

# Letters

## All About Libraries

George W. Beadle, chairman of Caltech's biology division, has always had a strong interest in library management. In England as Eastman Visiting Professor at Oxford University for 1958-59, Dr. Beadle set out this fall to make use of the Oxford libraries. The following is a true account of his experiences, which he wrote and sent to friends at Caltech interested in library matters.

It all started this way: The Demonstrator in Genetics asked me where he could find a good summary of the mechanism by which bacteria exchange genetic material.

"Easy," I said. "There's an excellent review in the *Scientific American* of about a year ago. You see it, of course?"

"No, not regularly. We don't have it in the Department Library," (Botany) "but it will be in the Radcliffe Science Library, just down the street."

I made a mental note of that for I had decided that I would initiate my lecture series at Oxford with a review of evolution beginning with the origin of the elements and I knew I could find excellent summaries of the present state of knowledge in the recent volumes of the *Scientific American*.

Next day, I went down to Radcliffe to learn my way around. I was duly signed up in the big book, given permission to use the library and instructed in its organization.

First I checked for the May number of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that I knew had contained a paper I wanted to read. It hadn't yet crossed the Atlantic and made its way through the Bodleian-Radcliffe accession machinery. This was not too surprising even though I had already received, in Oxford, by ordinary mail, the August number. Things do move a bit slower here and one must learn patience . . .

"Now to get that issue of the *Scientific American*," I said to myself.

I checked the periodical catalog. No card for the *Scientific American*.

Realizing that it was almost tea-time and that I'd miss that pleasant

half-hour if I didn't hurry back, I returned to the Botany Department—with the report that the Radcliffe didn't have the *Scientific American*.

"Oh, you *must* be mistaken," said the Demonstrator in Genetics. "It just has to be there."

The next day I tried again, with the friendly assistance of a gentleman who, I judged from his behavior, was the head librarian.

"Well, now," he explained, "that periodical is just a bit popular for us and I don't believe we have it."

He confirmed my check of the card file, reviewed the "on order" list and then went to the World List.

"Oh, this is why we don't have it. You see, it is in Forestry and in the Bodleian."

"Fine," I said. "Forestry is right next to Botany and it will be convenient."

So I went to Forestry, hunted up the "Enquiries" office and said confidently and cheerily to the young lady in charge: "I'm in Botany and I should like to use your library. You seem to have an up-and-coming Department here, one with commendable enterprise and good judgment. You have the *Scientific American* in your library. Botany and Radcliffe do not."

She beamed at me, invited me to use her library and took me directly to the librarian.

I stated my desires—permission to use the Forestry library and specifically right then to consult the *Scientific American* which I understood they had.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm afraid we don't receive it any more. Rather popular, don't you know?"

It turned out, on further inquiry, that they had discontinued the *Scientific American* in 1933.

But there might be other material I'd need, so I asked for and received indoctrination in the use of the Forestry library, including signing the "Library Book." This library is not catalogued in the same way as Botany (and Botany differs from Radcliffe). Even within Forestry there are two catalogs—one for books published

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## Letters . . . continued

prior to 1934 and a different one for more recent books.

We did, before I left Forestry, check another periodical catalog of the Oxford libraries. The *Scientific American* was indicated as being in the Department of Agriculture (of the University).

The next day on the way to lunch I stopped in at Agriculture, found the office, stated my request and was escorted to the library and introduced to the librarian. I again said who I was, what I wanted in general, and specifically inquired about the *Scientific American*.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm afraid you're mistaken. We don't subscribe to many popular journals, you know."

Right beside him was a rack of farm journals.

I later re-checked the catalog of the Oxford libraries. The *Scientific American* is listed in Agriculture.

The next day I resolved to solve the specific problem of reference to the *Scientific American* by going to the main library—the Bodleian.

I was directed to the right building and to a certain lady and I found her, a most pleasant and cooperative person, taking library pledges from a gathering of new students. I queued up and waited my turn; again I stated my desire.

"Are you a member of the University?"

"Yes, I'm the Eastman Visiting Professor this year and am in the Botany Department."

"I'm sorry to cause you inconvenience but I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to take the pledge."

So I pledged:

*"I hereby undertake not to abstract from the Library, nor to mark, deface, or injure in any way, any volume, document, or other object belonging to it; nor to bring into the Library or kindle therein any fire or flame, and not to smoke in the Library; and I promise to obey all regulations of the Library."*

"Oh, yes," she continued, "and now I must ask you to fill out this application."

She handed me a form and said: "Are you by chance a member of a College?"

"Yes, I'm a Fellow of Balliol."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't understand. In that case you need not fill out the form."

I concluded that Fellows of Balliol outrank Eastman Professors.

I followed her directions to the periodical card catalog—in another building—and confidently set out to find the *Scientific American*.

No card.

No *Scientific American*.

No *Scientific American* in the Bodleian.

No *Scientific American* in the whole of Oxford!

But no, that may not be true. For the Bodleian and its branches—Radcliffe Camera, New Library, Radcliffe Science Library, Rhodes House Library and Indian Institute Library—are not the only libraries in Oxford University.

There are 24 College libraries, all separate, each individual in its system of cataloging, its hours and its rules. Women may not enter some; I haven't yet investigated whether men may use the libraries of the several women's Colleges.

And in addition to the 24 College libraries there is the Balliol-Trinity Library of Science—separate from the regular Balliol and Trinity libraries and distinct from the Radcliffe Science Library.

There is no central catalog of College libraries.

So I may be wrong. The *Scientific American* may be in one of the College libraries—or maybe in all of them.

I figure that if I were to consult all the reference material relevant to my survey of evolution from the beginning of the universe to the advent of modern man, I should have to make use of 17 different libraries. I don't think I'll manage it by Thursday of next week.

So I guess I'll just have to send home for my file of *Scientific Americans* and another batch of reprints.

Oxford is a marvelous institution—or perhaps one should say, a loose federation of institutions—and I shouldn't want to see it changed. All the same, I'm certainly glad Caltech is going to have a centralized main library where I can learn about evolution, from hydrogen to man, in one building.

— G. W. Beadle