

IV. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, DOMINION MUSEUM.

Dominion Museum, Wellington, 18th June, 1917.

THE MUSEUM AND THE WAR.

IN view of the urgent need for national efficiency in the use of man-power, a non-productive department such as a museum should either be closed down or should justify its existence and its staffing. I have thought it my duty to give this question serious consideration since the commencement of the war, and would have preferred personally to relinquish my present position for war work in England had the maintenance of the present activities of the Dominion Museum not seemed of national importance. The question of actual military service does not arise, as there is no male member of the staff of military age who is eligible.

Museums in the first place are storehouses for the rare and the beautiful, and for the history of man. In a war to conserve the highest forms of civilization the tangible fruits of this and lower forms of civilization must not be scrapped. Museums must be maintained as storehouses, even if they are not open to the public, and this means caretakers and night-watchmen. Parts of the collections would deteriorate without periodic overhaul, and this involves additional staff.

Museums in the second place are, or should be, an integral part of modern systems of education, and through their public galleries serve a portion of the public not otherwise provided for. It cannot be claimed that the Dominion Museum, with its totally inadequate building, is a very efficient educational factor at present, but it meets an increasing demand owing to the number of visitors the military camps attract to Wellington, and the keeping of the doors open retains on the staff only one man beyond those necessary for the maintenance already mentioned.

Museums in the third place serve as a bureau of information and reference for scientific and other matters. The activities of the Dominion Museum in this respect are yearly expanding. Not only are the inquiries about natural-history objects from the public becoming more numerous, but the information of the staff is being increasingly consulted by Government Departments. A large proportion of the Director's time has been taken up during the last year with the co-ordination of the scientific publications of the Government and the problem of the organization of scientific and industrial research, the preservation of the native avifauna and of Maori pictographs, and other similar questions of national importance.

In the fourth place museums exist for carrying on research, and, while most kinds of research must be dispensed with at the present time, research into the ethnography of the primitive Maori race is one that must from the nature of things be pursued now, war or no war, or much scientifically important information will be lost for ever. The whole time of one officer is spent in this work.

In the fifth place the Dominion Museum includes also the nucleus of the Dominion Scientific Art and Historical Library, and the library of the New Zealand Institute. Absolutely the first fundamental in any scheme for the co-ordination of scientific and industrial research for New Zealand is the provision of an efficient scientific library in the Dominion, and the present nucleus must be properly cared for, and the incoming volumes acknowledged, recorded and bound, and placed on the shelves. This work, together with the working of the International Exchange Service, although shared between several officers, takes up time nearly equivalent to the whole time of one officer.

Finally, every function of the Museum must be intensified after the war if the lessons of the importance of scientific methods which the war has taught are to be kept before the people. The Dominion Museum should be in a position, as soon as a suitable building is provided, to fill that building with suitable popular educational exhibits and complete students' reference collection of all the natural products of New Zealand. The formation of these collections requires much work on the specimens besides their actual acquisition. One war of the future will be a war of man against insects, and it is important to know allies from enemies. The formation of a reference collection of New Zealand insects, which occupies the whole time of one officer, is the only branch of natural-history work which the present staffing permits to be kept reasonably active.

In view of post-war requirements, with a full appreciation of the urgent need for national efficiency in man-power, combined with a cognizance of the man-power that is going to waste in other doubtfully important directions which need not be named, I have no hesitation in closing this review of the Museum's activities and staffing by declaring that the staff should not at present be diminished in the name of national efficiency, but could be increased with great advantage.

BOARD OF SCIENCE AND ART.

The second annual meeting of the Board was held at the Dominion Museum on the 1st February, 1917, under the presidency of the Hon. Mr. Russell (Minister of Internal Affairs). The matters dealt with more particularly affecting the Museum were as follows:—

Regarding the proposed new building, the beginning of which was deferred by Cabinet, it was resolved "that this Board begs to call the attention of the Government to the continued danger to the valuable national collections in the Dominion Museum owing to their being housed in the present inadequate and inflammable building, and to repeat the Board's recommendations of the 29th January, 1916—viz., that Cabinet be recommended to commence without delay the erection on the present Museum site of a fire-proof building to house such collections."

Relative to suggestions forwarded by Mr. H. Skinner, that in order to combat the inevitably separatist tendencies of local historical collections in the Dominions the British museums should co-operate in assembling and distributing to the overseas museums collections illustrating the history of civilization in the British area since the earliest times, it was resolved "that the Board endorses Mr. Skinner's proposals, and suggests that steps be taken to obtain for permanent exhibition in the Museum a series of objects illustrating the origin and development of British civilization."