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The Museums of the British Isles.¹

SCATTERED throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland there are 530 museums, all at the service, in greater or less degree, of the public. They represent a great heritage of historical, educational, and intrinsic worth, and, like any other heritage, they impose obligations upon their trustees and beneficiaries alike. That, in the main, these obligations have not been satisfactorily met, is the burden of the report of Sir Henry Miers, made at the instance of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees. This outstanding monograph, which bears evidence of careful investigation and constructive thought, ought to mark a stage in the development of British museums, from which definite and rational progress should be made, and for this reason it ought to be in the hands of everyone associated with the control of museums.

The inefficiency of the majority of local museums arises from three sources. In the first place, it may be imbedded in their history, for many began as odd and nondescript collections made by 'collectors,' and many have continued the tradition of their foundation. In the second place, it may arise from indefiniteness of ideas as to the purposes and capabilities of museums in general or of some particular museum. This weakness is especially centred in governing or controlling bodies which, with the best will in the world, may be able to give no useful guidance in the development of the collections of which they are trustees, and at the worst may regard the museum as a home for derelicts, requiring no attention, demanding no progress, a place set aside for moths and dust. The last inefficiency lies in the museum curator himself, who, through lack of knowledge, lack of training, or lack of ideas, may be unable to guide either his collections or his trustees.

With these and the many subsidiary shortcomings of provincial museums, Sir Henry Miers attempts to deal in his report. It is impossible to state in any fullness the many suggestions he makes, but broadly his ideas run towards a great centralising and local decentralising of museum effort. He thinks there should be more museums, since many large towns and populous areas show extraordinary museum deficiency, but he is equally positive that the small, ill-assorted and heterogeneous collections which compose the stock-in-trade of perhaps the majority of little local museums, must give place to

¹ A Report on the Public Museums of the British Isles (other than the National Museums), by Sir Henry Miers, to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees. Pp. ii+213+8 plates. (Dunfermline: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1928.)

something better devised to meet the needs of their district.

At the centre of this scheme would stand the great government and national museums, places of rich collections, where the pick of the nation's treasures are to be found, with highly expert staffs and superabundant specimens ready to supplement the efforts and collections of lesser institutions. Next in grade would be central county museums, under the care of "the only body which can hope to provide adequately for the needs of the rural population," the county council. An already existing museum might be selected or a new museum created as the 'county museum,' but the essence of its place in the scheme is that it should become the centre of the county's museum efforts, housing the general collections, directing the scope, and aiding the development of the rural museums in its area, so that wasteful duplication should be avoided and the resources in skill and material of the less populous places be fittingly supplemented.

Last in the series, and providing perhaps the greatest problem of all, are the rural museums. The muddled assortment of bric-à-brac must go, and its place be taken by restricted and discriminate collections selected from a local viewpoint to serve in the best possible way the needs of the immediate district. Each local museum would thus become in the main, if not in entirety, a specialised institution with collections of a specific nature depending upon the idiosyncrasy, scientific, industrial or artistic, of its own limited region. Here we have foreshadowed a development in the museum world of that 'regionalism' which, introduced by Prof. Patrick Geddes, has given a new stimulus to the study of geographical and human relationships.

The scheme is a bold and a fine conception. The question which will arise in the mind of anyone familiar with the museums of Great Britain is, "Is it practical politics?" The difficulties are enormous. At the bottom lies the need of money; money to erect suitable buildings, to purchase and keep first-rate collections, and, most of all, to pay for the services of skilled curators; for no scheme can ever come into being based upon the degraded notions that are too prevalent regarding the qualifications required for the proper conduct of a museum.

There are also other difficulties, of which one of the greatest may be local patriotism. The American museums, some of the best in the world, depend very largely upon charity, and charity must be encouraged, but it has frequently a local flavour. A successful man collects during his residence

abroad a fine, perhaps unique, collection of a specific kind, which he offers to the museum of his native town. The museum trustees recognise that it lies without their usual field, but are they to refuse a gift of great scientific and intrinsic value? Still more, are they to set about quenching the smoking flax of interest in their charge?

County councils cannot burden the public rates on behalf of museums to the extent that would be necessary until such time as they have a solid backing of public opinion, and public interest in local museums cannot be aroused until museums offer the people collections and arrangements of collections more instructive and more entertaining than the dry-as-dust medley with which they are too familiar. It is a vicious circle: improve the museum, public interest will be stimulated, and public money will be forthcoming to improve the museum.

There is only one way out, and this is that the first step in the cycle, the bettering of the museum, so that it may be established on an up-grade which will ultimately land it at its due place in the educative and beneficent activities of the State, should be made through the application of funds from an outside source, independent of the public and the rates.

The Medicine of an Aboriginal Tribe.

Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Vol. 10, No. 2: *Studies in Santal Medicine and connected Folklore.* By Rev. P. O. Bodding. Part 2: *Santal Medicine.* Pp. 131-426. (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927.) 10.11 rupees.

THE Sántáls are one of several aboriginal tribes of India whose home is in the hills of Bihar and Chota Nagpur. Before 1855, when, infuriated by the subtle extortions of the Hindu moneylender, they rose in rebellion (and are said to have shown their valour by standing up fairly with axe and bow to a charge of suppressive cavalry), they were little seen or heard of outside their own jungles. Brave and self-reliant as they are, they live in terror of devils. Though their homesteads in their characteristic villages are well spaced in a long row on either side of a single street, without any cross-streets or unhealthy alleys, they are not exempt from the diseases generally endemic in India or from the common epidemics of the country; and their untutored minds think of disease as caused by devils, which they call *bongas*, and auxiliary witches.

The author of this memoir has lived among the