CHAPTER I

WHAT IS THE SMITHSONIAN?

In the Smithsonian Institution, America perpetuates the name of an Englishman. He was an Englishman who never saw America, who never, until he made his will, betrayed any special interest in the young Republic across the seas. Neither was he a man known widely for any great achievement. Yet his name will endure as long as the Government of the United States endures. No irony of chance need be looked for in this reward to modest James Smithson of England; there is in it, rather, a subtle and profound justice. Far in advance of the mass of even intelligent thought, James Smithson had faith that “no ignorance is without loss to man, no error without evil.” A disciple of the scientific method of patient observation, of measuring, of weighing, and of correlating, he spent his life in its application to decrease the boundaries of ignorance, and on his death he consecrated his fortune to the perpetuation of his faith, making young America his trustee. In the course of years, materially inspired and aided by Smithson’s bequest, the United States has come to accept as one of its motivating faiths the faith of James Smithson, while the key to the nation’s most typical contemporary achievements—in business organization, in education, in relations between labor and capital—is to be found in the application of the scientific method, which James Smithson’s gift to America helped so much to propagate. And therein lies the fitness of our recognition of this Englishman.
Smithson’s gift had a timeliness rarely met with in the annals of nations. He died in 1829, willing his fortune of $542,000, conditionally on the death of his nephew without heirs, to the United States of America, to found at Washington an establishment to be called the Smithsonian Institution, “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.” The money reached this country in 1838. Congress spent eight years in sporadic debate on how best to increase and diffuse knowledge among men, thus delaying the establishment of the Institution until 1846.

At that time the United States constituted a scientifically unknown area, enclosing in a single geographical and political unit a prolific plant and animal life ready under the most favorable conditions to reveal their secrets to botanists and zoologists; a country peopled by a primitive race, illustrating the mode of life and habits of thought of prehistoric man and offering a priceless clue to the lost story of man’s climb upward. At the same time, in the hands of an energetic people possessed of a freedom not before known to history, untrammelled by tradition, and putting a premium on the initiative of the individual, were the mechanical tools, particularly steam transportation, capable of developing this new continent. In fact, the country was on the eve of a dynamic expansion westward which, with the suddenness and the energy of a tidal wave, was to subdue two thousand miles of wilderness.

Such a setting and such men to deal with it offered possibilities for the increase of knowledge such as perhaps the world had never before seen. The danger was that the men would remain blind to those possibilities and waste the setting for practical ends without thought of its perishable secrets. The need was for some powerful, inspiring force, actuated by the highest ideal of knowledge for its own sake, which would be conscious of the possibilities and which would devote its energies to making
WHAT IS THE SMITHSONIAN?

the most of them. That force the liberality of the Englishman, James Smithson, helped to supply.

Congress made two invaluable gifts to the emerging Institution—prestige and stability—the former by accepting the trusteeship of the Smithsonian, and the latter by creating an unimpeachable governing board. The Establishment, an inactive body, includes the President, Vice President, Chief Justice, and the Cabinet; the Board of Regents, which actually governs the Institution, includes the Vice President and Chief Justice, three Senators, three Representatives, and six private citizens chosen by Congress.

In spite of this close and mutually profitable relationship with the Government, the Smithsonian Institution remains essentially a private establishment, enjoying the freedom of action derived from independent funds. True, in addition to its own income, the Institution oversees the expenditure of Government funds, but this is because Congress continues to entrust to its care several public bureaus which developed from the private initiative of the Smithsonian. They include the National Museum, the Bureau of American Ethnology, the Astrophysical Observatory, the International Exchange Service, the National Zoological Park, the National Gallery of Art, and the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature. The Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Fisheries also grew out of private Smithsonian activities, but they are no longer administered by the Institution.

Following the lead of the Government, several private citizens have likewise entrusted great administrative responsibilities to the Smithsonian; notably Charles Lang Freer, who made the Institution his heir and confided his Oriental and American art treasures to its keeping in the Freer Gallery; Thomas G. Hodgkins; and John A. Roebling.

