

SPECIAL REPORTS.

1. SOME PRINCIPLES OF MUSEUM ADMINISTRATION AFFECTING THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOMINION MUSEUM.

(By J. ALLAN THOMSON, Director.)

I. NEED OF A DEFINITE PLAN.

It is now an accepted principle in museum administration that if the best results are to be obtained each museum must outline for itself and steadily pursue a definite policy. "The general character of a museum should be clearly determined at its very inception. The specialities or departments of any museum may be few or many, but it is important that its plan should be positively defined and limited, since lack of purpose museum-work leads in a most conspicuous way to a waste of effort and to partial or complete failure." *

It is generally admitted in the community that the Dominion Museum does not occupy the position that it should as a national Museum. So far as natural history is concerned, its collections are surpassed in all but a few departments by one or more of the provincial museums, while in the important department of geology the Museum is at present without any collections of its own. The primary industries of agriculture, forestry, and mining are scarcely represented by exhibits or by material that could be made up into exhibits if space permitted. The reason for this state of affairs lies largely in the lack of a well-founded policy steadily pursued.

The Museum started with a miscellaneous collection gathered by the long-defunct New Zealand Society, and housed by the Wellington Provincial Government. In 1865 this collection was transferred to the General Government and incorporated in the Colonial Museum, which was founded about that date in association with the Geological Survey. Dr. (later Sir James) Hector had in 1866 a perfectly definite and limited plan for the Colonial Museum, which he thus stated in his first annual report: "One of the most important duties in connection with the geological survey of a new country is the formation of a scientific museum, the principal object of which is to facilitate the classification and comparison of the specimens collected in different localities during the progress of the survey." †

It was unfortunate that the national Museum was so strongly directed towards geology in its first twenty years; as rocks, minerals, and fossils can be collected at any time, while, on the other hand, the land fauna and flora of New Zealand and the primitive life and modes of thought of the Maori peoples were rapidly disappearing through contact with European settlement. In 1903 on the retirement of Sir James Hector the association of the Colonial Museum, the Geological Survey, and the New Zealand Institute came to an end, and it was decided to make a complete change in the policy of the Museum. The geological specimens were transferred to the custody of the Mines Department, and were in great part stored away in boxes; while the new Director, Mr. A. Hamilton, devoted his special attention, at the instance of the Government, to the collection of a representative series of specimens of Maori art and workmanship. This proved a difficult task, for most of the best specimens had either been exported from the country or were in the hands of the provincial museums or private collectors, who would not sell. It is safe to say that had the acquisition of such a collection been one of the original parts of the policy of the Museum, an infinitely better collection could have been obtained at about one-tenth of the cost. Nevertheless, thanks to the enthusiasm of Mr. Hamilton and the liberality of donors such as Mr. L. Buller and Mr. A. Turnbull, such a collection has been got together as must make Maori ethnography always one of the most prominent departments in the Museum.

Throughout both periods, that of geology and that of Maori ethnography, the biological sciences have not been altogether neglected by the Museum, but have always taken a subordinate position. Naturally, for a geologist, Sir James Hector's specialities in zoology lay in the direction of marine zoology, and the Museum collections of whales and fishes are by no means unrepresentative. But unfortunately, again, these are groups which are not in such danger of extinction as the land fauna—birds, lizards, land-shells, insects, &c.—and in none of the latter groups were the collections representative. Mr. Hamilton remedied these matters to the best of his ability with the means available, but it still remains true that the Museum collections are sadly deficient in land-animals of every kind, with the single exception of butterflies and moths.

The above summary of the history of the Museum will show not only that it is unfortunate that the policy of the Museum was not more broadly planned at the outset, but that, if the future is not to be as unfortunate as the past, a well-considered policy must be adopted and tenaciously adhered to. The object of this paper is to put forward certain considerations which may form a basis for discussion of the policy to be adopted.

II. FUNCTIONS OF A MUSEUM.

To the man in the street a museum is a building where collections are exhibited, and differs from an exhibition only in that it is always there and may be visited next year instead of this, but is probably too dull to be worth visiting at all. It is not at all the function of a museum to amuse, but it can and should be made to instruct and interest. That museums are thought uninteresting is the fault of the museums in the past, but modern methods of installation are rapidly changing this state of affairs.

There is a fundamental difference between the exhibition and the museum: the exhibition is primarily for the promotion of industry and commerce, the museum for the advancement and spread

* C. Brown-Goode: "The Principles of Museum Administration." Annual Report Museums Association, 1895.

† "Memorandum concerning the Colonial Museum." Parl. Paper D.—9, 1866.