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# QUAESTIONES ENTOMOLOGICAE

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### Editorial – One Eye on the Pot

The year 1972 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Department of Entomology at the University of Alberta. Anniversary –the turning of the year– is perhaps an unfortunate term, and especially so in relation to a university, the function of which is the unification –or turning into one– of knowledge. For, though history may repeat itself, it is to be hoped that a university does not. Perhaps it is the celebration of centennials and other major anniversaries that encourages history to repeat itself, for such celebrations are often preoccupied with the events of a hundred years earlier. If we should not be preoccupied with the past, then, trapped in the tunnel of time, our only remaining option is to look forwards. But gazing into crystal balls is fraught with perils for these without an anchor in history, so perhaps we need to take a quick glance backward to see whence we have come before viewing the horizon ahead to chart a course for the future. Oh for a pair of compound eyes, each able, though plastered on to the head, to look both ways without asking it to turn for them. Too little attention has been paid to this feature of the structure of insects, in attempts to understand their ability to stay on course in migration.

In 1921 E. H. Strickland, then working for the Canada Department of Agriculture at Lethbridge, visited Edmonton to consider an offer made to him by the University of Alberta. It must have been later in the year than this issue of *Quaestiones entomologicae* will appear, for the then Dean of Agriculture took him out on to some rough ground at the north end of the campus overlooking the valley of the North Saskatchewan River –like stout Cortez– and showed him the place where a building which would house the proposed department of entomology was to be built. We do not know whether Strickland was swayed by what he saw on that day, but in April 1922 the Department was created and twenty-five years later the staff increased by 100 per cent and he and I each occupied a roomlet, at either end of a modest room in the medical building. Our supporting staff consisted of half a stenographer and \$12 a month worth of part time student help. Professor Strickland's budget for entomological books for the library in 1923 was \$20, and the entire budget for the department in 1947-8 was \$9,401. Although nobody saw fit to calculate it, the cost of a "teaching unit" was \$18, a fifth of the cost today; we now teach four times the "units" with three times the staff and twenty times the money. In 1958, four years after Professor Strickland retired, the Department of Entomology moved into its present quarters in the Agriculture and Bio-Sciences building, which is just about where the Dean had said it would be. Two years later these quarters proved inadequate and a migratory branch of the department finally came to

an uneasy rest in the basement of Athabasca Hall.

So much for the backward glance. What of the future? When the first issue of *Quaestiones entomologicae* appeared a caustic reader remarked that he had no use for fly-by-night periodicals which usually folded up in five years. We have outlived that one. Some other pen than mine, I predict, will write an editorial for the volume which marks the centennial of the Department of Entomology. The editor who writes it may well have something caustic to say about this editorial for some of my predictions will be wrong; but if this one is, at least he will not say so.

It is customary to predict, by direct extrapolation of a smoothed curve of human population, that there will be 7.5 billion of us by the year 2000. With rather less reliability it might be predicted that by 2022 there will be double that number. But the curve of human population is based on close approximations for less than 300 years and we do know that *Xenopsylla cheopis* was indirectly responsible for putting several dents in the curve before that time and glacial epochs probably did likewise. Furthermore at least some drafts of the early part of the curve have been based on several species of hominid. Add to this Deevey's (1) elegant demonstration that this is man's third population explosion and the first to have its roots in non-renewable resources, and any applied entomologist might be expected to predict an end to the outbreak before 2022. A successful prediction of such an event should lead to a return to favour of entomologists, among both their biological colleagues and the population at large. Indeed, since a reduction in the number of insect species will almost certainly have resulted from the activities of the peak population of man, perhaps the economy of a declining population will support enough taxonomists to catch up a bit with the task of describing these species.

Sparked by the shortage of food and specifically of animal protein, man will have returned to eating insects. His smaller population will have been able to retreat from monoculture so that insect pest problems will have been reduced –perhaps to a point where eating the troublesome species will provide adequate control. Of course the arts of the kitchen should have so progressed that even a swarm of hoary old horseflies might be transformed into a delectable dish, and we can but imagine the succulent delight a skilled cook could render from the abdomens of queen termites forcibly fed on proof copies of last quarter's *Quaestiones entomologicae*. Or perhaps by then it will be last month's.

Clearly, as compared with today, the relative importance of the positive and the negative aspects of applied entomology will be reversed. Benefactory entomology will transcend pest control.

The Department of Entomology at the University of Alberta will be re-united under one roof –perhaps that of Athabasca Hall– but it will be understood that the roof will be demolished in the following year.

And so, like the cross-eyed cook in the English folk-song, we look briefly back and soberly forward from the first issue of volume eight –‘with one eye on the pot and the other up the chimney...’

(1) Scientific American 203:195, 1960