

Popular Science

General Science

Extract from Editorial in *NATURE* (*English Weekly*), March 10, 1928:

Popular science is a phrase which almost inevitably conjures visions of Pepper's ghost, unpleasant smells, a loud bang, and a disapproving mother. Not only in chemistry and physics, but also in psychology, sociology, and economics, the term suggests a superficial acquaintance with the more amusing manifestations of natural phenomena or with some arguable thesis concerning political affairs rather than any widespread understanding of the relation between cause and effect. Nevertheless, there is a general lay interest in the march of science, and very laudable attempts have been made, and continue to be made, to keep the populace informed of the trend of its progress, its rate, its direction, its practical effects, and something of the spirit permeating its body of serving men and women. Such a presentation demands painstaking and prolonged effort. The material must not be inaccurate, yet it must necessarily be indefinite, it must be attractive but not sensational, dignified but not high-brow. It must not be presented in its native language, but in that of everyday speech; it must indicate some practical advantage or it must positively refrain from suggesting any such mundane possibility, according as it is intended to be read before or after dinner.

We need not debate the desirability of recording the progress of scientific investigation and of discussing cognate matters in such a way as appeals to the "average" man. Obviously, if the task is not undertaken there can be little public appreciation of or sympathy with the objects to which the workers have devoted their labours, neither can there be full support in the provision of conditions necessary for the fruition of their efforts. * * * It does not necessarily follow, of course, that progress is any the more rapid on account of public interest, especially when the problem happens to be one which may admit of confusion by the articulate assistance of partially informed critics, but it is indisputable that encouragement and provision are much more likely to be the outcome of knowledge than of ignorance. Apart from such a consideration, most readers of the general press seek to know more of the world around them, whether physical, moral, ethnological, or industrial, provided that the effort accompanying the stim-

ulation of their interest is not too noticeable. If science is displayed for their benefit, it is not intended that they should be creative investigators; if poetry, that they should rush into verse. Besides, ignorance of natural laws, as of other laws, is no insurance against the regrettable consequences which may arise from their neglect.

The translation of scientific news—nowadays so enormous in its bulk—into suitable language, and its condensation to comparatively minute dimensions, is undertaken in a systematic manner in the United States of America by an organization known as Science Service, Inc., directed by Dr. E. E. Slosson, and functioning under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Research Council, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. This organization publishes daily science news bulletins, and a weekly summary of current science entitled the *SCIENCE NEWS-LETTER*, in which current events, scientific discoveries, and résumés of progress, together with broadly-drawn reports of the proceedings of scientific conventions, are recorded in simple terms. In addition, there is compiled a weekly digest, intended to present the cream of the week's scientific news, which is regularly used by more than twenty broadcasting stations in the United States. * * * We are familiar with the result of excursions by otherwise competent journalists into spheres with which they are not familiar; indeed, the distaste for publicity which is usually ascribed to undue modesty might, if the truth were known, quite possibly often be traced simply to a fear of misrepresentation. The American press is now able, however, to rely on telegraphic news "stories," prepared by the managing editor of Science Service, Mr. Watson Davis, and the members of his specialist staff, so that their reports of the proceedings of conferences and conventions shall be well-balanced and accurate, without losing their attractiveness as items of news.

In Great Britain there is, of course, fairly adequate publication and survey of the results of research, such publication being intended for the use of the scientific population itself, and being normally directed by members of that fraternity, but we seem to lack

a widespread sense of the importance of an appeal to the non-specialist members of the community as part of their ordinary daily culture, an appeal which must, to be worth while, be sponsored by the most notable members of the professions, and to be effective by the more journalistically-minded among them. There is, after all, no valid reason why the dissemination of knowledge beyond the confines of schools and colleges, provided it is carried out with scrupulous honesty, dignity, and restraint, should not be acknowledged to be as valuable a social service as the collection and arrangement of the knowledge itself * * *.

Dr. E. E. Slosson, in a recent address before the American Association for Adult Education, made the somewhat surprising statement that archæology and astronomy—essentially remote and unpractical—head the list of the sciences in order of popular interest, and that the essentially practical sciences are low in the list. He ascribes this, probably correctly, to the same cause as that operating in the selection of, say, "Futuristic Art" as a subject of study in a women's club rather than "Domestic Economy." He declares that scientific workers have been too humble and too modest in claiming credit for what they have done and what they can do in the control of human affairs, but have allowed statesmen, writers, and financiers to take all the praise for the advance in civilization and the amelioration of living conditions that were really due to scientific research. If we look at the matter from the point of view of the wealth of nations, as Dr. G. E. Hale, the honorary chairman of the National Research Council, has recently done in *Harper's Magazine*, it is clear enough that the business of men of science is to help to guide mankind as well as to serve it. That is to say, if a scientific orientation can more universally be associated with moral and religious convictions in the equipment of the human mind, there will be less danger of the wicked and unscrupulous misuse of scientific power, less point in arguing the prohibition of poison gas, and an extension of that wider fraternal patriotism which distinguishes scientific international relations.

Science News-Letter, April 21, 1928