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HUMAN NATURE IN SCIENCE¹

By Dr. JOHN K. WRIGHT

AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY, NEW YORK

THE Executive Committee has asked that emphasis be placed throughout this session of the association on "the indispensability of science for the future of civilization." This seems a little like putting the cart before the horse. If civilization were to disappear there would be no science, and science will contribute nothing to civilization if men of science fail to cultivate civilized qualities and respond to civilized motives. Hence, my talk to-day will bear, rather, on "the indispensability of civilization for the future of science." I shall invite your consideration of certain relationships between human nature, both individual and collective, on the one hand, and science on the other, and I shall illustrate some of these relationships with particular reference to geology and geography.

During their careers scientists acquire by bitter and

¹ Address of the retiring vice-president and chairman of the Section (E) on Geology and Geography of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1943), Cleveland, September 13, 1944.

sweet experience considerable information—even wisdom—concerning the influence of human nature on science. This they pass on to younger colleagues, who now and then give heed to it. Perhaps more heed would be given if the information itself were more "scientific." Actually most of it is gained hit or miss. Scrappy, unorganized and unsystematic, it breeds "pet theories."

The question of how human nature affects science is surely important enough to warrant a less personal and more systematic approach. Large quantities of data on the subject are available in published and unpublished documents relating to the history of science. From analysis of these data principles could be derived and illustrative examples could be drawn that would offend no one, as well might the use of examples taken from contemporary observation. Indeed, among the most valuable of the lessons to be learned from the history of science are those concerning the ways in

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