Book Reviews

An Enterprise in Science

The Founders of Science at the British Museum, 1753–1900. A. E. GUNTHER. Halesworth Press, Halesworth, Suffolk, England, 1980. x, 220 pp., illus. $20.

This unpretentious book casts much light on the way science developed in the 19th century by focusing on an institution and its gradual evolution. What we are given is a series of biographies of the officers in the natural history section of the British Musuem, down to its separation from the "arts" side of the collections in 1881, when it moved into a large new building in South Kensington. For the most part, those associated with the museum were not the great or revolutionary figures whose names are familiar to many people, like Darwin and Huxley. We are confronted with more normal and typical science, but this makes the story no less interesting.

The first point that emerges is the gradual increase in professionalism. J. G. Children was appointed keeper of zoology in 1821 not because he knew any zoology but because he knew Sir Humphry Davy. British society still worked by patronage, and Sedgwick, who taught Darwin geology, was in the same way made a professor at Cambridge because he was a sound man who would soon teach himself the subject; even in the United States, Silliman was appointed professor of chemistry at Yale on the same basis. Children's appointment caused an outcry, and generally thereafter competence in their field was expected of those appointed at the British Museum. Many were medical men, but the next keeper, J. E. Gray, was, like Davy and Darwin, a medical dropout. Children was unusual in that his social status made it easy for him to deal with the aristocratic trustees who governed the institution.

The next point is the growth of specialization. Sir Hans Sloane had collected everything, and his bequests formed the basis of the British Museum. The trustees became responsible for stuffed birds and dried insects, for works of art of different ages and countries, for ethnographical material brought back by Captain Cook, and for books and manuscripts. Moth and rust soon corrupted the natural history collections; but the principle was that all culture should be gathered under one roof, and the trustees were suspicious of the rival experts who looked after the various departments and competed for the scarce funds. By the early 19th century, the interests of the natural historians and of the fine arts and library departments were at odds—one can perhaps see here the beginnings of the two cultures to which C. P. Snow called attention in the 1950's.

By the middle of the century, natural history itself had split into parts, with botany, mineralogy, and zoology all competing for fossils; these various departments all had their staffs, and thus divisions between disciplines were displayed in infighting in the museum. There was an attempt to get the botanical collections to Kew; but the museum survived, and even flourished so that the collections increased rapidly in size and, as they were labeled and cataloged, in usefulness. The appointment of Richard Owen as superintendent in 1856 meant that natural history had a powerful advocate, who soon decided that a separate building must be provided for it. He successfully lobbied the trustees and the government and overcame the resistance of many men of science to the move; and by 1900 the Museum had become a center for both public education and specialized research.

The book is not always clear in its focus and has too many misprints, but it is a useful and suggestive contribution to the centenary year of the British Museum (Natural History).

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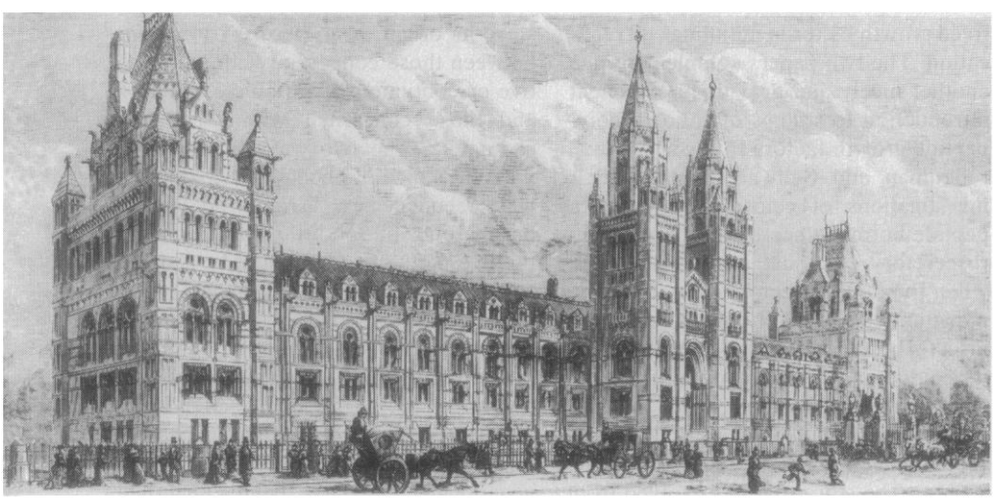

The British Museum (Natural History). [From *The Graphic*, 27 March 1881]

An 18th-Century Figure

Sir Joseph Banks. 18th Century Explorer, Botanist and Entrepreneur. CHARLES LYTE. David and Charles, North Pomfret, Vt., 1980. 248 pp., illus. $32.

Considering his commanding stature in late-18th-century British scientific circles and the wealth of materials he left behind, Joseph Banks has been poorly treated by biographers. A "Life and Letters" did not appear until nearly 100 years after his death. And when a real effort was finally made by H. C. Cameron to produce a scientific biography (1952) the tale was limited to 280 pages plus appendixes. Granting the difficulties of studying him owing to the unfortunate dispersal of his papers in the last century, the man who circumnavigated the world as "chief scientist" on Cook's first voyage, who directed Kew Gardens