Science News a Century Ago

Royal Geographical Society: Early Exploration Efforts

During the summer of 1833 the Council of the Royal Geographical Society had been actively engaged in promoting, with the countenance and patronage of His Majesty's Government, two exploring expeditions, leaving England, it was contemplated, in July of the following year, or near that date. The first of these was an expedition of discovery in South Africa by means of exploration up one of the rivers falling into Delagoa Bay. With the approval of the Society (which was chargeable with much of the expense) the task was entrusted to Capt. James Alexander, an adventurous young officer who in after life achieved much national fame. What sum of knowledge resulted from the project is a story revealing the uncertainties attending early geographical effort, however well planned in advance. The honorary secretary to the committee appointed to organise the expedition was Mr. W. Desborough Cooley, a fellow, and sometime first secretary, of the Hakluyt Society. In the opinion of Dr. H. R. Mill ("Record", Roy. Geog. Soc., 1930), Mr. Cooley was "an erratic genius". He had never, Mill tells us, travelled, but supported himself by writing about all parts of the earth. Devoting himself mainly to Africa, Mr. Cooley recorded and criticised the work of explorers, whilst upholding fantastic theories of the geography of the continent, even against the assertions of those who had actually traversed various tracts. However, much kindly appreciation was entertained finally, the Society securing for him a Civil List pension of £100, terminated in 1883 by his death.

The second of the two expeditions arose from the offer of Richard (afterwards Sir) Schomburgk, who proposed to explore the interior of British Guiana, with the financial assistance of the Society. A committee accepted his services, and following a strong appeal to the Government, a contributory sum was voted for the expedition, as well as for the Delagoa Bay project. Schomburgk's work proved to be of great geographical and botanical service.

Elcot Park Garden: Heating Hot-houses

"This place is celebrated as the scene in which the mode of heating hot-houses by hot water was displayed, in 1823, to the British public; we will not say for the first time, because we have shown that it was exhibited in the hot-houses at Sundridge Park, by the Count Chabannes, in 1816; but we do say that it was from the apparatus displayed in this garden that this mode of heating first became generally known to the British public. We also believe that the late Mr. Bacon invented it at Aberaman in 1821, as Mr. Atkinson appears to have done in London in 1822. There is nothing uncommon in different persons inventing the same thing at nearly the same time, without any knowledge of each other's ideas. Inventions are more commonly results of the general state of science on a particular subject, at a given time, than of the character or degree of knowledge of an individual mind." (J. C. Loudon, *Gardener's Mag.*, July 1834.)

Abolition of Slavery in British Colonies

As a result of an Act of Parliament passed on August 28, 1833, for the abolition of slavery in the British Colonies, for the promotion of industry among the manumitted slaves and for the compensation of slave-holders, on August 1, 1834, nearly 800,000 negro men, women and children in Jamaica, Barbadoes, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa and other places obtained their freedom. Thus culminated the self-denying efforts of a comparatively small group of men, who for half a century had advocated the claims of these unfortunate people. The event was commemorated with great rejoicings, many meetings were held in Great Britain, and on the day referred to the friends of the abolition of slavery held a dinner at the Freemason's Tavern, London, which was presided over by the Earl of Mulgrave, who for two years had been Governor of Jamaica in which were more than 300,000 slaves. In a speech on the occasion, he told how that as soon as it was known that the British Legislature had given emancipation to the black population he made a tour of the island to explain to the negroes the nature and the extent of the boon they had received. He was convinced, he said, that there was nothing in the negro mind to unfit it for the reception of moral and religious instruction, and he hoped the negro population of our Colonies would fulfil all the hopes and expectations of those who had so nobly stood forward to assert their rights, and raised them from the degradation of slavery to the proud elevation of British subjects.

Meteorological Records for 1834

An interesting article on meteorology in the *Athenæum* of August 2, 1834, began: "The daily increasing interest that is felt in Meteorological Observations, the high rank that they have of late assumed in this department of physical science, the importance of the results which may be obtained from them by a cautious system of induction, and the absolute necessity, before such results can be announced as general principles, that the observations on which they are founded should be numerous, accurate and authentic, have rendered us for some time more than ordinarily anxious to meet the demand for information, in a manner at once full and satisfactory; and our readers will learn with pleasure that our exertions have been crowned with the highest success, in proof of which we this day present them *The Meteorological Journal* kept by order of the President and Council of the Royal Society, at their apartments in Somerset House." The number of August 2 accordingly contained the Meteorological Tables for the months of January–June 1834. Succeeding Tables were published monthly.

The Entomological Society

On August 4, 1834, at a meeting of the Entomological Society, presided over by Lieut.-Col. W. H. Sykes (1790–1872), a report of a committee for investigating the nature of the ravages of the cane fly was read. The matter had been brought before the Society on July 7, when it was said that this insect, a minute species of the Cicada of Linnæus, was committing incredible mischief in Grenada and other West Indian Islands, having in some cases destroyed not less than two-thirds of the crops. A committee was therefore appointed to discover the precise mode of its attack, and if possible to suggest a remedy. In the report, a variety of suggestions were made and these were immediately forwarded to the Agricultural Society of Grenada. At the same meeting, Col. Sykes described some species of Indian ants.