This issue of Notes and Records offers research papers dealing with periods ranging from the early eighteenth century to the late twentieth, and with themes connecting scientific and technological practices to satire, travel, religion, popularization and government policy. Collectively the papers illustrate the great variety of forms that communication of and commentary on science have taken: pamphlets, travellers’ notes, newspaper reports, books for children and general readers, inspirational Nobel Prize lectures, and keynote speeches by prominent politicians all figure here.

The first paper takes as its starting point a pamphlet: The York Buildings Dragons satirized rival metropolitan hydraulic projects, their advocates and their detractors in 1720s’ London. This anonymous work has been attributed, albeit tentatively, to the Newtonian engineer and technical author John Theophilus Desaguliers but Pat Rogers argues that the true author was the mathematician, physician and irrepressible member of the ‘Scriblerians’ John Arbuthnot. The paper adds to the developing field of literature and science, though here technology and medicine are prominent; and it challenges historians of science to recognize and, with tough archival work, to recapture the significance of erudite and ephemeral wit, of the kind typically associated with that other Scriblerian Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, in critiques of early eighteenth-century science. Explaining the culturally entangled, apparently obscure, jokes of the 1720s illuminates the otherwise elusive experience of the new science and its industrial ambitions.

Charles Blagden was a British army surgeon, a prolific scientific diarist and, from 1784, secretary to the Royal Society during the lengthy presidency of Joseph Banks. Some will recognize in him the ‘type’ of the scientific bureaucrat, known through figures like Henry Oldenburg in the early Royal Society, or Sir John Robison, junior (son of the better-known natural philosopher) at the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Paul Frame’s paper illustrates the potential for continued international scientific interaction through correspondence (here with Blagden’s Welsh friend John Lloyd, in 1778), even during times of political conflict (here, the Revolutionary War in America). We will be learning more about Blagden and his epistolary networks thanks to University College London’s research project ‘Charles Blagden and Banksian Science, 1770–1820’, undertaken in close collaboration with the Royal Society.

Research in nineteenth-century British history, including history of science, has been revolutionized in recent years by the increased availability of newspaper resources, and especially those which may now be searched with ease online. Richard England’s intriguing paper looks again at the Huxley–Wilberforce debate at the Oxford meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1860, revisiting a ‘set piece’ in the interaction of science and religion. Historians’ desire to know who said what to whom at that famous meeting, and how audiences reacted, has led to intense scrutiny of primary sources, including what seems to have been a censored Athenaeum account, and to much creative speculation, especially because contemporary accounts differ and seem to have omitted some of the deliciously memorable verbal jousting disseminated in accounts traced to the Huxley camp and reproduced in popular accounts ever since. Did
Huxley et al. embellish the story? The newly rediscovered and, as it were, unexpurgated, account in the Oxford Chronicle reproduced and analysed here will cause historians to rethink the foundations and the significance of the encounter yet again.

The parliamentary-style near-verbatim reporting of the Oxford Chronicle in 1860 was a far cry from the carefully crafted evolutionary epic of the popular author Arabella Buckley. Jordan Larsen’s paper uses Buckley to explore the story of evolution in a period when the vast range of implications of Darwinian views was being elaborated in subtle but often conflicting ways, to fit with contemporary religious views and spiritualist beliefs and practices held by Alfred Russel Wallace and others. Herself a spiritualist and an advocate of ‘traducianism’, Buckley is here shown to have conceived the status of a soul in a manner she believed to be consistent with natural selection. In private, she proposed that the soul was not a later addition to the physical human frame, after natural selection had done its work; rather, souls themselves were subject to, and the products of, evolutionary mechanisms in nature, their state at any particular time once rehoused within a particular individual the consequence of past natural historical contexts.

Jon Agar’s Wilkins-Bernal-Medawar Prize Lecture takes for its topic ‘curiosity’ in science. Agar treats this notion in a wonderfully concrete way, linking it to the asserted motivation of Nobel Prize winners, the unschooled inquisitiveness of the child, the morality of early modern experiments of ‘light’ and of ‘fruit’ – and much more besides. Categories such as ‘pure science’ and ‘applied science’ are not ‘natural kinds’, presented to us by the physical world about us, but rather rhetorical constructs, with their own histories, developed for particular purposes in particular contexts. Agar shows how Max Perutz’s attack on ‘mission-oriented science’ (science overly preoccupied with immediate utility) and his call for a return to ‘curiosity-motivated research’ in a New Scientist article provided ammunition for the scientifically trained Margaret Thatcher – who, in the autumn of 1988, advocated ‘curiosity-driven research’ as UK government policy.

This issue concludes with an essay review by Casper Andersen of an innovative new companion to the history of science edited by Bernard Lightman.

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