

*American Civil Engineers' Handbook.* Editor-in-chief, Mansfield Merriman. Fourth edition, thoroughly revised and enlarged. Pp. 1955. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.; London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1920.) Price 33s. net.

THE seventeen sections into which the volume is divided cover the whole field of civil engineering, together with mathematical tables, mechanics, physics, meteorology, and weights and measures. The fact that there is but little overlapping indicates that the work of the editor-in-chief has been done thoroughly. Books of this kind must contain the information in a condensed form; in the present volume, however, the condensation has not been carried to the extent which sometimes obtains, making the contents a mere dictionary. On the contrary, each of the sections is presented in a readable form, and is profusely illustrated. British practice differs in many respects from American, but there is much in common, and so much of value in the latter as to make it almost essential for students of civil engineering to have some knowledge of American practice. In no other single book that we have seen can so much information be obtained regarding the practice of civil engineering in the United States, and we can confidently recommend the book as a useful addition to the British civil engineer's library.

### 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.]

#### The British Association.

WE must first tender you our best thanks for having, at this time of inevitable reconstruction, opened your columns to a discussion which has been of great value in showing the general trend of opinion concerning the future of the British Association. We have had the benefit of letters from presidents and secretaries of Sections in addition to those printed in your columns, and now beg to offer a few general comments. But we hope we shall not be regarded as attempting thus to closure the debate and dismiss it from our minds; rather do we regard the period of discussion, and, we would add, of experiment, as just beginning. It was with the full consciousness that much new enterprise and revision of old procedure were desirable that we invited the recorders and local secretaries to a friendly meeting at Oxford in the spring of this year, and we hope to continue at regular intervals the discussions then initiated and helpfully continued in your columns. We need only add here that as it is an essential function of the British Association to consider and act upon all suggestions tending in any way to the advancement of science, we hope that if you receive further communications for which you cannot find room you will do us the favour to forward them for our consideration.

Proceeding to general comments, we would first express satisfaction that the undoubted smallness of the Cardiff meeting has not been allowed undue weight, even by critics who did not attend and could not appreciate the unusually keen and businesslike quality of the proceedings. Many causes contributory to its smallness are fairly obvious, and incidental to recovery from the war. The high cost of travel and of living (the predatory attitude adopted by one or two of the Cardiff hotels by anticipation was particularly unfortunate), and ultimately the local tram strike, all played their part, and it is to be feared that some of them may continue operative beyond the Cardiff meeting. This we can only endure, reminding those who formerly urged that we should discourage "camp followers" that it is not for them to complain if the attendance is less.

But the important criticisms and suggestions have had a more general character. Some of them (fortunately) cancel out, as when Sir Ray Lankester advocates very careful pre-arrangement and Sir Oliver Lodge the throwing over of the time-table in favour of impromptu discussion. Sometimes the cancelling is kindly done in the same letter, as when Prof. Armstrong, another *laudator temporis acti*, first sings the praises of two long official reigns and then advocates a rapid change of officials. Parenthetically, we may correct a misstatement in his letter; the General Committee did not "relegate to a committee the appointment of a new treasurer"; it only adopted the universal practice of appointing a committee to suggest names to the council. We have, however, no wish to curb permanently the picturesqueness of Prof. Armstrong's exhibitions of hitting out at all and sundry.

But some of the points on which there is division of opinion cannot be simply dismissed for that reason, and chief among them is the very important question of the nature of the Sectional proceedings. Should they be made more "popular"; and can this be done without repelling some of our most regular and most useful supporters?

Now we fully agree that it is a very important function of the British Association to attract the public and impress the nation, but even from this point of view alone it may not be the best method to cater directly for them. Where a frontal attack may fail, more insidious methods may succeed.

One excellent method of attracting the public is to make sure of attracting the nearest living representatives of men like Huxley and Lord Kelvin, who always attracted the public. Now Lord Kelvin used to declare (Sir Arthur Schuster kindly allows us to quote his authority for the fact) that he came to the meetings of the British Association "to hear what everybody else was doing"; and the curtailment of "specialist" papers might easily drive away the very people who ensure the success of the meeting, and in some Sections certainly would do so. We need scarcely labour this point, on which Prof. Eddington has already written much good sense; but we will just add that, in spite of the existence of "special societies" in London, there are many people who have no other chance to hear "what everybody is doing." Thus there are many who are not near enough to London to attend meetings regularly; there is the growing army of science schoolmasters and schoolmistresses who can attend meetings only in the summer holidays, when the London societies do not meet; and there are the numerous members who are interested in more than one Section. All these would benefit by meetings of the Sections even if they were conducted on *precisely* the lines of specialist societies. No one, however, advocates this extreme ex-