

Register, Jan. 5th, 1911

THE SCIENCE CONGRESS.

The next Congress of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science will be opened in Sydney on Monday, January 9, and will be closed on the following Saturday. These biennial gatherings are always interesting, and, on this occasion special importance and significance attach to the Congress because it is the last which will be held before the expected great assembly of the British Association in Australia. The conferences have quite fairly been regarded as a federal agency, because, held periodically in the different principal cities of Australasia, they have brought into friendly relations men and women of light and leading and special influence in each State, and have encouraged an interchange of opinions the expression of which has had a distinctly educational value. At the conclusion of the session the papers read, and those laid aside on account of lack of time for their presentation, are collected together; and, after having been carefully edited, they are sent to the members of the association in a bulky tome, worth more than the subscription for the whole session. Some critics of these volumes, which now make a small library in themselves, have objected that they are too general and not particular enough; and it is certainly open to question whether the scope of the programme of the association is not too comprehensive. One commentator epigrammatically complains that the business at the Congresses usually consists of "too much of too little, and not enough of a great deal." Of course, there is a large amount of human nature even among scientific and quasi-scientific men and women, and the task of rejecting any contribution sent in either for the meeting or for the volume, is invidious and otherwise unpleasant. But, notwithstanding the labours of capable editors, and allowing that the volumes form together a wonderful compendium of miscellaneous scientific and other information, the special trees are sometimes lost in the forest thicket constituted by the mass of superfluous material.

Still, if the association did nothing else than encourage and promote the fine exercise of individual thinking, it would do much that is worthy of commendation in an age when people are too apt to delegate their thinking to others. Although calm and impartial judgment of the net effect of the many Congresses of the association would not permit the candid and competent observer to commit himself to the opinion that any conspicuously outstanding results had been achieved, the association has on the whole undoubtedly ministered to the enlightenment of the community, particularly on some subjects which are as caviare to the general public. The most difficult task of the conductors of the Congresses seems to have been to steer clear of too paralysing abstruseness on the one hand, and too much of the merely popularity-attracting element on the other. Some of the scientific lecturers have seemed unable to get away from their mystifying technical terms, and other have made the mistake of presuming either that the audience knew more of the theme than it did, or else that it knew less. In both

of these cases the effect was equally unsatisfactory in an undue tax upon time, patience, and temper. It is noteworthy that in Australasia there are few scientific generalizers who have the power to give succinct synthetic narratives, bringing up to date periodically the progress made in scientific circles. This ought, indeed, to be done at the University commemoration every year. Some of the science congresses have been marked in the so-called "popular" lecture department by extraordinary practical definitions of the term popular—definitions which remind one of the hobbyist who invited a mixed audience at a convivial gathering to hear him speak for two hours on the nebular hypothesis. Certain lectures, although nominally addressed to the average man in the street, have been so complex and hyper-technical and profound as to weary and puzzle even a mathematician or a philosopher. Others have partaken of the type of an ordinary literary society address.

On drawing a line midway between these extremes it seems regrettable—and yet probably only significant of the conditions natural in a young country—that the Congresses have given little sign of the original research which should of right characterize all universities and university men who do most of the speaking before the association. It is a result less of intention than of circumstance that so much of the time of the professorial staffs of practically all the universities is devoted to the humdrum work of teaching and examining as to leave only slight opportunities for the pursuing of radical investigations. This acknowledged defect is bound to be reflected in all scientific gatherings until Australia shall have attained to an age which will enable its head centres of learning to attend to their legitimate functions more than is possible at present.

If only on the principle that where many bullets are fired some are sure to hit, the accumulation of human knowledge should be enriched by the deliberations of the scientists in Sydney next week. The subjects to be discussed cover a truly expansive range—astronomy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, metallurgy, mineralogy, geology, biology, geography, history, anthropology, philology, social and statistical science, agriculture, engineering and architecture, sanitary science and hygiene, and medical science and education, among other things—manifestly a goodly, if not an appalling, array of profundity and variety. Those who join the associa-

tion with the purpose of enjoying the social advantages connected with it—and their name relatively is Legion—will be more interested in the extensive programme of entertainments, beginning with a garden party at Government House, than in learning that a rhetorician like Professor Henderson, of our own University, has been selected to give a "popular" lecture with the somewhat unpromising title of "The Mutation Theory of Evolution in History." It is characteristic of the enterprise and alertness of the Government Tourist Bureau in New South Wales—the forerunner of all such bodies in Australia—that it has already established a temporary branch office at the association's headquarters and sent prospectuses and lavishly illustrated literature to members of the association throughout the Commonwealth as a

means of beguiling visitors to visit the beauty spots of the oldest State. And so, what with the three objects of science, sociability, and sightseeing, the Congress is likely to be an especially successful engagement.

Advertiser, Jan. 9, 1911

SCIENTISTS IN COUNCIL.

If there is charm in variety, the bill of fare to be discussed by the Science Congress, which begins its sessions in Sydney to-day, may be regarded as highly attractive. In general terms it includes items not only from all the "ologies," but also from many other branches of science, abstract and concrete, practical and academic. The catalogue of topics to be dealt with is itself voluminous, and its contents are as diversified as the heart of man could desire. During the five days over which the sittings of the Congress will extend, its members, and the visitors who may avail themselves of the opportunities for increasing their knowledge which it affords, will run considerable risk of incurring mental dyspepsia, unless they are prudent in their selections and moderate in their demands. Fortunately for their interests alternatives will be provided in ample measure in the form of social functions and entertainments of various kinds, this portion of the programme, it may be whispered, being quite as alluring to most people as the more serious business which brings them together. Whatever truth there may be in the oft-quoted line that "knowledge grows but wisdom lingers," the biennial gatherings of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science demonstrate as scarcely anything else could do so effectively the breadth and vigor of scientific activity in the southern world. It is only on such an occasion that the public is enabled to form any adequate conception of the number of earnest workers in the several departments of this important sphere, and of their sustained efforts for the common welfare. As a rule the scientific enquirer is a comparatively silent person. He is sometimes accused of being unpractical because he is absorbed in the pursuit of knowledge, and, it may be, is obsessed by a dominant idea. He lives, if he can, to wring from Nature some of her jealousy-guarded secrets, his telescopes, microscopes, test tubes, retorts, and other ingenious or fearful appliances being the agencies by which he works. Of his failures and disappointments little is heard, and it is only when his patient research is rewarded in some such way as by the discovery of radium, the isolation of a disease-producing bacillus, or the demonstration of an anti-toxin that the world realises a fraction of its indebtedness.

Associated with every Australian seat of learning, and acting independently from