Royal Technophobia

The scientific establishment got a taste of the royal whip last Wednesday as Britain's Prince Charles decried the dominance of soulless science in today's world. We have lost a "sense of the sacred in our dealings with the natural world," the prince said in a radio address.

Charles has long been known as a foe of biotechnology and genetically modified food, but last week's 22-minute outburst was more of an attack on the scientific endeavor as a whole. "If literally nothing is held sacred anymore because it is considered synonymous with superstition—what is there to prevent us treating our entire world as some great laboratory of life, with potentially disastrous long-term consequences?" Charles asked. He went on to paint a picture of a once idyllic natural world increasingly jeopardized by scientists bent on shaping it to their own visions.

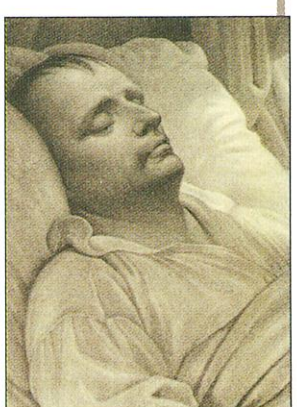
Prince samples organic yogurt.

The attack drew some defensive reactions from scientists. "It's fundamentally wrong to equate scientific rationalism with the desecretion of our planet," says John Sulston, director of the Sanger Centre near Cambridge. The prince is "identifying some deep-seated anxieties about science and technology," acknowledges John Durant of Imperial College in London. "But I don't see that ... easy solutions [will be generated] simply by recognizing the spiritual or intuitive side" of human nature.

Napoleon Death Debate Continues

When Napoleon died in exile in 1821, was he poisoned by arsenic, or did he succumb to stomach cancer as his doctors said? The debate, smoldering for years, got a public airing this month in Paris.

Ben Weider, fitness equipment magnate and longtime student of Napoleon who runs the Montreal-based International Napoleonic Society, made the case for arsenic poisoning before a group of French historians, scientists, and politicians at a luncheon on 5 May, the 179th anniversary of Napoleon's death. He argues that Napoleon was quietly murdered by infusions of arsenic in his wine. Several hairs analyzed by the FBI in 1995 showed elevated levels of arsenic in the neighborhood of 20 to 50 parts per million. (The average today is about 1 ppm.) Accounts by those around Napoleon in his last years are full of allusions to physical problems—such as light sensitivity, hair loss, sleep problems, and neurological symptoms—consistent with arsenic poisoning, he says. Furthermore, he claims autopsy records show that Napoleon died fat, which is inconsistent with wasting away from cancer.



Napoleon on deathbed.

Officials of the Napoleonic Society of America, based in Clearwater, Florida, say Weider's arsenic theory is complete hogwash. Society president Robert Snibbe says there's no proof that the analyzed hair was actually Napoleon's, and that the general lacked one of the chief symptoms of arsenic poisoning: leathery palms and soles of feet. Philip Corso, a plastic surgeon at Yale University Medical School, says there were five lengthy autopsy reports by eight doctors, all of whom agreed that Napoleon suffered from extensive stomach cancer.

To ascertain whether it's really Napoleon's hair, Corso has given some strands to scientists at Pennsylvania State University, but he says they will need much more hair to get any useful DNA. Meanwhile, Snibbe is trying to get permission to dig up a nephew of Napoleon's who is buried in Florida, to obtain some benchmark family DNA. All sides, of course, would love to settle the entire matter by disinterring the great man himself from his tomb at Les Invalides.

China Tackles Rice Genome

China has announced plans to sequence the entire genome of the superhybrid rice that its scientists have developed over the past 2 decades. The project is a first step in the National Bio-resource Genome Project, set up to unravel the genomes of organisms that are important economically or that affect public health (*Science*, 5 May, p. 795).

Within the next 2 years, the Beijing Genomics Institute aims to produce a working draft covering 90% of the genome of the rice, which was cultivated from indica and japonica varieties, said institute director Yu Jun at an 11 May press conference. An international consortium of researchers is already sequencing japonica, while a team in Shanghai has taken on indica.

Yuan Longping of the Chinese Academy of Engineering Sciences hopes the new project will not only lead to further increases in superrice yields but help explain why hybrids often outperform their parental strains in yield and disease resistance.

To complete the project on schedule, the institute has 30 new sequencing machines and a teraflops supercomputer, which should increase sequencing capacity up to 15-fold. Next on the lab's agenda: genomes of a pig and of *Schistosoma japonicum*, the tapeworm that causes schistosomiasis, the world's most prevalent parasitic infection after malaria.

The Burden of Baring All

The New England Journal of Medicine (*NEJM*), a self-proclaimed leader in exposing all potential conflicts of interest among authors, may have outdone itself in the 18 May issue. A 29-author write-up of a giant study on treatment of depression with Bristol-Myers Squibb's drug Serzone involved so many drug company ties that there wasn't room to get it all in print. Instead, it's on the *NEJM* Web site. Lead author Martin Keller of Brown University alone has served as a consultant to nine companies, gotten grants from nine, and served on 13 corporate advisory boards. *NEJM* might save space in the future with a simple disclaimer: "Assume multiple drug company ties unless otherwise indicated."

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