

BRIEFER ARTICLES.

BOTANICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY.

THE announcement in a recent number of *Hedwigia* that, at the request of a number of subscribers, it is proposed to abandon the publication of bibliographical notices in that journal, except in a few cases, brings up the question of the best method of issuing notices of current botanical literature. The question is especially pertinent at the present time, since the publication of an international scientific catalogue is under discussion. Those who have expressed their views on the subject have considered principally two points, viz., (1) whether the proposed catalogue should be a card catalogue or should be issued in some other form; and (2) the best classification of subjects to be adopted. In this country the card catalogue is generally preferred. It is not necessary to discuss here in detail the merits and defects of such a catalogue so far as it is to be used in large public and university libraries. In a certain sense, however, all working botanists may be said to be librarians on a small scale, and the question which concerns us is, how shall we best secure a good record of current literature for our private use? Probably most botanists have card catalogues of subjects in which they are most interested, but such catalogues must be made by individual botanists, each from the standpoint of his own particular needs, and they could not be furnished wholesale by any publication agency.

What botanists want is a list of the titles of botanical publications as soon as possible after their issue, together with such accounts of their contents as will enable them to determine whether they need to buy the publications named, or to recommend the libraries near at hand to buy them. This information in a very large number, if not in most, cases cannot be given on any card of the size proposed for use by those who advocate card catalogues, and a card catalogue, valuable as it is in many ways, cannot be transformed into what is wanted, viz., a series of short descriptive, not critical, reviews. To accomplish the important object of furnishing botanists as speedily as possible with adequate notices of current works, it seems to us better to utilize some

regular botanical journal under competent management, with a numerous staff of editors, than to depend on a general international scientific catalogue, whether issued in the form of cards or printed sheets to be bound together. Just's *Jahresbericht* is probably as good a work as is practically possible except in the delay of publication, which probably might be reduced by skillful management so that it would be only a year behind the time. In a journal which should have for its sole object the publication of notices of current literature, the delay of a year would be fatal; but, in order that the notices might be up to date, it is plain that it would not be possible to treat the material with the same thoroughness and completeness as in Just's *Jahresbericht*, where time is taken to digest it thoroughly. In the case of a journal reviewing current literature we can only ask that the notices shall appear as quickly as possible and that the whole ground shall be covered as far as is practically possible, expecting that some works will escape notice at the time.

The form of journal which it seems to me is best adapted for the purpose is something like that of the *Botanisches Centralblatt*, and the question arises, would it be possible to transform that journal so that it might become a satisfactory organ to be accepted by all botanists as the standard record of current literature? We may therefore, in the interests of those desiring as satisfactory a journal as possible for the record of current literature, offer certain criticisms on the *Centralblatt* as now conducted, not, however, intending to reflect on the management of the journal, which deserves praise for its activity and enterprise. At present, the *Centralblatt* furnishes original articles, reviews of recent books and papers, and a list of current publications, besides certain items coming under the head of news. It may be said with truth that by far the larger portion of the subscribers take the *Centralblatt* for the sole purpose of knowing the contents of botanical publications as soon as possible after their issue. They do not take the journal because they expect to find in it important original articles, but they do expect, in return for their money, as complete an account of current literature as the editors are able to furnish. Since 1891, however, it has been the practice of the *Centralblatt* to issue a series of *Beihefte*, forming annual volumes of about 500 pages, not included in the subscription price of the journal but issued as independent volumes. The result is that one is practically forced to pay two prices in order to obtain the complete set of notices; the notices which one would care to

have are quite as likely to be found in the *Beihefte* as in the *Centralblatt* itself. The great body of subscribers are practically paying for what they do not want, the original articles, and are forced to pay an extra price for what they do want. It would be quite possible, by omitting the original articles or relegating them instead of the notices to the *Beihefte*, to include all the notices in the four regular volumes issued annually. Certainly this result could be accomplished if the lengthy notices of certain works not of primary importance were condensed as they should be, the interest of the reader being consulted rather than the wishes of the author.

On looking over the original articles in the *Centralblatt* it will be seen that, while a certain number are important, they are almost always short, and, it must be confessed, not numerous; on the other hand, the majority, it can hardly be denied, are tedious and on subjects which could interest very few readers. A good share of the original articles would appear more properly in the proceedings of learned societies than in a current journal. Again, the subscriber hardly cares to pay for polemic tirades of a personal and perhaps undignified character.

We are, of course, speaking in the interest of the subscriber. As far as the interests of the publishers are concerned the following suggestion may be offered. If, by suppressing the original articles and limiting the journal to the one object of furnishing notices of recent works, avoiding lengthy notices of the less important and rejecting those containing personal criticism, the journal could be generally recognized as an indispensable record of current literature, would not the number of private subscribers be so much increased as to more than counterbalance the subscriptions now received for the *Beihefte*?

As it is, the *Centralblatt* is a valuable journal, and, with certain modifications which seem to me practicable, it would become so nearly perfect, practically speaking, that for the purposes of botanists it would be better than any international catalogue and could be sold at a price not beyond the means of most working botanists who would find that they could not do without it; whereas now they hesitate to subscribe to the *Centralblatt* because they know that for many of the notices they will have to subscribe for what is practically another journal. If it is not feasible in the opinion of the publishers of an existing journal to transform it into such a record of current literature as is desired by botanists, the question arises whether, by a combination among

botanists, it would be possible to issue such a journal directed by a number of capable editors who should receive pay for their services, it being understood, however, that such a journal would pay its way without leaving a profit. To secure a good result, it seems to be necessary that certain competent persons should be paid for writing the reviews. Gratuitous notices written by the authors themselves cannot be depended on, for authors are given to prolixity in reviewing their own works. In a recent *Beiheft* of the *Centralblatt* is a review covering twenty-five pages, written by the author himself! In this case a single page would have answered every purpose and it would have been cheaper to pay someone to write that page than to pay for the printing of twenty-five pages.

As a last alternative, if no other arrangement can be made, the following tentative experiment might be tried. By private subscription a sum might be raised to establish a journal which, for five years, should give the record of botanical literature in a single country, our own for instance. The experiment might be worth trying, and, at the end of five years, if the experiment proves successful, the journal could be made to cover a larger field on an independent footing. If unsuccessful, it could be abandoned, probably without much loss.—W. G. FARLOW, *Cambridge, Mass.*



Farlow, W. G. 1900. "Botanical Bibliography." *Botanical gazette* 29(1), 64–67.
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