

NATURE

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CONTENTS

	Page
Selection Methods and Man-power	545
Concepts of Culture. By Lord Lindsay of Birker	547
Caste in India. By Prof. J. H. Hutton, C.I.E.	548
Practical Electronic Circuits for Industry. By T. H. Flowers, M.B.E., and Dr. J. R. Tillman	549
Mathematics for the Engineer. By F. G. W. Brown	550
Sense of Taste. By Dr. J. H. Kenneth	550
Central and East African Water Resources. By W. D. Brind	551
Reform of German Higher Education in the British Zone of Occupation. By Dr. Ronald Fraser	552
Chloromycetin: its Structure and Synthesis. By Prof. H. Raistrick, F.R.S.	553
Cytology as a Factor in Taxonomy	554
Obituaries:	
Mr. P. Bruce White, F.R.S. By Sir Charles Harington, F.R.S.	556
Capt. G. C. Shortridge	556
Prof. Douglas Hay	557
Mr. John Ardagh. By Dr. J. Ramsbottom, O.B.E.	557
News and Views	558
Letters to the Editors:	
Determination of Carbonic Anhydrase Activity.—A. M. Clark	562
Effect of Urethane Combined with X-Rays on Chick Fibroblasts.—Edith Paterson and Mary V. Thompson	563
A New Method for Determining the Weight of Cellular Structures.—Dr. A. Engstrom and B. Lindström	563
Chlorophorin, a Constituent of Iroko, the Timber of <i>Chlorophora excelsa</i> .—M. F. Grondon and Prof. F. E. King	564
Formation of Trivalent Cobalt Complexes in Protein Hydrolysates.—Per Laland and Karl Closs	565
A Quinonoid Structure for Hydroquinone Pyridinium Salts of Organic Acids.—Dr. Abdel Fattah Aly Ismail	565
Clathrate Compound Formed by Benzene with an Ammonia-Nickel Cyanide Complex.—H. M. Powell and J. H. Rayner	566
Double Orientation and Infra-Red Dichroism in Polymers.—Dr. A. Elliott, E. J. Ambrose and R. B. Temple	567
Reactions in Liquid Sulphur Dioxide.—Dr. I. Lauder and E. Rossiter	567
Determination of Keto-Acids by Partition Chromatography on Filter-Paper.—Dr. Dorian Cavallini, Nora Frontali and Giovanni Toschi	568
Divergent-Beam X-Ray Photography.—W. May	569
Radioactivity of Dust.—C. Jech	570
Raman Spectrum of Potassium Bromide.—Prof. R. S. Krishnan and P. S. Narayanan	570
Differential Transformer Bridge Operated by Square Waves.—Dr. W. A. Prowse and Mrs. Elizabeth Laverick	571
Free Barium in and Evaporated from Oxide Cathodes.—R. O. Jenkins and R. H. C. Newton	572
A Simple Method of Producing Wide-Band Frequency Modulation.—Dr. H. Rakshit and N. Sarkar	572
Studies on Human Dentine.—H. F. Atkinson and Prof. E. Matthews	573
Mutations by Photodynamic Action in <i>Bacterium prodigiosum</i> .—Dr. R. W. Kaplan	573
Artificial Media for Rearing some Phytophagous Lepidoptera.—Eunice F. Wellington	574
A Fungus Disease of Raspberries Induced by Insect Attack.—R. S. Pitcher and P. C. R. Webb	574
Biological Oxidation of Manganous Sulphate in Soils.—V. B. D. Skerman and S. M. Bromfield	575
A Narwhal in the Thames Estuary.—Dr. F. C. Fraser	575
Sub-Microscopic Localization of Minerals in Skeletal Muscle by Internal 'Micro-Incineration' within the Electron Microscope. By Dr. M. H. Draper and A. J. Hodge	576
The Teaching of Biology in Schools. By Prof. H. Graham Cannon, F.R.S.	577
Structure of the Resting Nucleus in <i>Morasmus androsaceus</i> Fries. By Dr. J. A. Macdonald	579
A Notation for the Lewis and Lutheran Blood-Group Systems	580
The Teaching of Physics. By G. R. Noakes	581
Climatic Races of <i>Achillea</i> . By Prof. I. Manton	582
Treasury Grants for Science and Research in Great Britain	583

