ON THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF A MORE GENERAL INTEREST IN SCIENTIFIC PURSUITS.

By Wm. Benson.

The object of this short paper is to offer a suggestion for the consideration of this Society.

It is a very simple one, and perhaps ought rather to be made to the Council privately than be brought forward in a general meeting. But there seemed some advantage to be gained by mentioning it here, inasmuch as an opportunity would be afforded for ascertaining how far other members coincide in the views expressed.

Our Society unquestionably has rendered, and is now rendering, practical and substantial benefits to the colony at large, but I think it may be made of greater use, and may influence a still wider circle than is at present the case.

Also with regard to its meetings I venture to think that improvement is possible, which would increase their general interest and value.

There are amongst our members two classes—first our *savants*, or specialists, all more or less entitled to speak with authority on some particular branch of scientific enquiry; and secondly, there are those who possess a general acquaintance with and taste for such matters, but who have not thoroughly studied any special subject. It is as one of the latter class, and in their primary interest that I speak, having heard many say that they do not care to attend these meetings because the papers read are often abstruse, fragmentary and dry.

It is obvious that this want of interest arises from our want of knowledge; our previous acquaintance with the special subject brought forward has been to slight to enable us perfectly to follow the reader. The fault very rarely rests with him, for it is almost impossible briefly to handle in detail any scientific topic in a manner that can be readily comprehended by an unprepared hearer. Even the language is often strange, for diffuseness can only be avoided by the free use of technical and unfamiliar words.

So far as the meetings of the Royal Society are intended for the interchange of notes upon new discoveries between *savants* and specialists only, the reading of such papers is a natural and proper course, though it may still be questionable whether those who merely hear a technical paper read gain as full a knowledge of its contents as they would by studying it at leisure in the Society's printed proceedings.

But while I would not depreciate the value of such papers, which are and must be the most important that can come before the Society, yet I would urge whether papers of another kind might not also be encouraged.

In so small a community as ours the *savants* can never be numerous, but there is, or with a little encouragement there might be, a considerable number among us who would eagerly and intelligently enter on scientific pursuits if facilities were offered: and surely the fostering of this general interest, and the creation of a wide-spread scientific taste throughout our community are well worthy of any attention and assistance this Society can give. In the long run they will yield results of practical value, and also materially add to the prosperity and influence of the Society itself.

It must be remembered that opportunities for self-instruction in all local branches of science (by which I mean our local geology, botany, natural history and the like) are very few as compared with what have been provided for English students.

There every branch has not only its well recognised and standard authorities, but also its popular text-books in which the subject is presented in a simpler and more approachable style.

Here our authorities are few, text-books hardly exist, and English works are in many cases unsuitable. We are at a great disadvantage in this respect, and are much more dependent upon the direct teaching of our scientists themselves, and for this reason I would ask this Society to consider whether means cannot be devised for affording instruction of a more elementary and general kind.

There must be not a few who sometimes attend these meetings, and very many others who at present never think of becoming members, to whom such opportunities would be welcome, and, who by means of such assistance, would be enabled to follow up chosen studies on their own account, and to take a livelier interest in the more advanced and specialised papers that are read here, which at present are too often, I fear, interesting only to a few.

It is not to be expected that we can inspire everybody with a love for scientific pursuits. The tastes and talents of many will always lie in other directions. But good only can result from any effort that may be made to encourage and develop such a love wherever its germ exists, and I do not see any other organisation that is as well qualified to do the work as this Society.

I want to see the rising generation more interested than they appear to be in the physical history of their native colony, its fauna and flora, and so forth. At present these

subjects have attracted but little attention, though they are easily made attractive, and this neglect is largely attributable to the absence of accessible sources of information.

The taste for such studies when once acquired rarely leaves a man, and developes afterwards along the lines of his peculiar preference, and thus the whole field of scientific enquiry is gradually occupied, though only a few branches be specially taught at first.

At present the Royal Society occupies a somewhat isolated height, and my wish is to see encouragement offered to climbers from the lower level, and means of ascent provided.

Many plans might be proposed for carrying out such educational work, and the following suggestion may not be the best, but there is an advantage in having something definite before us to be amended if it cannot be approved, and therefore I would propose for consideration the desirability of initiating courses of popular lectures on scientific subjects to be delivered under the auspices of this Society. Such lectures might alternate with the ordinary meetings, and they should not be restricted to members, but be open to all who desired to attend. I do not know whether this room would be available. It is not spacious enough for a large audience, but doubtless if the attendance became considerable a suitable hall would not be wanting. Personally, having great faith in object lessons, I should like to see the Museum itself made use of on all occasions where its cabinets could be used as illustrations, and the lecture would be none the less valuable to the hearers, and might perhaps be less arduous to the lecturer if it were so delivered.

