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<i>The History and Work of the Army Medical Library:</i> LIEUTENANT COLONEL EDGAR ERSKINE HUME	207
<i>Waves and Corpuscles in Quantum Physics:</i> ALFRED LANDÉ	210
Obituary: <i>Sara Gwendolen Andrews:</i> PROFESSOR H. T. WIL- SON. <i>Recent Deaths</i>	213
Scientific Events: <i>Tour of European Industrial Laboratories under the Auspices of the National Research Council;</i> <i>The North Carolina Meeting of the American Chemical Society; Awards of the American In- stitute; Award of the Willard Gibbs Medal to Dr. McCoy</i>	214
<i>Scientific Notes and News</i>	216
Discussion: <i>The Hen's Egg not Fertilized in the Ovary:</i> DR. CARL G. HARTMAN. <i>Structural Control of the Form and Distribution of Sink-holes:</i> PROFESSOR A. C. SWINNERTON. <i>A Method of Dispersal of the Black Widow Spider:</i> DR. DAYTON STONER. <i>Concerning Fossil Legumes:</i> DR. ROLAND W. BROWN. <i>The Na- tional Association of Science Writers:</i> DAVID DIETZ	218
Reports: <i>Geological Survey of Newfoundland Revived:</i> DR. A. K. SNELGROVE. <i>The Thirty-third Meeting of the Association of American Geographers</i>	220

Special Articles: <i>Localized Cortical Growth as the Immediate Cause of Cell Division:</i> DR. A. M. SCHECHTMAN. <i>How Consistent are an Individual's Brain Potentials from Day to Day?:</i> PROFESSOR LEE EDWARD TRAVIS and ABRAHAM GOTTLÖBER. <i>Microstratification of the Waters of Inland Lakes in Summer:</i> DR. L. V. WHITNEY	222
Scientific Apparatus and Laboratory Methods: <i>Use of the Lantern for Objective Examinations:</i> DR. E. P. LYON. <i>Apparatus for Producing Cumu- lative and Ordinary Type Kymograph Records Simultaneously:</i> K. M. WILBUR. <i>Another Carbo- rundum Pencil:</i> DR. ESTHER CARPENTER	225
<i>Science News</i>	8

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THE HISTORY AND WORK OF THE ARMY MEDICAL LIBRARY¹

By Lieutenant Colonel EDGAR ERSKINE HUME

MEDICAL CORPS, U. S. ARMY, MEDICAL FIELD SERVICE SCHOOL, CARLISLE, PA.

THE celebration on November 16, 1936, of the cen-
tenary of the foundation of the Army Medical Library
served to bring home to a large number of persons not
engaged in work in the medical sciences the importance
of this great collection of books. This celebration was
attended by six or seven hundred representatives of
universities, libraries and learned societies of the world,
and cablegrams, letters and diplomas of honor were
received from nearly 200 foreign institutions alone.
These bodies joined in commemorating the establish-
ment of what is now the largest collection of medical
literature that the world has ever seen. The develop-
ment of this mighty library in so short a time is a
phenomenon in which American science and letters
may take pride.

Established in 1836 by Surgeon General Lovell as a

¹ Read on December 30, 1936, at Brown University,
Providence, R. I., before the joint session of the History
of Science Society and the American Historical Associa-
tion.

small number of reference medical texts for the use of
his staff, it was in fact as well as in name "The Surgeon
General's Library." The collection, hardly more ex-
tensive for some years than President Eliot's five-foot
shelf of books, grew but slowly until, at the close of
the Civil War, one of the greatest men of science our
land has produced was placed in charge and given the
congenial task of building up a great national medical
library.

This man was Surgeon John Shaw Billings (1838-
1913). When he took up his new work the library
consisted only of 2,253 volumes (602 titles under 11
topical subdivisions). A catalogue of the collection
was printed in 1865. Billings was given the sum of
\$80,000 left over from the hospital fund of the war,
and wise Surgeon General Barnes likewise gave him a
free hand. Billings had realized the need for such a
library ever since he was a medical student at what
is now the University of Cincinnati. Writing many
years later he said:

