THE NEW MILLENNIUM

A journal of the history of science seems almost obliged to mark the transition from one millennium to another, artificial though that may be. It seems even more contrived for a journal that is about science related to The Royal Society, for our history spans not even a millennium but almost exactly one-third of that period. Yet the history of science in those years has much to teach us today about the practice and use of science and to help in promoting its understanding among the wider public. The Society and its Fellows have been particularly deeply involved in the development of a number of disciplines, and so we have essays on representative topics—time, microscopy, exploration, geology and planetary studies, together with some cautionary tales about prediction—though not the only ones that could have been included. One topic, the science of materials, is represented by a book review. As is usual for the first issue of a year, we include the President’s Address to the Anniversary Meeting—his last, and the last of the millennium.

The Library of the Society is the oldest scientific library in continuous existence and celebrates more than a one-third millennium, for although as an entity it is coterminous with the Society, some of its holdings, notably those of the Arundel bequest, are older than the Society. There is, for example, an early book from the Accademia dei Lincei of Prince Cesi in Rome. The Library put on an exhibition of some of its holdings of meteorological works at the Soirées last June and we reproduce a number of those items, together with a selection of illustrations from the rich collection of botanical books.

The Society has, from the start of its life until almost the present time, supported and even run scientific institutions of national importance. Fellows actively promoted the establishment of the Royal Observatory, and when Newton became President he ensured that a committee of the Society oversaw its work, an arrangement that continued into the last century. The Society later directed the work of the meteorological observatory at Kew, and when, just 100 years ago, the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) was founded, it was as a laboratory of the Society. In November last year, a meeting was held in the Society’s rooms to celebrate 100 years of the NPL, and since that coincided with the end of the last millennium, it seemed right to have a report of it in this issue. Our President gave an account, published here, of the history of the NPL and its relations with the Society, but many of the other talks were, as is appropriate in our first issue for the new millennium, about current and possible future work at the NPL.

What of the history of science as the new millennium opens? Modern science developed essentially within and out of European life of the last 400 years, and from its first days The Royal Society has had members from other European lands, and also from the North American extension of the European world. The last years of the previous millennium have seen a great efflorescence of European cooperation in science through particular institutions, notably CERN, ESA and EMBO, but also more generally through the European Commission and the European Science Foundation. The Commission and the Foundation both promote the study of the history of science
and so we are glad to have contributions from two European members of our Editorial Board. Professor William Shea of Strasbourg has written an editorial for this issue, and Professor Debru has sent us an account of a Commission conference on the teaching of the history of science. The history of science is an essential part of the history of human thought and endeavour, it is a guide to the practice and use of science, and it contributes greatly to the understanding of science by people who are not scientists. We hope that our contributors and readers, known or unsuspected, will enable us to advance those ends of learning and understanding as the new millennium opens.

Sir Alan Cook