

tives, they give better results than the majority of Huyghenian eye-pieces.

We close the book, nevertheless, feeling that it will be an acquisition to many who are without information, and want it, as to how to use the microscope.

A Sketch of Geological History, being the Natural History of the Earth and of its Pre-Human Inhabitants. By Edward Hull, M.A., LL.D., F.R.S. (London: C. W. Deacon and Co., 1887.)

In a prefatory note the publishers of this little book inform the readers that it constitutes the first of a series of volumes devoted to a "Sketch of Universal History." We must congratulate the publishers on having discovered an author with sufficient knowledge, and at the same time with the necessary courage, for coping with such an undertaking. In 148 small pages we have a description of the "original condition of the globe" when it first assumed its present form, followed by sketches of the Archæan and succeeding periods of the earth's history; the whole concluding with a retrospect, which reads like the moral of a fable. The work, it is believed, will form an appropriate introduction to three similar volumes in which the modern history of the world is sketched. The book before us is a marvel of condensation; but in reading it we feel like the unfortunate individuals who are compelled to support life on lozenges composed of "Liebig's Extract."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. Neither can he undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.]

[The Editor urgently requests correspondents to keep their letters as short as possible. The pressure on his space is so great that it is impossible otherwise to insure the appearance even of communications containing interesting and novel facts.]

Politics and the Presidency of the Royal Society.

I THINK that you have done the scientific world a great service in pointing out, in language to which it seems to me no one can take exception, the inconveniences which may arise from the President of the Royal Society occupying a seat in Parliament.

No one will, I think, contest the fact that the Royal Society occupies a unique place in our social organization. It differs from all other Societies in constitution, temperament, and tradition. To persons unacquainted with its working, its method of procedure often seems deliberate and formal to a fault. To those who take part in its work it is obvious that its intellectual freedom is absolutely unrestrained, and that, subject to such mistakes as no human institution can claim exemption from, its impartiality and independence of judgment are absolutely unfettered. This arises from the fact that it is a picked body of men of the most diverse mental attitudes, who owe their association to nothing but their own exertions, and who are in the habit of expressing themselves with the utmost frankness on subjects of common interest discussed amongst themselves.

With the general body of Fellows the Council, from the rapidity with which it is changed, is in constant touch. It is no great assumption, then, to conclude that the Council when it speaks will have behind it the approval of the Fellows—that is, in point of fact, the sanction of the general scientific opinion of the Empire.

Now, the President of the Royal Society, when he speaks officially, is something more than the President of a learned Society: he is virtually the Speaker of the English scientific

world. This being so, his position appears to me to be no small one. It is one which in emergencies may become of paramount importance. And it is this view of his position which disposes me to think that it is desirable that the occupant of such a post should be politically unfettered. I apprehend that this view is shared by Prof. Balfour Stewart when he says: "I grant freely that under ordinary circumstances it is undesirable that the President of the Royal Society should enter the House of Commons." And it is not difficult to see why it is undesirable.

Successive Governments, as is well known, are in the habit of consulting the Royal Society on scientific questions, the solution of which may possibly influence or determine a public policy. To such appeals the Royal Society has hitherto replied to the best of its ability without fear or favour. Will it always have the same freedom when its President is amenable to party discipline? It is only necessary to point to the last session of Parliament to see that there were many occasions when the position of the President on the Government benches would have been a not wholly pleasant one. Much bebadgered Ministers would perhaps have come up to him and have said, You must really make some concession, and the man would be made of iron who would not sometimes yield. Then, having been squeezed himself, he would return to his Council with:—"In the House of Commons the other night a very strong opinion was expressed to me," &c., and the process of squeezing would be transferred to the Council. It is no use saying that these things would not happen; because everyone knows that in actual political life they do. If the President descends from the dignified reserve which hedges him in at Burlington House, he will have to take his chance with the disabilities of the ordinary Parliamentary rank and file.

I cannot therefore resist the conclusion that a President of the Royal Society owes it to himself and to his position to hold aloof from all influences that would impair his freedom, and, as a consequence, that of the Society. His position is one of the few in the country which is unique not merely from its absolute independence of external public influence, but from the sanction which is given to the action of its occupant by internal support. The impossibility of allowing the Judges to sit in the House of Commons is, I suppose, apparent to everyone, and, in my view, every disability in that respect which attaches to them attaches with equal force to the President.

I will only trespass on your space with two further observations.

Prof. Balfour Stewart's last argument is, of course, purely political, and, being so, appears to me to be the one thing needed to demonstrate the unadvisability of any exception to the general principle to which he adheres. He says that the President "has chosen to be an Englishman first and a man of science afterwards." Yes. But—and I trust that no shade of impropriety may be thought to attach to the argument—would he have been as equally acquiescent had the President chosen the political rôle of Irishman as his first duty?

Lastly, Prof. Williamson remarks that our President cannot "be supposed to have entered the House as the political representative of the Royal Society." But unfortunately he cannot help himself. He cannot sink his official status. The House of Commons will take note of it just as it does of that of the Lord Mayor and of the Chairman of the Metropolitan Board of Works, who do not sit in Parliament by virtue of their official positions. Yet, being there, they are liable to interpellations with respect to the business of the bodies over which they preside. I do not see why the President of the Royal Society should expect immunity from the same discipline, and the result, it is easy to see, might be extremely embarrassing to the Royal Society, which has other, and in my opinion more constitutional, modes of communicating with the Government, and, if need be, with Parliament.