University of California: In Memoriam, 1943-1945

William Emerson Ritter, Zoology: Berkeley and San Diego

1856-1944
Professor Emeritus

William Emerson Ritter died on January 10, 1944. For several months his health was far from robust although his intellectual activity and clarity of mind were in no ways impaired. He had reached his eighty-eighth year, but he remained young in spirit, keenly interested in the basic problems of biology and their philosophical bearings. Within a month of his death a recently completed manuscript was accepted for publication.

Dr. Ritter was born at Hampden, Wisconsin, November 19, 1856. After graduating from the State Normal College at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in 1884, he taught for a few years in the schools of Wisconsin and California and then came to the University of California from which he was graduated in 1888. In 1891 he married Dr. Mary E. Bennett who, after practicing as a physician in Berkeley for several years, served the University as Lecturer on Hygiene and as medical examiner of women students. Very appropriately the University conferred the degree of LL.D. on W.E. Ritter and M.B. Ritter in 1933 and 1935, respectively.

Two higher degrees were taken at Harvard University, the M.A. in 1891 and the Ph.D. in 1893. After his return to California in 1891, Professor Ritter was made Instructor in Biology in the University, where he organized the first laboratory instruction in zoology. In 1894 he was made Assistant Professor of Biology. The following year, 1894-1895, was spent abroad where he studied in the Zoological Station at Naples and at the University of Berlin. He was advanced to an associate professorship in zoology in 1898, and to a full professorship in 1902.

While he was in charge of instruction in zoology in the University of California Dr. Ritter established summer laboratories at a number of places on the coast--Pacific Grove, Catalina Island, San Pedro, Coronado, and La Jolla, where he was followed by many students who were attracted by his stimulating instruction, his boyish enthusiasm, and his ever kindly and helpful attitude. He was always keenly interested in natural history, but his earlier researches were mainly in the field of comparative morphology. These resulted in the publication of several papers on the tunicata and other chordates.

During the summer spent at the seaside laboratories at Coronado and La Jolla, Dr. Ritter became acquainted with Mr. E.W. Scripps who became much interested in the possible contributions of biology to the scientific understanding of human nature and human social problems. As a result Mr. Scripps and his sister Ellen B. Scripps were led to establish the institute later known as the Scripps Institution for Biological Research. Dr. Ritter became its first director in 1902. The institution soon embarked upon a systematic plan of research on a wide scale. Its program involved subsidiary investigations in the field of oceanography and these came to include more and more of its activities. Accordingly its name was changed later to the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

The association between Dr. Ritter and Mr. Scripps bore fruit in another direction, the establishment of Science Service of which Dr. Ritter became the first president. Science Service is now an active agency in contributing reliable scientific information to the press throughout the country.

Dr. Ritter's published books afford a good index of the scope of his intellectual interests. They include War, Science and Civilization, 1915; The Higher Usefulness of Science, and Other Essays, 1918; The Probable Infinity of Nature and Life (1918); The Unity of the Organism and the Organismal Conception of Life, two volumes, 1919; An Organismal Theory of Consciousness, 1919; The Natural History of Our Conduct

(with Dr. Edna M. Bailey), 1927; The California Woodpecker and I, 1938. A final volume about his old friend, E.W.
Scripps, was completed shortly before his death. Dr. Ritter left a large amount of unpublished manuscripts on various subjects, now in the hands of his literary executor.

It is not possible in a short space to give an adequate account of Dr. Ritter’s contributions to biological thought. His observational and descriptive work was painstaking and sound; but his writings of greatest import are contained in his books and articles dealing with general topics. His general biological philosophy is ably developed with a wealth of pertinent facts in his two volumes on the unity of the organism, a work which has elicited favorable comment from a number of leading biologists and philosophers. He was deeply impressed with the unity of nature and the value of the “natural history mode of philosophizing,” not only in biology, but also in ethics and the social sciences. Man he regarded as a product of nature in all aspects of his being. Hence we can attain a really scientific knowledge of man only by recognizing his kinship with the rest of the organic world. This conclusion is especially emphasized in his last published book, *The California Woodpecker and I*, which is replete with valuable, original observations. Something of the message and spirit of this volume may be gleaned from its concluding sentence: “The Moral Law to which I, my birds, and all living things are subject is a basic element in the Web of Life; it is one of the profoundest manifestations of Nature’s order, unifiedness, and oneness.”

*Academic Senate Committee* S.J. Holmes G.M. Stratton H.B. Torrey

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