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SELECTION METHODS AND MAN-POWER

IN its ninth report for the session 1947-48, the Select Committee on Estimates discussed the Civil Service Commission, and recommended that the Civil Service Selection Board should be retained for the present if only on a part-time basis. Few who saw the Board at work in its country mansion at Stoke d'Abernon were not impressed by the skill and thoroughness with which the potentialities of candidates were probed and brought to light for the final interview board of the Commission. It is not contended, even by those who hold most strongly that the new methods have helped the final selection board to make a better selection and fewer mistakes, that these methods are as yet anything more than experimental, and it should not be forgotten in applying them that their effectiveness depends largely on the accuracy with which we can define the qualities sought in the candidates, whether for the Civil Service or any other occupation.

Nevertheless, granted that the Selection Board has been working on the right lines—and there were only two dissentients from this view on the Select Committee—the Civil Service Commissioners have wisely decided to continue the Board on a more modest scale. They agree with the Committee that when the present lease of the Manor House at Stoke d'Abernon comes to an end, smaller and less expensive premises should be found. So far as the Civil Service itself is concerned, the number of candidates is likely to be considerably reduced in the near future. Therefore the Commissioners agree generally with the Committee that there should be a reduction in the directing staff; but they observe with some force that the extent of the reduction should be determined on general grounds of economy and administrative efficiency, rather than in strict proportion to the decline in the number of candidates as the Select Committee suggests. To effect a substantial reduction the Commissioners believe that a non-residential establishment is necessary, and candidates will accordingly have to find their own accommodation while under scrutiny. Certain consequential changes in the arrangements operated by the Selection Board will be necessary, which will coincide with the conclusion of the main series of examinations under Reconstruction Regulations; but no estimate of the resulting savings in cost is given. At the same time, the Commissioners record their emphatic opinion that a residential centre affords the best conditions for the conduct of the Selection Board experiment, and they do not accept the view that the work which has been done at Stoke D'Abernon has been an unnecessary extravagance.

These decisions of the Commissioners are announced in the third report from the Select Committee on Estimates for the session 1948-49*. They are accompanied by a spirited reply to some of the observations in the ninth report referred to above. The Commissioners challenge the Committee's con-

* Third Report from the Select Committee on Estimates. Pp. 87. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1949.) 4d. net.

clusion that the system of testing tends as a whole to favour candidates who are quick at dealing with intelligence tests but who may lack some of the qualities especially valuable to the Government service. The Commissioners insist that, at the final group conference, at which all the evidence is marshalled and weighed by the three judges, no single piece of evidence is decisive and that speed at dealing with intelligence tests is only one small factor, and one of the less important, among a very large number that are taken into account. In answer to the comment that the Colonial Office does not make any use of the procedure at Stoke D'Abernon, the Commissioners remark that the India Office and Burma Office in 1945 set up a board on the same lines to test candidates, and the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry are using a similar system to test candidates for cadetships.

It is true that it will be some time before the recommended candidates show their powers of development, so that there is at present lack of full evidence on which to judge the merits of the system for selecting candidates. Meanwhile, even the Select Committee admits that many first-class recruits might be lost to the Civil Service if the method of entry by way of Stoke D'Abernon were to be abandoned. The promise which the innovation has shown suggests, indeed, that the Board might be entrusted with more experimental work, and the decision to restrict its work may, from the national point of view, prove a false economy in that it may deny to industry and the universities the opportunity of learning from the Board something about choosing applicants.

