

combining the best parts of the traditional meetings with the public platform which will be needed for the proper presentation of the association's interests in public issues. It could well turn out that the ideal is unattainable because

it costs too much, in which case it is to be hoped that the association's members will acknowledge that it is better to make a dash for survival at this stage than to face the prospect of a slow but inevitable decline.

Geographers as Authors

THE idea that geographers, of all people, should need instruction in how to write will no doubt be a surprise to many geographers, let alone to their colleagues in other fields, and for that reason it is creditable that Mr T. W. Freeman, Reader in Economic Geography at the University of Manchester, should have been able to write a book, *The Writing of Geography* (Manchester University Press, £0.84), which is neither patronizing nor platitudinous. To be sure, books which are bound to contain lots of examples of how other people write badly and which nevertheless avoid rubbing salt into open wounds are entertaining to read, and those who are not geographers can cluck their tongues and say to themselves that such practices would never be allowed in, say, chemistry or physics. . . . Mr Freeman has advice for everybody, however. He opens by urging that writers should begin by making sure that they have a rounded view of what they want to write about, even if this implies that they must take extra care to collect enough information. He goes on to argue that research and authorship are inseparable parts of scholarship—a person should write up an account of his work as he does it, not merely because he may otherwise forget what he has to say but because the act of writing is a stimulant to further thought. And, in the best traditions of Gowers and Fowler, Mr Freeman has good sport with the unnamed authors of solecisms such as “the rapidly developing shipyards added to the number of workers”. Relenting, he commends vivid writing such as “To be poor, in West Indian eyes, is to be black; to be white is to be rich; and to be coloured is to be somewhere in between, relatively well-off, middle-class”. All this is good knockabout stuff, but it is too bland. Academic prose is much worse than Mr Freeman implies. That it should remain so is a continuing scandal.

The empirical evidence that scholars in general and scientists in particular should write plainer English is plentiful; most journals are full of it. The most serious complaint is not at the way in which people use words but at their motives in writing at all. Good grammar is only a means to an end and there is no reason why some authors should not be able to convey the essence of what they have to say by methods that would bring a rap over the knuckles in many Victorian primary schools. It is true, of course, that a writer needs to be sure of himself before he throws the grammar book away but what he most of all needs on his side is a direct appreciation of why he wants to write. It must be acknowledged that in a good deal of what academics write, objectives are unclear or, worse, suspect. Sometimes, articles in journals seem to have been written with the intention not of communicating to readers news of some development of interest to them as well as to the author, but of creating the impression that something is going on without revealing what this may actually be. These are the articles which are written for posterity (when some ambiguously constructed phrase may be reinterpreted as

the first hint of an important discovery) or for immediate colleagues and competitors (who may have the information necessary to interpret what the author has written). On other occasions, the exposition is clear enough but is also so dry that it will serve only as a statement of facts, not as a means of persuading readers to take as their own ideas or points of view which may not previously have occurred to them. In short, a common fault in academic writing is that it is cryptic (which is an offence against scholarship) or unpersuasive (which is a way of making sure that it serves no purpose). Over the years, the convention has been established, especially in the sciences (which include geography) that just as data are in themselves neutral, so scientific records should be neutral—raw material with which readers must make up their own minds. One obvious difficulty is that most readers are never able to appreciate the neutral data as sensitively as the author, with the result that they often miss the point. A more serious flaw in this view of how the scientific literature should be written is that attempts by authors to conceal the views they wish their readers to adopt lead them into tortuous arguments which either bemuse their readers or, worse still, mislead them.

100 Years Ago



WE reprint the following sentence from the recently published address of the President of the Tyneside Naturalists' Field Club, commending it to the notice of similar institutions throughout the country now that the season for excursions is commencing:—
“We have no law excluding ladies from our club, but yet we have no lady members. Ladies, however, sometimes attend our meetings, and it would, I think, be an advantage to the club (may I hint also that it might be an advantage to the ladies?) if more of them came, and oftener. It is of infinite importance that mothers should be able to impart to their children an intelligent interest in Nature. They cannot do this unless they first possess that interest themselves, and in what way can it be more pleasantly developed and refreshed than by meetings such as ours? It may perhaps be objected that the length and occasionally the rugged character of our walks prove an obstacle to the presence of the weaker sex; but my impression is that this is not the case to any very serious extent, and in many of our excursions ladies have proved themselves quite equal to walks as long and as arduous as are at all desirable for our purposes. I would therefore recommend—not any new rule, which is needless—but simply that we should persuade our lady friends to join the club as members, and not as only casual visitors.”

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