

Neue Beobachtungen über den Erreger der Maul- und Klauenseuche: Die Entwicklung des Schmarotzers im Blut, speziell in den roten Blutkörperchen. By Dr. Hrch. Stauffacher. Pp. 62+plates. (Zürich, 1918.) Price 8 francs.

THE author describes and illustrates a number of curious linear and spherical bodies found in the red corpuscles of animals with foot-and-mouth disease, and works out a life-history for them along the lines familiar from the parasites of malaria. The difficulty in all such investigations is to be sure that the intracellular appearances represent the cause rather than the effect of the disease, and to distinguish between a parasite and some remnant of the nucleus of the erythroblast seems often to be impossible. Sometimes the nuclear remains are plain as such; sometimes by special methods they can be brought to take a basic stain in cells which by ordinary procedures would appear normal; it is quite possible that they may be thus unmasked in consequence of a parasitic illness. What curious objects may be found in red corpuscles is readily appreciated by examining the blood of a dormouse or of a new-born rat. The nail- or tadpole-like bodies shown very clearly in the first photograph are extraordinarily similar to those demonstrated some years ago by Braddon in (or on) the red cells in rinderpest.

A Night Raid into Space: The Story of the Heavens told in Simple Words. By Col. J. S. F. Mackenzie. Pp. 143. (London: Henry Hardingham, n.d.) Price 2s. 6d. net.

THIS book describes in a chatty, discursive way the elementary facts of astronomy. It is avowedly written for those who have absolutely no mathematical knowledge. Unfortunately, there is in many places an absence of the necessary precision of statement. Thus the description of precession suggests that it affects the earth's orbital motion, there being no mention of the equatorial plane. Moreover, the action is ascribed wholly to the sun, though the moon's contribution is twice as great. The description of sidereal time, and the explanation of the spectroscopic determination of radial velocity, are misleading. Also the erroneous statement is made that the Babylonian year contained 360 days, and had an intercalary month every sixth year. Its real length was 12 lunations, or 354 days, and there were 7 intercalary months in 19 years. Altogether the book needs careful revision; if this were carried out, it could be recommended as a simple handbook.

Musings of an Idle Man. By Sir R. H. Firth. Pp. xii+359. (London: John Bale, Sons, and Danielsson, Ltd., 1919.) Price 7s. 6d. net.

THIS book comprises seventy-five readable and suggestive essays on the most varied subjects, ranging from "The Origin of Life" to "Good and Bad Form." In an essay on "The End of Life" the author envisages the final destruction of life by heat due to radio-activity.

NO. 2630, VOL. 105]

Letters to the Editor.

[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. Neither can he undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts intended for this or any other part of NATURE. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.]

Museums and the State.

THE old danger arising from the haphazard application of a name surrounds the public institutions which are called "museums." By a perversion of its ancient signification, the word "museum" is now used to designate a collection of natural history specimens, pictures, antiquities, machinery, wax-work or other articles (rarely libraries), as well as the building where it is exhibited to the public either with or without charge for admission. There are various so-called "museums" supported by public funds, either national or municipal. The proposal to create a new body of Government clerks (or to aggrandise an existing one) on the pretence that museums form a "genus" which all alike require central control of one and the same "tape and sealing-wax" type, and that the well-known ignorant, and therefore impartial, Civil Servant is to have new fields of plunder thrown open to him—as "administrator"—is not surprising. We are familiar with such schemes, but, none the less, this is one that all serious lovers of science and of art should resist to the uttermost! What is needed in regard to our existing national and other public museums is not the creation of highly paid posts for otherwise unemployable "administrators," but definite legislation after inquiry and report by a Royal Commission as to the specific purpose, scope, and method of work to be followed in each of those great museums which in this country receive support from public funds. "Overlapping" of collections and neglect of this and that department could be at once prevented by assigning to each museum its proper function and by making its income depend upon its doing what it is intended that it shall do. No central salaried body, no "committees" of delegates, trustees, or members of governing bodies are required. They certainly would prove incapable and obstructive, as such "committees" have generally shown themselves to be.

The defects in the working of our national museums have arisen from the fact that they have come into existence in obscure, surreptitious ways and by chance—witness the history of the British Museum, of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and of the new so-called Science Museum. They have no programme, no clear assignment of scope and purpose to guide them, and no attempt is made by successive Governments to define their functions and to ensure for each of them and for other "museums" supported by public funds a reasonable system of management and control designed so as to ensure their activity and development as efficient instruments of public service.

A central bureau of managing clerks pretending to deal under a heterogeneous "committee" with all the various branches of science and art concerned in the life and progress of all our museums would be an exaggeration of the worst features of the present management by irresponsible and incapable "trustees."

I am convinced that what is needed is the separation and independence of the chief departments now agglomerated in the national museums and their redistribution to form a series of independent institutions each under its own highly expert specialist as director, with no other interference than that of a visitatorial board assigned to each museum, approved