

indicates the re-orientation which is taking place in Norwegian foreign policy, now that isolated neutrality and Scandinavian collaboration have proved insufficient security. As an Atlantic and seafaring nation, Norway seems likely to look for help and collaboration mainly to the free nations overseas—the British Empire and the United States.

#### Recent Earthquakes

ACCORDING to a message in *The Times*, a violent earthquake was experienced about noon (local time) on November 12 at Erzinjan in Anatolia. A number of buildings were damaged in the town but only a few persons were injured. It is feared that the damage and casualties will be greater in the villages near Erzinjan, and further information is awaited. It will be recalled that a very great earthquake struck the same region on December 27, 1939 (*NATURE*, January 6, 1940, p. 13).

An earthquake of considerable severity (probably the most severe for eight years) shook Los Angeles on November 14. The electric power station in the Beverly Hills district was temporarily stopped and about a hundred small buildings together with some oil storage tanks were wrecked. Gas and water mains were broken, and some suburban homes in the Torrance Gardena district were damaged. Several parked motor-cars were damaged when the front of a store fell into the street. Damage in one district is estimated at a million dollars. No deaths or serious injuries are reported and further information is awaited. Los Angeles and Hollywood were affected by strong earthquakes on October 11, 1940 (*NATURE*, November 30, 1940, p. 720), and January 28, 1931, besides numerous other occasions.

#### Dr. George Birkbeck and Technical Education

ON December 1, a century ago, Dr. George Birkbeck died in London and was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery. His name to-day is recalled by Birkbeck College, London, which began its career as the London Mechanics' Institution with Birkbeck as its president. There were at one time hundreds of such institutions, and no doubt many of them exist to-day, but they may all be said to have sprung from the classes for mechanics started by Birkbeck in 1800 at the Anderson College of Glasgow, in which as a young man of twenty-four he held the chair of natural philosophy. Born in Settle, Yorkshire, on January 10, 1776, Birkbeck studied medicine at Leeds, London and Edinburgh, but he began his active career as a lecturer. In 1804 he set up in practice in the City of London and there became known to Hume, Grote, Brougham, and many other men of liberal ideas. In 1809 he assisted in founding the London Institution, in 1824 became president of the Mechanics' Institution, and was a projector of University College, and a supporter of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. He was, as his biographer J. G. Godard says, a "National Reformer". In the prospectus of his class of 1800, he stated that it was "for persons engaged in the exercise of the mechanical arts, whose education in early life has precluded even the possi-

bility of acquiring the smallest portion of scientific knowledge". He lived to see knowledge brought within the reach of all.

#### Recent Investigation of New Plant Fibres

AN investigation has been carried out by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in collaboration with the National Physical and Chemical Laboratories and the Imperial Institute, of the mechanical properties of the fibre from nettle stems (*Urtica dioica*) and other plants native to Great Britain, and of methods of extraction. The nettle fibre has been found to be suitable for the manufacture of high-grade paper, and possibly of textiles, while the leaves are commercially valuable for the extraction of chlorophyll. Arrangements were made for the extensive collection of this abundant raw material during 1941.

#### The Night Sky in December

THE moon is full on Dec. 3d. 20h. 51m. U.T. and new on Dec. 18d. 10h. 20m. Lunar conjunctions with the planets occur on the following dates: Saturn on Dec. 2d. 9h., Saturn 2° N.; Jupiter on Dec. 4d. 7h., Jupiter 4° N.; Venus on Dec. 21d. 16h., Venus 4° S.; Mars on Dec. 26d. 22h., Mars 4° N.; Saturn on Dec. 29d. 11h., Saturn 2° N.; Jupiter on Dec. 31d. 7h., Jupiter 4° N. Jupiter is in opposition to the sun on Dec. 8, and on Dec. 29 Venus attains its greatest brilliancy; the planet is then 38 million miles from the earth. Mercury is a morning star until Dec. 21, then an evening star. Venus, Mars, Saturn and Uranus are evening stars. Neptune is a morning star and Jupiter is a morning star until Dec. 7, then an evening star. The sun enters the sign Capricornus on Dec. 22, the winter solstice. About this time of the year we have the interesting phenomenon of the mornings decreasing in length while the afternoons and the whole periods from sunrise to sunset are increasing; this, as is well known, is due to the equation of time. The first magnitude star  $\alpha$  Tauri (Aldebaran) is occulted on Dec. 30d. 22h. 23.4m., reappearance occurring at 23h. 46.6m. The Geminid meteor shower is active during Dec. 7–15, the radiant being close to  $\alpha$  Geminorum. Many interesting objects can be seen during the month, such as the great nebulae of Orion and Andromeda, the open star clusters of Perseus, the Pleiades and the Hyades, and many well-known double stars and variable stars.

#### Announcements

PROF. BJORN HELLAND-HANSEN, the well-known hydrographer and head of the Meteorological Institute of Bergen, was arrested some six months ago and is still in prison.

THE title of professor of mining geology in the University of London has been conferred on Dr. W. R. Jones, in respect of the post held by him at the Imperial College of Science and Technology.

PROF. F. C. BARTLETT, professor of experimental psychology in the University of Cambridge, has been appointed a member of the Medical Research Council in the vacancy caused by the death of Prof. A. J. Clark.