

The Advertiser

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THOUGH Professor Rennie declines to regard himself as an orator, his address at the University commemoration yesterday was in every way worthy of the occasion, and will well repay careful perusal. The subject he chose for his theme is of great and growing practical importance. Chemistry is closely connected with a wide range of the industrial arts, and has done far more for them than is commonly recognised. The complaint is not without reason that chemistry as a science is insufficiently honored because its scope and aims are insufficiently understood. To a good many people a chemist means an apothecary, and the term is generally associated in their minds with portly globes of colored liquid, indicating places where prescriptions are made up. Even among those who are better informed the relative importance of chemistry as a science is often lost sight of. Professor Rennie points out that medical students are apt to view the subject with repugnance, "as something to be crammed up and got through with the minimum of knowledge." It is not easy perhaps to fall in love with a number of uncouth names and symbols which, Dr. Rennie admits, may fairly be compared with Chinese puzzles, and especially when the value of that kind of knowledge is not perceived. Whatever difficulty there may be on this score is probably supplemented and increased by one of the special characteristics of our times. There is manifest eagerness on all sides for the practical application of scientific facts and knowledge. Dexterity and inventiveness are fostered by the keen competition that prevails. Applied science is at a premium. Both the demand and the desire for technical instruction are urgent. The immediate benefits that are obtained as the result of this general tendency need not be undervalued, but it may be freely confessed that they are likely to prove an allurements from the less attractive path of patient and plodding investigation. Dr. Rennie showed very clearly that the best results are not likely to be obtained by haphazard experiments, but that the study of scientific principles, even though there be no promise of useful issue, yields the greatest amount of profit in the end.

With such a theme as this to expatiate upon, and such a plea to urge, Dr. Rennie had no difficulty in finding arguments both forcible and eloquent in support of the claims of chemistry as a science. The bare fact that in its broad sense, which is the true, it deals with the elements, forms, and combinations of matter, with the processes by which elementary substances are combined or separated, and the laws by which they operate or are themselves operated upon, is an ample explanation of the enthusiasm which it kindles among its votaries. In ancient times the alchemist had before him the attractive prospect of discovering an elixir which should confer upon its fortunate possessor the blessing of perpetual youth, or the philosopher's stone by which all baser materials were to be transmuted into gold. Such anticipations as these are now dismissed as dreams that belong solely to a visionary and unpractical age, but at the same time scientific chemistry has well nigh erased the word impossible from the vocabulary. With more complete knowledge of such phenomena as are presented by light, electricity, and heat, and the chemical

affinities and relations of elementary substances, the horizon has widened for the explorer, and the possibilities are seen to be rich as well as boundless. The highest knowledge only proves how little is actually known and therefore stimulates the student in his pursuit. Had Dr. Rennie done no more than draw attention to this aspect of the subject in hand his address would have served its avowed purpose, but his plea was reinforced by many useful practical suggestions. Avoiding technicalities which are "caviare to the general," he clearly showed the indebtedness of medicine to chemistry, and at the same time indicated how the obligation might be increased. The wide field for usefulness which may be found in Australian plant life was only glanced at, but enough was said to encourage the cultivation of this branch of knowledge. The indigenous products of this continent have so much that is special to them as to afford promise of abundant reward for local study and examination. We are in the presence of scientific novelties, some of which we know a little about, but only enough to suggest how much remains unknown. Only the other day the discovery of a mineral entirely new to science was reported from Broken Hill, and the chemical combinations in that region are, if not absolutely unique, so diversified as to be intensely interesting, while to solve the problems they present would be to confer a national boon. This is only one of many inviting fields for original research.

Touching this matter of special investigation into the various departments where science holds up a beckoning finger, Dr. Rennie's observations were stimulating and suggestive. They embody a conclusion that has been reached and expressed many times—by those who desire to see Australian Universities taking their proper place and exercising their proper function. This will never be done as long as the digging and delving are left to other hands and we are content to be their copyists or to reap the fruit of their labors. If our seats of learning are to acquire respect and exert influence they must prove their capability for original work that shall be of value to the world. There are several conditions very much in their favor. In some directions there is virgin soil to be cultivated which may be expected to yield an abundant harvest. The trouble is that we have so very few who think it worth while to give their time and talents to the work. Dr. Rennie contrasts the scarcity of persons who devote themselves to scientific pursuits in these colonies as compared with the old world, and his statement of the case is no doubt perfectly correct. Graduates in Australian Universities as a rule regard the curriculum through which they pass as the means to an end, and that end is to enable them to take a certain position or to earn a living. It would be unfair to blame them for doing so, inasmuch as they have scarcely any choice. Yet it is to be regretted that such is the case, and the question is a very natural one whether some of them have not the means, or cannot be supplied with the means, of utilising the training they have received in another way. A measure of encouragement is afforded by the fact that colonial Universities have already made some valuable contributions to the scientific knowledge of the world, and that their alumni have repeatedly proved themselves to possess all the ability required. What more is needed is a thirst for scientific investigation for its own sake, combined with the means for indulging the desire. In all directions, and especially the department to which Dr. Rennie more particularly referred, there are inviting prospects, and it may be hoped that he will have the satisfaction of seeing effect given to his wishes. His appeal should not be without some practical effect.