Another thing which might be attempted in connection with this Society is the formation of a Naturalist's Field Club, similar to what exists in Melbourne and other Australian cities.

These two suggestions are much alike in character, and both the lectures and the excursions might be expected to give rise to papers, for the discussion of which opportunity should be found, though of course not at our regular meetings.

One other matter might well interest this Society, but it is probably one which must originate with some individual privately, and need only be hinted at here. I mean the introduction of local science primers for school use.

Some may think such work, as is here suggested, too elementary for our Society to recognise.

This would be true enough if it were proposed to abandon the Society's present work, or to lower the standard of the papers submitted to its meetings. But the desire is to supplement rather than to subvert, and the hope is to obtain in the end a wider circle of contributors and papers, embodying more varied original researches.

Also, if there were any other organisation capable of taking the matter up, or if the work could originate spontaneously, I would not bring it before this Society's notice, but it seems to me a case where our recognition and help may make the difference between failure and success.

For years science stood apart. Its affairs were assumed to be above the popular understanding. But all that has now been changed, and in Huxley, Tyndall, and many others, we see men of the highest scientific rank taking the lead in bringing their chosen studies home to the minds of the masses. We need not fear that anything we may do will be *infra dig.*

Any proposal for delivering popular lectures, pre-supposes the presence amongst us of gentlemen qualified and willing to come forward as lecturers. That we have the qualified men none will deny, but it is not everyone who would be willing to devote the necessary time and thought to the preparation of such lectures as have been indicated, for it would involve much trouble, and at first, until public attention had been thoroughly aroused, there might appear to be too little interest manifested to warrant the effort. But I hope the love of science for its own sake, which animates all who have advanced any distance into its mysteries, may suffice to induce one or more of our *savants* to offer their services, and to permit the experiment to be at any rate tried. It is hardly probable that we should ever have a continuous succession of lectures all the year round, but if from time to time such series could be delivered, and if the Council of this Society could keep an open eye for any opportunity that may arise to interest the public, and especially the young, I have faith that good results will follow.

Discussion.

Sir Lambert Dobson said he had heard many lectures in his early days which had furnished him with a great deal of information, and which had been of great use to him since then. He was thoroughly in accord with Mr. Benson that the Society could be much more useful than it is at present. The start wanted to be made, and there was no reason why they should not have, say, half-a-dozen lectures in the course of a session. Geology was a subject which might well be introduced, and there were many other subjects which would be found both interesting and useful.

Mr. James Barnard thought it would be very practicable to follow out the idea suggested by Mr. Benson, and he heartily supported and concurred in this.

The Hon. NICHOLAS BROWN said there could be no doubt that if it were possible to carry out a system of popular lectures they would gather in a much larger interest in the proceedings of the Society than at present existed. He thought the Council of the Society should take the matter up and endeavour to ascertain whether or not it would be possible to give effect to the suggestions made by Mr, Benson.

Mr. MAULT agreed with the suggestions contained in the paper, and especially the one relating to the formation of a Naturalist's Field Club, which could work during the recess of the Society. He would particularly urge this upon the Council, because during the summer months they would probably gain a good deal of knowledge through coming in contact with members of similar clubs from the other colonies.

The Rev. E. G. PORTER (United States), on being introduced and requested by His Excellency to give some idea of the working of American societies, said he was cordially in sympathy with the objects of the Society and the paper which had been read by Mr. Benson. In America people were glad to study and glad to learn. They had many societies, and although none of them were "Royal," he thought they were doing "Royal work." (Laughter.) He gave an interesting account of the scientific work undertaken by the American societies, and stated that the results were that science became popular, and that large audiences could be secured at lectures, not only in the cities but in smaller towns.

Mr. MORTON stated that the Technical School Board had already arranged for a course of lectures to be delivered in connection with the work of the schools. Dr. Giblin, at the special request of the Board, had undertaken to give a series of lectures on "Human Physiology." His lectures would be illustrated by means of an excellent collection of slides. As secretary to the Society he would take care that the suggestions contained in the paper should be brought before the Council.

Mr. W. E. SHOOBRIDGE thought the Society should also take up the question of advising in regard to text books suitable for schools.

The PRESIDENT (Sir R. Hamilton), in moving a vote of thanks to the readers of the papers, said he thought the suggestions made by Mr. Benson might be left to the Council.

A vote of thanks was carried by acclamation.