

SCIENCE WHOLESALE.

The Science Congress.

[From our Special Correspondent.] MELBOURNE, January 11.

The latest session of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science has ended at last, and left most of the remaining visiting members jaded, and some of them disappointed. When they sit down, after the whirl of business and social engagements, to make up their profit and loss accounts, they cannot say candidly that there is much—if anything—to carry over to credit of added knowledge, and, putting it in another way, one cannot see the trees for the forest, and the forest for the trees. The methods of the Congress lead to no definite gain in particular or in general, excepting through the personal contact and the comparison of notes between folk earnestly engaged in research. The man or woman who wants to learn in detail regarding his own study or hobby can glean little from the formal discussions on the papers, which are read by the authors or by somebody else, because the leaders of thought in practically all lines absent themselves from the lectures; and the individual who wishes to acquire a comprehensive view of the progress of science cannot do it because the arrangement of the addresses is such—and necessarily such—that it is impossible for him to hear what is said in half a dozen lecture rooms at the same time. Then, to attempt to "average" the teaching would be to make something consecutive and cohesive of a motley mosaic. The whole effect is one of bewilderment and puzzlement, and nobody should be blamed but the system. The officers are models of courtesy, zeal, and efficiency, in spite of the academical degrees of some of them; but "five into two won't go." In other words, 100 essays and papers of an hour each cannot be crammed into 10 hours, and the galloping effort to make the most of the time, as well as destructive to sustained thought. Even the best speakers, with at least an Australasian-known name, talk to small audiences; and few of those who are present at any one time are there all the time. Some hear the beginning of the talk in one hall, and rush off to another room to listen to another address in which they are interested; and at intervals, to the disconcerting of the speaker, others drop in from other lecture rooms, and so the lecture is usually only half-heard and wholly misunderstood. So that, in order to take a satisfactory survey of the proceedings, one has to await the leisurely publication—about a quarter and a half after the event—of the "Proceedings" of the association—and some of the members did before that huge mass of more or less digested data is placed before them—not "by the aid of a handtruck" as one critic facetiously observed. The association is a noble body, but it would do more if it tried to do less.

—Passing Away.—

In one of the rooms the other day the Rev. Dr. George Brown, the veteran and once-robust missionary, talked to a small audience (in touching tones, which indicated his own decadence as he nears the eighties) of the voices, so familiar and so vigorous in the counsels of the association, which since the last previous meeting two years ago had been stilled in death. The two years' retrospect which each meeting provides suggests a sad commentary upon the suitability of human affairs; and the good old doctor, just risen from a bed of sickness to speak, talked falteringly of the stalwart who had preceded him—not by a long handicap, alas!—on the journey which ends in the land where all scientific secrets are solved. "If there be such a land!" That is not my own statement, but an interjector, that embodies some of the contentions in which one lecturer expressed doubt concerning the sound basis of the conventional idea of the regions of Felicity and Brimstone, et cetera. And several speakers on Sunday in the pulpits girded at science on the presumption that it is another name for unbelief. Which it is not; for, contrary to the continental, and particularly the German, experience, most of the chief scientists of Australasia are "good-living church members." But very definite is the impression created by the yearning at these congresses for the touch of the vanished hand; and equally strong seem to be the ideas that the number of young scientists now coming forward is not sufficient to compensate for those who have fallen, and that the Presidential lead now given is not what the Presidential lead once was and ought always to be.

—Two Ineffective Addresses.—

A few days before the opening of the congress The Register outlined in a leading article what the general character of the Presidential deliverance should be; and since then many members of the association have pronounced the opinion that the ideal therein explained was right, but that the reality, as offered in the inaugural spoken manifesto of President Professor David, was poor indeed, after all allowances had been made for it. These allowances included the fact that the dearly-loved professor—although genial, kindly, wholly estimable, and popular as ever—is visibly showing signs of wear and tear. The audience who heard him in the Wilson Hall suffered rather than enjoyed his generally heavy talk of 100 minutes, and cheered vehemently when he had made an end—not in appreciation of what he had said, but in relief because he had no more to say of the same kind in the same way. By no means did the good professor do himself justice when he dished up once more comparatively old observations regarding south pole exploration; and after all he sat down with a rather comical apology for not having been able to say he had written, and for having been compelled—after he had eaten up a whole long evening—to leave unuttered much that he wanted to mention. And so the first night ended with more of a fiasco than of anything else, applying the word fiasco on a successful basis of judgment. The Association still awaits the coming of a man who can and will give a worthy Presidential review of the progress of science between Congress and Congress. This desideratum cannot reasonably be expected from Professor Baldwin Spencer, who endeavoured one night during the session to enlighten a huge audience in the Town Hall on the question of Northern Territory settlement. Like most of the other expositors to the Congress, the able Professor, who is so much in the limelight, has no elocution or rhetoric, and scores of people left the hall during the progress of his address—because they could not hear half-a-dozen consecutive words. And even apart from that his sense of proportion was all awry. The pictures were too much of a muchness, and the photographic records of aboriginal utterances, if new, apparently repeated themselves like half-a-dozen prolonged encores. The gallant Professor has yet many things to learn before he will shine as a lecturer, and his observations upon the Northern Territory, so far have not—at least concerning matters outside his own particular orbit—added much to the public knowledge on the theme.

