

WELLINGTON PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY.

FIRST MEETING: 13th June, 1888.

W. M. Maskell, F.R.M.S., President, in the chair.

New Members.—T. D. McDougal, W. B. Hudson, and A. Boardman.

Inaugural address by the President, W. M. Maskell, F.R.M.S.

ABSTRACT.

The PRESIDENT, after thanking the Society for the honour done to him by his election, proceeded to deliver the annual address. He began by congratulating the members of the New Zealand Institute upon the appearance of the twentieth volume of "Transactions," and therefore upon the completion of twenty years of good and solid work for the benefit of the colony—work undertaken without any view to emolument or reward, and solely with the intention of disseminating useful information. At the same time he recognised that there was some foundation for the complaint often made that the "Transactions" contained almost too much of the purely natural and physical sciences. This may have been inevitable in the past; but perhaps the time may have arrived when an extension of work might be brought about, and he hoped to be able to suggest some plan during the year for encouraging young men to take up other lines of study, and to publish their results. Little or no assistance could be hoped for from the Colonial Legislature, which was now cutting everything down to the lowest limit, and which evinced no disposition to liberality towards learning. The vexatious restrictions to which respectable citizens were subjected if they desired to make good use of the library which the colony had given to Parliament, were an evidence that the Legislature could not be in the least relied upon to help the Institute, even though it was demonstrable that the "Transactions" were capable of being directly profitable from an educational point of view. Still, perhaps a good deal of difficulty undoubtedly arose from the character of the young men of New Zealand, who certainly did not seem to show much inclination to intellectual pursuits. Athletics and, perhaps, practical business seemed to absorb their entire attention; and if some addicted themselves at all to study this was probably in the great majority of cases only with an eye to the positions and the salaries to be gained by it. *Finis scientiæ opes*: the test of knowledge is the money to be made from it. Such seemed to be the philosophy of young New Zealand.

Passing to the scientific portion of his address, the President drew attention chiefly to the branch of study which he had himself followed—microscopical investigation. He began with the seeming paradox that, whilst the microscope since its invention has taught us very much, it had also taught us very little. In the improvement of mechanical appliances and adaptations the advance of the microscope had been most wonderful, and an illustration of this was afforded by the comparison of a microscope by a modern maker, exhibited on the table, with the model of a microscope

made and used by A. Leeuwenhoek, one of the most celebrated of the early discoverers, about the year A.D. 1700. This model, which would be placed in the Colonial Museum, showed that the original instrument was of extreme roughness, having only a single lens fixed in a metal plate, to which a small apparatus was attached at the back for holding an object. The improved mechanism of the modern microscope was indeed wonderful, and probably left little more to be effected. Still, this was but a question of degree and of mechanical skill: as regards the deductions from the teaching of the microscope, we are no further advanced now than the observers of Leeuwenhoek's time.

The two great problems, What is life? and How have the variations of organic beings been brought about? are not solved by the microscope—which, indeed, in revealing to us innumerable wonders of fact, has not lent itself to the advancement of modern scientific theory. The prevalent tendency of modern thought is in the direction of discovering a physical, a material basis of life; and all the energies of many accepted leaders nowadays are bent towards this end. But they receive no aid from the microscope, which, as it every day leads them further on in the domain of facts, only does so to show still the same impassable gulfs preventing the desired solution of the problem. And as regards the second question—of the variations of organisms—the microscope seems to provide even a positive bar against modern theories. For these rest fundamentally on a few assumptions, one of which is that in organic nature simplicity of construction implies inferiority, and therefore priority: the simplest organisms are taken as necessarily inferior, and therefore precedent, to the more complex. An instance of the fallacy of this assumption is afforded by the microscopic animal, hydra (common about Wellington and elsewhere), an animal of almost the last degree of simplicity, and on that account placed in modern systems in a very "low" order of beings. It could be shown that the marvellous properties and powers of the hydra formed a direct contradiction to the fundamental assumption above mentioned of the evolutionary theory. On the whole, the microscope, whilst it has taught us, and will continue to teach us, ever more and more in the domain of fact, has in the domain of speculation left us no further advanced than the early observers two centuries ago—even no further advanced than the philosophers of ancient Greece.

The President exhibited under the microscope a specimen of the hydra.

Papers.—1. "On a New Species of Kiwi (*Apteryx bulleri*)," by R. Bowdler Sharp, F.L.S., F.Z.S., Honorary Member N.Z. Institute (Ornithological Department, British Museum); communicated by Sir Walter Buller. (*Transactions*, p. 224.)

2. "On the Varieties of a Common Moth (*Declana floccosa*)," by G. V. Hudson. (*Transactions*, p. 190.)

SECOND MEETING: 27th June, 1888.

W. M. Maskell, F.R.M.S., President, in the chair.

Papers.—1. "On Rabbit-disease in the Wairarapa," by Coleman Phillips. (*Transactions*, p. 429.)

Mr. John F. McClean, M.R.C.V.S., by permission of the meeting, said that he objected to the wholesale introduction of "rabbit-fluke" as a means of eradicating the pest, on the ground of its being the same