications, of which about 23 are primarily synthetic in character and might well fit into specialist synthesis journals.

Apart from the external covers, the camera-ready pages resemble the long established *Tetrahedron Letters*. But authors in that journal are restricted to four-page preliminary accounts of urgent material. Some of the communications in

*Natural Product Letters* (which allows authors a maximum of eight pages) would come in this category, and are certainly of good quality, but others are of lesser urgency and do not, I think, deserve preliminary publication. Some are full papers, complete with all experimental details. Then again, some lie part way in between. Blurring the distinction between preliminary communications (which *Letters* usually implies) and complete, or partly complete, papers seems to me to be undesirable; some standardization would be helpful.

Some clear editorial thinking about the focus of *Natural Product Letters* and its place in the literature now seems due. Library budgets are everywhere under strain, and this journal will have to make a strong competitive case if it is to be bought by chemistry departments. □

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## Structure and technique

*Robert Tycko*

**Solid State Nuclear Magnetic Resonance: An International Journal.** Editor-in-chief J. Klinowski. *Elsevier*. 6/yr. DFL446, USA and Canada \$241.

THE proclamation that nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) is dead has become something of a joke among practitioners of NMR spectroscopy. New technologies and new ideas have produced an explosion of activity in solid-state NMR in the past ten years. The importance of NMR in solid-state inorganic chemistry, catalysis, materials science and biochemistry is now recognized by academic chemistry departments. Solid-state physicists are recalling that NMR can be an essential experimental tool, their memories refreshed by recent NMR studies of high- $T_c$  superconductors, fullerenes and alkali fullerenes, organic conductors, charge-density wave materials and other systems that demonstrate the power of NMR as a local probe of the electronic, structural and dynamic properties of solids.

These various forces have brought forth this new specialized journal, "a forum in which results and opinions are exchanged between researchers using NMR methods to study the properties of solid materials and researchers developing NMR instrumentation, experimental methodology, and new theoretical and computational techniques". The journal plans to publish invited reviews, book reviews and announcements in addition to full-length research papers and short communications. The production quality is excellent.

There is no question that solid-state NMR spectroscopists need a journal of their own. Developments in solid-state NMR techniques and technology are often better published in a specialized journal than in a more general publication, where they may miss their proper audience (or run into hostile referees). Even spectroscopic studies of systems that are of wide scientific interest often lead to two types of papers simultaneously, one for people interested only in the systems themselves and one for people also interested in the details of the spectroscopy. The new journal does, however, face some competition, primarily from the *Journal of Magnetic Resonance*, now in its twenty-fifth year. That journal has always had a much broader mission, with most of its papers dealing with liquid-state NMR. But in 1993, it split into two parts, "series A" devoted to information of particular relevance to chemistry and physics, "series B" to biology and biochemistry. It seems possible that series A will tend to attract papers on the solid state. Of course, only time will tell how researchers choose to apportion their manuscripts among the various journals, specialized and otherwise. So far, papers published in *Solid State Nuclear Magnetic Resonance* have been of uniformly excellent quality and of importance to practising solid-state NMR spectroscopists. All indications are that this trend will continue. □

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