

HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS

No more than the works of art of a given period of history are something completely detached from contemporaneous events in other, wider fields, can the development of science be regarded as uninfluenced by what happens outside its particular sphere.

True, the scientist uses methods by which he attempts to arrive at conclusions as objectively as possible; but in the conception and evaluation of problems and theories the "spirit of the times" will invariably have an important say. This may be illustrated by a simple example.

Mediaeval man, imbued as he was with the static image of the unbreakable hierarchy of the feudal estates, also pictured to himself Creation as a kind of ladder on which each species of animal had been allotted, right from the beginning, its own unalterable "rung". It was accordingly considered rather bad taste to show much interest in those despicable creatures that populate the lowest steps of the ladder.

What a change in this mental disposition during the 19th century, when social conditions had been in the melting-pot, and man became aware of the fact that it was possible to climb the ladder! In this new situation the doctrine of evolution could generate and thrive; and indeed, the question whether micro-organisms can be produced from dead matter is no longer a purely academic question, but one that affects mankind itself.

The next two pages represent an attempt to place the development of the microscope in juxtaposition with a number of important events in other fields. It needs no emphasis that a survey of this kind, being so extremely concise, must be very incomplete, and leave much for the reader to supplement.