In his evidence before the Select Committee, the First Commissioner, Sir Percy Waterfield, said that a joint committee with the Federation of British Industries was exploring the possibility of putting the Selection Board's methods at the disposal of industry. He also referred to the suggestion, which has since received wider publicity in the report of the 'working party' on university awards, that the Selection Board could be used to help to sift young ex-Service conscripts who, for some reason or other, failed to qualify for a university education before they went into the Forces, but have been reported on favourably by their Service education authorities. On the first statement the Select Committee made no comment; but on the second, it "would view with concern the adoption of a system as a result of which only those applicants possessing qualities thought to be desirable in a Civil Servant would be accepted by the Ministry of Education as suitable for a University education".

Surely, however, the first principle of selection tests is to define the qualities sought in candidates. The Commissioners have rightly made clear that a new form of tests appropriate to the purpose would be worked out by the Civil Service Selection Board, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and the university authorities, the object being to select those candidates who possess qualities likely to enable them to profit by a university education. Whatever the precise form these tests take, the

Selection Board would presumably submit a report to the appropriate authority, and it would be for that authority to reach the final decision, using the report as evidence. It is true that Dr. W. W. Grave made reservations on this point in the 'working party' report, but he does not seem to have misunderstood the proposal as the Select Committee appears to have done. Dr. Grave was concerned to preserve the autonomy of the university and the right of the university to make the final choice of applicants from those who might be recommended by a selection board. It should be noted that the working party's proposal was to place the final responsibility neither with the selection board responsible for the tests nor with the universities, but with a Final Selection Board constituted by the Ministry of Education, on which the universities were to be represented. This is quite a different proposal from that now suggested by the Civil Service Commissioners, which should go far to meet the objections from the universities' side to that in the report on "University Awards".

In any event, it is made perfectly clear that the experiment would be on a small scale until experience has been gained. The great administrative strain under which the universities are at present placed is a further reason for experimenting with any method that may help to relieve them in what may be an increasingly heavy task, quite apart from the desirability of trying out new methods of finding the nation's most promising talent for a university education. Most important of all is the task of finding ways to assess a candidate's potentiality rather than his achievements, and no solution to that problem will be found without experiment and much careful thought.

Whether or not the methods of the Civil Service Selection Board can be modified and applied so as to make a real contribution to the selection of even one type of university student, they may well offer some real help in the selection of men for industrial appointments, and perhaps especially for administrative responsibility. The result of the inquiry to which the First Commissioner referred will be awaited with interest. In the meantime, the observations on the possible application of such selection tests to candidates for university awards may contribute to the discussion of the wider question of university examinations, which has been brought to a flux by the new examination system to come into full operation in 1951. In reconsidering entrance requirements, whether by examination alone or with the further assistance of selection tests or the interview, the first step is for the universities to be quite clear as to what they are looking for in their candidates for admission.

This step is fundamental in formulating any proposals to give effect to the resolutions passed at a recent meeting of representatives of universities convened to discuss proposals for entrance requirements and to harmonize divergent views. However strongly it may be agreed that greater weight must be given to diligence and aptitude, or that the possession of intelligence and zeal, as Sir Henry Tizard

urged at the Brighton meeting of the British Association, is what matters most on entering the university, the universities cannot well consider the matter apart from the schools. A thorough understanding between the universities and the schools is essential in shaping the entrance examination, just as a thorough understanding of what we seek for in candidates is the first condition in devising effective selection tests to guide us in the choice of entrants for the Civil Service, for industry, or possibly for the university awards and scholarships as well.

The whole problem of selection is a highly important aspect of the general problem of man-power. No method that promises to assist in discovering the nation's precious resources of talent, and in placing it where it can best develop, is to be regarded lightly as uneconomic. One great difficulty in assessing the value of an institution such as the Civil Service Selection Board is that while its financial cost is so easily determined, the return to the nation is much more intangible and may, indeed, only appear over a period of years.

22/6

CONCEPTS OF CULTURE

Notes Towards the Definition of Culture

By T. S. Eliot. Pp. 124. (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1948.) 10s. 6d. net.

THIS is a puzzling book. It begins with Mr. T. S. Eliot explaining that his intention is definition, that he wants to make clear to his readers what culture is and what it is not, to give us a better understanding of the meaning of the word so that we shall not talk the nonsense about culture of which he complains.

