A VISIT TO THE HOME OF CIVIL ENGINEERING

By Sergt. Gordon L. Shanks, A.M.Can.Soc.C.E.
Formerly Municipal Engineer, Rockwood, Man.

TO any practising member of the profession, especially if he be British, or to any student interested in its history and development, there is but one place thought of as the home of the profession,—the headquarters of the Institution of Civil Engineers, in Great George Street, Westminster, London, England. All civilized countries have their own national civil engineering societies, with headquarters or homes in the political or commercial capitals of the respective countries, as the case may be, but the British Institution (or Society) of Civil Engineers is the oldest one existing to-day and easily the leading engineering organization in the world in rank, in power, in influence and in dignity. Its home, then, may quite properly be taken as THE home of the profession.

Such, at least, were the thoughts of the writer as he approached the building one afternoon in late October, 1916. The situation and surroundings for this home are ideal. Great George Street is a short street, connecting Westminster Bridge with St. James' Park. Directly across the street is the minor facade of one of the huge government departmental buildings fronting on Whitehall. Almost across the street and a little to one side is a corner of St. James' Park, that beautiful breathing space in the aristocratic, official city of Westminster, while just around the corner and only a few hundred yards away are the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey, representing, as it were, the thought-essence and blood-essence, respectively, of the British race. Surely a fitting setting for the home of the greatest profession!

The building itself, which is only a few years old, is three stories in height with a frontage of about 150 feet. The exterior is quite plain, but massive and dignified. The interior is large, but evidently none too large for the wants of the members. All the rooms, especially the reading room, library and lecture theatre are excellently proportioned for the use to which they are put. The reading room, of course, is stocked with copies of every engineering and scientific periodical published in the world and the writer easily picked out such well-known and familiar magazines as *The Canadian Engineer*, Engineering & Contracting, Engineering Record and Engineering News.

But the library is probably the greatest attraction in the building. The room itself, on the second floor, stretches completely across the whole frontage of the building and is a magnificent apartment. One may find here, under courteous and expert guidance, any information and literature on the subject of civil engineering that has ever been published. The transactions of all the great engineering societies are here in complete bound sets. Indeed, it may safely be said that all that is known to-day of the science and art of civil engineering is reduced to writing, printing or diagrams and kept available in this great room. The writer noticed, among other things, that all the American text-books he had ever read or heard of, in connection with different subjects he was interested in, were here and evidently used quite as much as European books on the same subjects.

A feature of the interior of the building of particular interest to a visitor is the collection of portraits and paintings hanging on the walls. This includes all the past-presidents and distinguished members of the institution and views of some of their works. To look at the portraits of a few of the greatest of these men, such as Telford, Rennie, Smeaton, Macadam, Stephenson, Aird, Willcocks, Baker, Wolfe-Barry, etc., and then think how much their life and works has added to the advancement of civilization during the period in which they lived, is to realize what a very important constructive element this institution and its component members has been in the history of the world since it was founded, hardly 100 years ago. Probably the finest picture in the whole collection (and certainly the most attractive) is a large oil painting of the Forth Bridge, placed in a conspicuous situation at the head of the great staircase. A new hanging, and one probably not thought of when the building was planned, is displayed proudly and prominently, and yet quite modestly, on the main floor near the entrance. It is the Roll of Honor. Evidently this institution is doing its full share, in common with all its professional brethren, to support the cause of the Empire in the Great War.

The bulletin-board in the hall stated that a general meeting of the institution, with a lecture, was booked for the evening of the writer's visit, so he decided to stay. Sir John Griffiths, the chief engineer for the Port of Dublin, was the speaker of the evening, and his subject was "Modern Appliances for Handling Raw Materials at Ports and Other Centres of Traffic." He was clearly master of his topic and delivered a very fine address. Although, naturally enough, most of the descriptions and illustrations (the lecture was accompanied by excellent lantern slides) were applied to and taken from ports in the British Isles, the whole world was included in the scope of the paper, and views were shown of the latest labor-saving machinery at such ports as Antwerp, Hamburg, Duluth, Cleveland, Montreal and New York.

To the writer, however, the most interesting feature of the meeting was not the subject matter of the lecture but the character and personnel of the audience. The presiding officer was Mr. Alexander Ross, the president of the institution. Seated around him was the council, and taking part in the animated discussion which followed the lecture were a number of men, all famous in their respective lines of work, and men very well known, indeed, to anyone familiar with the personnel of the civil engineering profession.

The audience numbered probably 150, and almost filled the large and well-appointed lecture theatre. Only a few young men were present; the great majority were men well up in years. The writer could not help but think of a similar meeting he attended, while visiting Montreal, at the headquarters of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers. The same professional spirit and enthusiasm was certainly present at both meetings, but the greater age and experience of the men taking part in this meeting, and the fact of its being held in London, the capital of the world, gave it a dignity quite impressive to a visitor from overseas. It induced a feeling of awe, almost of reverence, and the writer left the building afterwards quite humbled but thankful, indeed, that he had had the opportunity of visiting this home of civil engineering, this temple of applied science.

Chinese newspapers have discussed very generally the suggestion that the Allies may build wooden ships in China, using timber from the Philippines. The idea has met with great favor. China has an unlimited supply of labor.