The man immediately in charge of the great administrative organization here outlined, is called, like the men
at the head of the Government departments, the Secretary. In the eighty years of its existence since 1846, four secretaries have controlled the destinies of the Smithsonian. Each has been a man of international standing in science. First came the physicist, Joseph Henry, 1846 to 1878. A contemporary and peer of Faraday, Henry gave up his own brilliant career of discovery in electricity and magnetism to shape the policy of the Smithsonian. Of another scientist’s life we should recount the profound researches and the classic publications. Henry’s electromagnetic discoveries were indeed of such importance as to cause his name to be given to the international unit of electric self-induction, just as Faraday’s is to the unit of electric capacity. But Henry’s greatest experimental research was his development of the Smithsonian Institution; his classic publications form its Reports.

Then followed Spencer Fullerton Baird, naturalist, Assistant Secretary, 1850 to 1878; Commissioner of Fisheries, 1870 to 1887; and Secretary, 1878 to 1887. Baird carried several men’s work continuously, and was not only the foremost authority of his time on birds, snakes, and fishes, but also the father of the National Museum and the U. S. Fish Commission. We owe it primarily to him that America’s fisheries are now flourishing.

After Baird came Secretary Samuel Pierpont Langley, astronomer and physicist, 1887 to 1906. Langley organized epoch-making researches on the solar rays. Later on he rescued the study of mechanical flight from ridicule and, after experimentally developing the art, as early as 1896 he flew large power-models, heavier than air, for long distances. Langley established the Astrophysical Observatory of the Smithsonian Institution, which still carries on his researches on solar rays, and he also was the prime mover in founding the National Zoological Park.

Fourth of the quartet came Secretary Charles Doolittle Walcott, 1907 to 1927, foremost investigator of the most
ancient life of our world, revealed as Cambrian fossils. He headed the U. S. Geological Survey for fifteen years before assuming the Secretaryship of the Smithsonian. Valued advisor to leaders of the Government during many administrations, irrespective of their politics, as well as member and President of the National Academy of Sciences, he was a potent force in all the effective movements for conservation of natural resources for nearly forty years. He was the leader, also, in the formation and development of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

Such is the Smithsonian Institution, and such its leaders during the eighty-one years of its history. The following list of activities presents a bird’s-eye view of the place it fills:

1. It carries on original scientific investigations by its own staff, taking part in expeditions for research in all parts of the world.

2. It prints large memoirs and smaller original papers, publishes useful tables and formulas, and reprints informing articles on scientific progress suitable for the intelligent general reader, and distributes these free to libraries, to scientific and learned societies, and to individuals throughout the world.

3. It administers seven public governmental bureaus and also the Freer Gallery.

4. It subsidizes approved researches by outside workers.

5. It is the official channel of exchange of scientific intelligence between the United States and the world.

6. It fosters scientific development of schools, museums, and institutions throughout the world by cooperation in the loan of research men, in the free distribution of over a million specimens, and in giving its advice and its publications.

7. It maintains at the Library of Congress probably the foremost scientific library in this country, consisting chiefly of the transactions of learned societies and scientific
journals from the entire world, and numbering more than 500,000 volumes.

8. It answers by mail an average of 8,000 inquiries on scientific subjects annually, gratis.

9. It gives occasional lectures and courses of lectures by eminent scientists.

10. It confers medals of honor on eminent discoverers.

11. It procures foreign diplomatic and learned recognition and assistance for expeditions going abroad.

12. It is the headquarters of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Association of Museums. Until 1924, it was the headquarters and meeting place of the National Academy of Sciences.

13. It disburses annually funds from four sources which for five years ending June 30, 1927, averaged as follows:
   (a) The income of its endowment, $65,000.
   (b) Sums entrusted by private individuals for special objects, $70,000.
   (c) The income of the Freer bequest, $190,000.
   (d) Congressional appropriations for seven public bureaus, $850,000.