—South Australians.—

The range of papers—some of which were not, and never will be read to an audience, if in the library—was so comprehensive as to include the Poles, and even—specifically—"the east wind," and the two theological antinodes. A true perspective of the nature of the discussion cannot be gained by reading the reports of the Melbourne papers, because the Victorian metropolitan journals report on names rather than on merits, and with them Victoria is always the Alpha and the Omega, if not quite all the intervening letters. As the conspicuous failures of the Congress were the addresses of Professor David and Professor Baldwin Spencer—and they were not the less failures because they were boomed as successes—so the real triumph of the Congress in matter as well as (generally) in manner were the discourses of the South Australian representatives. This observation applies heard as well as within the exact sphere of the Congress; for instance, at a side meeting held last Friday, to form a

Federal Forest Conservation League—a purpose which was accomplished—more than those of any other State, including Victoria, and most of the business was done by Adelaideans. Why, in all such interstate conventions, do South Australians do the real work, if not admittedly? They do take it, and most people admit the fact, but why? One scientific observer gives the assurance that the whole merit lies in the quality of the Adelaide metropolitan water, which puts keen energies into South Australian muscle and keen thoughts into South Australian brains. Yet, most of the speeches here talk of Australia as consisting mainly of Sydney and Melbourne, but particularly Melbourne; and the Presidential address in connection with the visit of members of the British Association next year, is to be divided in halves between those two capitals. Adelaide and the other cities are to be permitted to enjoy only the privilege of picking up the crumbs—if any—which may fall from their masters' table. But when South Australians have talked in this Congress the rest have listened, so far as it was humanly possible for any one to do so, systematically under the conditions already described. And well they might listen. If, for instance, Dr. Ramsay Smith and Mr. Howchin had been Victorian speakers, they would probably have been reported in full in Melbourne; and Professor Henderson, with his dramatic and well-composed utterance,

would have won more commendation than was extended to him, even though he did speak upon a somewhat abstruse subject. A similar remark may be used in relation to the lecture of that brilliant young educationist, Dr. A. Schulz, Principal of the University Training College, Adelaide, who delivered a really fine address. Partly because it dealt with a popular topic, and was popularly expressed, Dr. Ramsay Smith's speech was the talk of the Congress on Friday, for the interstate reputation of this untiring investigator and able expounder has been greatly augmented during the last few years; and it is not unlikely that he will be President before very long. Mr. Howchin, too, is increasing in reputation, and in prestige in his special line; and the President struck a sympathetic note at the inauguration when he eulogized some of his geological discoveries. And the Melbourne papers, when they don't misspell his name, in common with those of other well-known visitors, style him "Professor." Perhaps they are prophets? Meanwhile, he was made the subject of a presentation in the shape of a medal, in recognition of his important contribution to the literature of Australian geology, and he and the audience who witnessed the ceremony were equally pleased—which does not always happen on such occasions.

—Social and Other.—

During Congress week Victorians of all classes were hospitable to an extreme—a sentiment which was quaintly expressed by Professor David at the closing engagement last night—a reception by the President of the Public Library, Museum, and Art Gallery—when he humorously returned thanks because the President had announced that it was impossible to dispense any refreshments in the building that night. The visitors (said the Professor) were already practically surfeited. The social functions and the cheap railway fares are more enticing to the majority of members of the Association than the scientific disclosures. The State Governor held a reception on the first day, and the Lord Mayor on the second, and both meetings were attended by folk scientific and otherwise, dressed scientifically and otherwise. The great organ in the Town Hall thundered for about half an hour, when (to the evident and natural annoyance of the player) the audience gradually departed to the tearooms, and left the hall to music and to him. These were only two of a number of engagements, all more or less interesting, and entertaining, and instructive. Among the most impressive, but least visited places—because it was not on the itinerary—was the Horticultural College at Burnley, where Mr. E. E. Pescott and his predecessors have converted a comparatively arid tract of 17-inch rainfall land into a bower of beauty and a hive of agricultural industry. Every gardener, when on a visit to Melbourne should see this place, which is only about three miles out on the banks of the Yarra; and all who do see it will surely admire Mr. Pescott's triumphs of landscape garden effect. When fine old Dr. Hottel shall leave the Adelaide Botanic Garden, one hopes that a successor as grand as Mr. Pescott may be obtained, for he loves his work, and his work loves him—judging by the way in which it smiles at him. Mr. Pescott's immediate forerunner at Burnley was Mr. Cronin, now the Director of the Melbourne Botanic Garden; and he was the recipient of many compliments upon the appearance of the delectable fairyland under his control. These gardens—seen by preference from the elevated Castle of the Winds at the hither end of the Alexandria Drive—are inexpressibly charming. Truly every prospect pleases—nay, enchants; but at this season the flies buzz so and bite so that one fancies that they must be the agents of Satan in the Home of Fragrant Beauty.

Advertiser, Jan. 17/12

PLACES OF PUBLIC ENTERTAINMENT ACTS.

The following new regulation under the Places of Public Entertainment Acts is published in this week's issue of the "Government Gazette":—"In every place of public entertainment, at all times from the commencement of any entertainment until such time thereafter as the place is completely cleared of the audience—(a) Every exit, passage, and gangway shall be kept entirely free from chairs, flap seats, or other obstructions, whether permanent or temporary. (b) Every exit, passage, or gangway shall be kept free from obstruction by persons standing or sitting therein, or otherwise occupying the same. (c) Every exit, passage, and gangway and the immediate approaches to and from escape doors shall be kept free from obstruction of any kind. (d) Seats shall be securely fixed together in sets of not less than three each in any case. (e) Under no circumstances shall any chair or movable seat be placed in any passage or gangway. (f) All carpets, matting, or other floor or stair coverings shall be securely fixed to the floor and so kept as to avoid the possibility of accident.