

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

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The January Meteors of 1918.

I WATCHED the northern sky during most of the interval between 6h. and 10h. on January 3, and recorded eleven Quadrantids. The conditions were not good; there was a slight fog, through which the stars of Ursa, Draco, etc., shone dimly, and the air was frosty, the temperature being about 26°.

The Quadrantids observed were, in the majority of cases, near their radiant at 233°+59½°, and moved slowly. This position is near ϵ Draconis, and about 6° north of that usually determined in past years. I am at a loss to explain the cause of the discordance, the data of the present year being considered quite satisfactory. In the circumstances the results recently obtained by other observers will be awaited with special interest.

W. F. DENNING.

44 Egerton Road, Bristol.

THIS evening, between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m., looking north, twenty-two meteors were observed at Sidmouth, South Devon. The most brilliant one appeared about 8.15 p.m. G.M.T., and was travelling in a south-easterly direction at a moderate speed. The meteor was of a reddish colour, and was followed by a long trail of white light. It was frosty and beautifully clear, excepting a slight haze for a short interval.

WINIFRED L. LOCKYER.

Salcombe Regis, Sidmouth, January 3.

NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN PERIL.

THE report that the Government proposed to requisition the British Museum as the headquarters of the new Air Board has resulted in a storm of protest from many men of light and leading throughout the country, and from corporate bodies concerned with the promotion of the intellectual welfare of the nation. The correspondence published in the *Times* and other journals represents only a small fraction of the budgets received, and it is evident that the Government will bring upon itself nothing but obloquy if it persists in the action contemplated. Since we referred last week to the projected dismantling of the galleries at Bloomsbury, it has been made known that the Office of Works has surveyed the Natural History Museum at South Kensington with the view of using the building for the purposes of other Government departments, and has reported in favour of doing so. The very existence of our two greatest national institutions is thus threatened, unless a united effort is made at once to convince the Cabinet of the unnecessary and ruinous proceeding to which certain administrative officials, with the usual indifference to scientific interests and inability to understand scientific values, desire to commit it.

The high-handed method adopted in the proposal to commandeer the two museums cannot be justified even by the provisions of the Defence of

the Realm Act. Sir Arthur Evans states that the trustees of the British Museum were not consulted upon the matter, though they are responsible for the collections, not as Government nominees, but under an Act of Parliament. They were astounded upon receiving from the Air Board a requisition for the building to house the Board's establishment, and at once sent a strong protest to the Government against the scheme. Even an enemy invader could not adopt a more arrogant attitude towards the trustees than that shown by the representatives of the Government. The collections were regarded as so much furniture which could be packed up in a few days by workmen and conveyed in pantechnicons to convenient places of storage until after the war. As "A Londoner" writes in the *Times* of January 4 in an attempt to justify the official attitude: "It is pretty widely understood that the Air Board is willing and anxious to put its large resources in transport and labour at the service of the nation for the removal of the contents of the British Museum to places of safety which the Board has already inspected and approved."

This semi-official pronouncement reveals entire incapacity to appreciate the difficulty of the problem of dealing with the contents of the museum. The whole of the objects are considered as goods which may be removed in a few days and returned without detriment at a later period of reconstruction. Because a selected number of objects have been carefully transferred to places of security by museum officials during the past two years, as a precaution against air-raids, it is assumed that the whole may be dealt with summarily by energetic workmen under the supervision of experts. The absurdity of this view will be manifest to anyone acquainted with museum work. To make a selection of fragile objects and other national treasures, and to take measures to preserve them from damage, are very different matters from that of clearing space without reference to what it occupies. It is certain that if the indiscriminate and hurried dismantling of the museum is proceeded with, many of the objects taken away will never be worth bringing back, and it would be just as well to make a bonfire of them at once.

Only a small proportion of the contents of the museum could be removed in time for the space they occupy to be of any use to the Air Board. The library must remain, and the larger sculptures, including the more important pieces of the Elgin marbles, the Assyrian bas-reliefs, and the Egyptian statuary. The ethnographical collections cannot be disturbed without certain destruction of many objects. The glass, pottery, porcelain, and faience collections, the ancient and medieval gems, rings, and jewelry, the Greek vases, the Babylonian clay tablets, the Egyptian pottery and images, the terra-cottas, the bronzes—all these can be moved only with an infinitude of skilled handling and packing, and in a period of time which might well run into years rather than months. No, it must be clearly understood that if the museum is to be taken for the Air Board—