

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

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**The Proposed Tropical University.**

THE proposal to create a tropical university which has been put forward in the columns of NATURE and elsewhere is one which requires careful scrutiny and calls for a clear appreciation of the real issues involved.

It seems at least open to question whether the advocates of the scheme really contemplate a new university, or whether they are not rather thinking of a college or institute of university rank, the work of which should be somewhat intimately associated with the promotion of the material prosperity of the great agricultural interests that are growing up in the tropics. Such a college, in addition to the function of inducting men into the various branches of tropical agriculture, should serve, if properly staffed and organised, as a centre for the dissemination of current information on matters pertaining to the industrial needs of the community, in so far as agricultural problems are concerned. For this purpose it is essential that facilities for field and other experiments should be fully provided, and if the site were suitably chosen the college would prove an invaluable training ground, not only for the population resident within its immediate geographical area, but for others also, and especially perhaps for Europeans, about to engage in agriculture in any part of the tropics. Various places have been suggested as possible sites, and there is much to be said in favour of the West Indian proposal. Easy access from Europe, as well as the variety of soil, climate, vegetable products, &c., are all points in its favour, whilst the fact that no British institution of the kind desired exists in that region is a defect which would thus be repaired. Furthermore, the possibility of securing a considerable range of advantages within a relatively small geographical area is of itself a distinct gain, for it could be more economically worked than a similar institute in a large continental area, where things are on a larger scale, quite apart from limitations imposed by a continental climate, which cannot be ignored.

Accepting for the moment the desirability of founding a college of the kind indicated, the danger that lurks in the scheme would almost certainly be found, in practice, to consist in a desire to see immediate results which would be convertible into a cash value by the planters. In order to ensure success, it is absolutely essential that a wise and far-sighted policy should guide the destiny of the institute. Agricultural problems, and especially tropical problems, are seldom simple, and while immediate practical objects need not, and should not, be lost sight of, the college would fail to justify its creation if it were to exist for these purposes alone. It must, while not neglecting the practical training of students in tropical agriculture, also include within itself, as a vitally essential part, a body of first-rate scientific investigators and teachers, who will be able to seize upon problems and work them out. There must be no attempt to limit their work to the economic questions of the moment, for in cramping the spirit of investigation lies the way of throttling material progress.

Such a staff would, of course, cost money, and often the return might seem to be slow in coming, but it is impossible to over-estimate its importance. Indeed, unless a proper staff can be provided, the

scheme is not worth pursuing, for the most that could then be hoped for would be a mere technical institute—a sort of edition *in parvo* of current planting practice, veneered over by a fallacious appearance of scientific equipment.

Now an institute such as is here foreshadowed would greatly gain by connection with leading institutions in this country. Science is growing apace, and particularly those branches of it which especially touch on agriculture. And, however able the staff, it could not hope to escape from the disadvantages inherent in a separation from the main clearing-houses of scientific thought. Some sort of association, then, with home institutions, such as the University of Cambridge and the Imperial College of Science and Technology, for example, could not fail to be of advantage to all concerned. An association of this kind ought to be a real and not a merely nominal one, for only in this sense could it serve any useful purpose and provide for an interchange of knowledge and for the stimulation of ideas. Arrangements might perhaps be made for enabling suitable students of the college to visit this country and be received for a time in the home institutions, and *vice versa*.

Such a college, conceived and maintained on generous lines, would develop into a valuable asset to the Empire, and would exert a powerful influence in furthering the interests and objects of tropical agriculture within it.

But the question of an insular tropical university is a very different one. There are perhaps already more than enough universities, and it is difficult to see how it would be possible to justify the foundation of another in the manner that has been suggested,—quite apart from the very considerable outlay that would be necessarily involved.

Moreover, a centre of real university learning, and still less of culture, can scarcely be created by the stroke of an administrative pen, and it would, in any event, be compelled to seek its justification in the existence of a population large enough and able in other respects to utilise the advantages the university ought to be in a position to confer. And it seems open to inquire whether a mere fraction of the financial resources which would be needed for the more ambitious project might not amply suffice to enable everyone of marked ability to enter an existing university elsewhere, if he (or she) were otherwise unable to do so. There would be many disadvantages inseparable from a small insular university, and it is scarcely necessary to dwell on them here. For the present it may suffice to remark that a second-rate university is not worth its upkeep, whilst a properly staffed and equipped one would demand very considerable funds, and not only so, but other claims, difficult to meet, would also have to be satisfied.

The further one reflects on the matter the weaker does the case for the establishment of the university, and the stronger the claims for the foundation of an agricultural college, appear. Almost all the arguments which can be urged against the first proposition can be used in support of the latter. But it may be that after all a substantial agreement already prevails amongst the majority of those who are advocating the scheme, and that an agricultural college of university rank is really what is desired.

J. B. F.

**The Mountains and their Roots.**

IN NATURE of February 27, p. 703, you honoured me with a review of my recent paper on the origin of the Himalaya Mountains. During thirty years of residence in these mountains I have continually been