

CONCERNING VARIOUS MEANS OF ENCOURAGING THE STUDY OF NATURAL HISTORY IN TASMANIA.

[BY JAMES R. McClymont, M.A.]

When consulting, recently, the British Museum Catalogue of Lizards, I found that about eighteen species or varieties were attributed to Tasmania, whereas only about five species are admitted by local authorities. This impressed on me the fact which I had previously seen stated, that our natural history collections are, in some respects, still very incomplete. Possibly some of the British Museum specimens of lizards are wrongly allocated, but, allowing for errors in this direction, it would still appear that the collection of Tasmanian lizards in London is more complete than any in Tasmania. However, I quote the instance as typical, not as exceptional. The same is true of the Mollusca. "Nearly half," says Mr. R. M. Johnston, "of the number of the principal type species (of shells) are deposited in foreign museums, and are therefore inaccessible for purposes of reference to local students" (R. S. Tas. Proc., 1890, p. 57).

I am afraid the dispersal of these specimens shows that very little patriotic interest is taken in this matter, and I purpose, briefly, to enquire how such an interest can be awakened and sustained. I shall deal with three only of the most evident means to this end.

- (1) The establishment of district museums.
- (2) The compilation of cheap scientific manuals, having special reference to the natural history of Tasmania.
- (3) The establishment of a lectureship in biology in connection with the Tasmanian University.

(1) My idea of a district museum is a local depository of specimens of the fauna and flora of some well-defined geographical area, such as a group of islands, or a peninsula, or a portion of coast to a given distance inland, or a table-land, or a mountain chain. From a strictly scientific standpoint, such an area would be limited by the homogeneity of its flora or fauna, or by the individuality of its geological features. But as one object of local museums in a new country would be to discover such boundaries, not to ratify them; the definition of a museum area must, in the first instance, result from convenience and practicability.

If we had Field Naturalists Clubs in Tasmania there would be no difficulty about opening local museums. These clubs make it part of their work to form collections of natural objects, and we can imagine what healthy rivalry must be created between clubs in different districts, each striving to

excel in the completeness and orderliness of its little local collection. But these clubs do not exist with us, although efforts have been made to establish them, and, though desirable, it is not absolutely necessary to have them before we can hope to open a few local museums. There are many amateur collections of shells, eggs, and other natural objects aimlessly and almost uselessly acquired and maintained; there are many lovers of natural history scattered through the country districts without any definite end in their studies, without specimens to throw life into their reading, without that cohesiveness and unity of purpose which co-operative collecting for a local museum would impart. To both these classes I appeal; to the former, to unselfishly contribute their unclassified private collections to form public and classified ones; to the latter to contribute their time and knowledge for the purpose of inaugurating and arranging collections for their district. I appeal to the well-to-do landowners of the colony for the necessary means. Those of them—possibly there are no exceptions—who are deeply interested in the spread of sound knowledge amongst the people, who are interested in the advance of the colony as a whole, who would joyfully see Tasmania stand up and *do* something—to those I appeal for aid to procure the necessary buildings and fittings. Many of them could spare a room or a renovated outbuilding; many of them could, at little cost, supply shelves or tables to be converted into cases for specimens; all of them could contribute their pence and their moral support.

But it is to the lovers of natural history in the country districts, who with that love combine a fair knowledge at least of the elements of some one branch of natural science, that I look in the first place for support. They would have to take the initiative in their own particular districts, to air the proposal, to interview the amateur collector and soften his heart, to enlist the sympathy of the all-powerful man of substance to set the whole machinery in motion.

At the outset the founders of the local museums would be encountered by serious difficulties in the matter of preserving specimens. Suppose a small building be provided and drawers or cases procured, how are the specimens to be preserved from decay, and from insect pests? As regards the herbarium, some useful directions are given by Mr. Spicer in his "Handbook of the Plants of Tasmania." I would urgently impress upon the Royal Society the utility of publishing directions for the preservation of skins, insects, and reptiles, and regarding the best method of capturing and killing insects. A leaflet would contain all that is necessary, and I am sure the Society would be amply repaid the trifling expense and trouble involved in the preparation of it by the addition to our scientific knowledge that would result there-

from. Let this be the Royal Society's contribution towards the project.

Local museums would educate in many ways, about which I will not expatiate, as I desire to be brief and pointed. Labels would have to be prepared similar to those in use in the Tasmanian museum; but for those who had time and inclination to pursue natural history studies there would have to be more advanced guides in the shape of hand-books to the various branches, compiled with special reference to Tasmania.

(2) There is but a small demand, at present, for such hand-books, but still there is a demand; local museums, I believe, would be the means of greatly increasing it. And I have the more confidence in proposing the hand-books, because some-things of the kind has been already adumbrated in respect of Birds by Col. Legge, Molluscs by Mr. Johnston, Ferns by Mr. Morton. These works, if not intended to assume exactly the form of hand-books, would at least be conducive to their preparation. In some departments, no doubt, our existing information is not complete enough to justify the dogmatism of a text-book. It would be much more complete if we had local collections open to our scientists for purposes of comparison; but there are other departments—those I have mentioned for example—in which we are advanced enough to speak with authority.

(3) Finally, as the cope-stone of the edifice, I would suggest a lectureship in biology in connection with the Tasmanian University. When one reflects that a brief three years ago a university was an unsuspected privilege, it may seem somewhat bold even to hint at a natural history chair in connection with it. I could, perhaps, point with some forcibleness to the example of other colonies; I could mention a Tate, a McCoy, a Hutton, and ask whether the advantages, which have accrued to South Australia, Victoria, and New Zealand from the labours of these indefatigable men of science, might not reasonably be expected to accrue to Tasmania from the labours of one of their compeers. But I refrain, being confronted with the inevitable question of the means thereto. Moreover, the Council of the University have, no doubt, their own ideas as to the fittest allocation of their funds, and the possibility of adding another lectureship to those already established. This much I may be permitted to hope, that they will duly consider the claims of biology to be represented on their teaching staff, and remember the fact that their energy and success in biological investigations have done as much as anything to establish the thoroughness, the originality, and the entire reasonableness of colonial universities in the eyes of the educated world.