The first chapter is devoted mostly to this, and is called "The Three Senses of 'Culture'". I find this chapter quite extraordinarily difficult to understand. What seems to emerge as a fairly simple point is that culture properly so called is a characteristic of society as a whole, and that it can be applied to groups and individuals in so far as they play a part in the culture of the whole. Secondly, that the culture of a society is, at least to some extent, a growth and therefore unconscious, and not something that can be consciously planned. We can see that certain tendencies in society are inimical to culture, or tend to degrade it, and we can deal with these specific evils. But culture as a whole we cannot plan. Mr. Eliot then goes on to talk about the relation between culture and religion, warning us that the word 'religion' has got to be understood with great care. About this he says: "The way of looking at culture and religion which I have been trying to adumbrate is so difficult that I am not sure that I grasp it myself except in flashes, or that I comprehend all its implications". Which reminds me of the famous remark of Tennyson about Sordello, that he only understood the first and the last lines. Mr. Eliot seems to mean that the culture of a society is its whole way of life, and so is its religion, and yet they are not the same; and I give this up, because I less understand what Mr. Eliot means by religion than what he means by culture.

I do not think the obscurity of the first chapter matters very much, any more than does the obscurity

of the prelude to "The Egoist". In the remaining chapters Mr. Eliot is putting forward certain views about culture which are clearly important and well worth considering. The second chapter is called "The Class and the Elite", and is largely devoted to a criticism of the views of Dr. Karl Mannheim. Indeed, much of the book is a criticism of Dr. Mannheim's passion for planning. As Mr. Eliot says in the last chapter: "one thing to avoid is a 'universal' planning; one thing to ascertain is the limit of the plannable". Those of us who knew and discussed sociological questions with Dr. Mannheim have probably had something of the same experience which has affected Mr. Eliot. Dr. Mannheim's talk was so illuminating, so able and stimulating, that he was difficult to resist, and we often gave up the argument, silent but not convinced, and then went away to ask ourselves hard why we did not really agree. Dr. Mannheim held that the culture of society depends upon an intellectual elite, and that the future of a planned society depends upon the strength and the vitality of this elite. Mr. Eliot's second chapter is really an examination of the whole ideal of a classless society; that is, a society which is so contrived that every individual fulfils the function for which he is by nature most fitted, where his position in society does not depend on his family or anything of that kind; there is in the classless society complete and perfect equality of opportunity. We often accept that ideal as an obvious one. Mr. Eliot's criticism is that it is an atomistic view of society, that culture depends at least partly upon the strength of the family and of tradition, and therefore on the existence of classes. We so take for granted nowadays that a classless society is an unmixed good and the ideal towards which in different ways we are all moving that this criticism of the ideal by Mr. Eliot seems to me of great value. Whether one agrees with it or not, the considerations which Mr. Eliot brings forward are well worth thinking about.

The third chapter is called "Unity and Diversity: The Region". Mr. Eliot's contention is that it is very important that the culture of a society should have in it a certain unity in diversity, and that is admirably fulfilled in a society which has both dominant and satellite cultures. He explains why, in his view, it is a good thing for English culture that it is in relation with and affected by Welsh and Scottish cultures, as it is good for Welsh and Scottish cultures that they are not entirely independent, but are affected by English culture. Therefore it is important to preserve the vitality and independence of the satellite cultures, and it is worth agreeing to political and economic arrangements which will subserve the partial independence of such satellite cultures. The vitality of a culture depends upon its relation to other cultures and is served by a certain friction between them; and this is what really matters in regionalism in general. "It is an essential part of my case, that if the other cultures of the British Isles were wholly superseded by English culture, English culture would disappear too." Then Mr. Eliot refers again to his previous chapter, stressing the vital importance for a society of friction between its parts. "One might even put it that a classless society should always be emerging into class, and a class society should be tending towards obliteration of its class distinctions. I now suggest that both class and region, by dividing the inhabitants of a country into two different kinds of groups, lead to a conflict favourable to creativeness and progress." It follows from this that the