News and Views

John Maurice, Count of Brühl (1736–1809)

THE bicentenary of the birth of John Maurice, Count of Brühl, recalls an interesting figure in the history of science in Great Britain in the eighteenth century. Born at Wiederau in Saxony on December 20, 1736, he studied at Leipzig, and at the age of nineteen years entered the Saxon diplomatic service and was sent to Paris. In 1759 he was transferred to Warsaw, and five years later, when but twenty-eight years of age, was appointed ambassador extraordinary to the Court of St. James. From the time of taking up his appointment in 1764, save for one journey abroad in 1785, he continued to live in England for the remainder of his life, and died at his house in Old Burlington Street, W.1, on June 9, 1809. He was devoted to astronomy, and effectively promoted its interests. Through his influence, von Zach, who was a tutor in his family in 1783, became an astronomer and assisted Brühl in determining the latitude and longitude of Brussels, Frankfort, Dresden and Paris. He patronized the chronometer makers Mudge and Emery, wrote on time-keepers, was intimate with Herschel and delighted in transmitting abroad the discoveries made by him and others through the medium of Bode's "Jahrbuch". At his villa at Harefield about 1787, he built a small observatory, and a few years later equipped it with one of the first astronomical circles constructed by Ramsden.

Mr. A. B. MacDowall

A FREQUENT correspondent to NATURE about a generation ago was Mr. Alexander Baird MacDowall, who completed his ninety-third year on December 18. Mr. MacDowall was particularly interested in terrestrial and solar meteorology and the relationships between them, and most of his communications to these columns and to the Royal Meteorological Society dealt with this subject. The methods used by him, and some of the results, are typically illustrated in a small book published in 1895 with the title "Weather and Disease: a Curve History of their Variations". In this volume Mr. MacDowall showed, by means of graphs, the variations which certain elements of the weather and the mortality from certain diseases had undergone in the course of years. The mode of representation adopted by him was that commonly used at the time to illustrate the relation between two variables, the curves being subjected to a process of smoothing so as to record the averages of five or ten consecutive values.

IN a paper to the Royal Meteorological Society on April 21, 1897, Mr. MacDowall used this method of smoothed curves to make a comparison of weather statistics with the sunspot cycle, and was led to conclude that "In the climate of Western Europe there is apparently a tendency to greater heat in the summer half and to greater cold in the winter half near the phases of minimum sunspots than near the phases of maximum." Though the curve correspondences used by Mr. MacDowall and others to reveal periodicities have since been superseded by the periodogram and the statistical method of correlation, they were suggestive and represented a helpful stage in the understanding of meteorological relationships. Mr. MacDowall was a student at the Old College in High Street, Glasgow, under Prof. Thomson (afterwards Lord Kelvin), who influenced his whole subsequent career. After leaving Glasgow, he went to Berlin for a time and then voyaged to Australia and back in a sailing ship. He next settled in London and embarked upon a career of general journalism, working at the British Museum and the Patent Office. At that time he met Thomas Carlyle and became acquainted with D. E. Hughes, inventor of the microphone. In later years he has lived more or less in retirement and at present resides at Rothesay, Isle of Bute, where, in spite of his advanced age, he still retains active interest in scientific subjects.

Cultural Origins in Central America

NOTWITHSTANDING numerous attempts continued over a long period of years to trace the prehistoric civilization of Central America to its origins, the ancestral forms, especially of the culture of the Maya, remain obscure. It is now reported that a substantial advance towards a solution of this problem has been made by a joint archæological expedition to Yucatan of the Peabody Museum and the Smithsonian Institution of Washington, which has excavated a stratified site on the Ulua River, known locally as the "Beaches of the Dead". This site, the second only of the recorded stratified sites in this part of the world, lies on the fringe of the Mayan area. It has been known since 1929, when Mrs. Dorothy M. Popence was lowered by ropes into the channel which has been cut by the river through the deposits to collect skeletal material which had been washed out with potsherds and other debris from the culture-bearing strata. Dr. W. D. Strong, who is in charge of the expedition, now reports to the Smithsonian Institution the discovery at a depth of twenty feet of house-floors, refuse heaps and pottery fragments incised or painted in monochrome with designs which, though less elaborate, suggest an early Mayan type. Overlying this culture is a deposit of sterile clay, six and a half feet thick, and above this again is a deposit of burials and potsherds typically Mayan in character. The intervening cultural and chronological gap is partially filled by a culture from a site on the tributary Comayagua River, where an apparently transitional stage affords pottery of Mayan type that seems to shade into the "Beaches of the