

SCIENCE

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CONTENTS

<i>The Earth's Crust:</i> SIR THOMAS H. HOLLAND.	533
<i>Fraternities and Scholarships at the University of Illinois:</i> ARTHUR RAY WARNOCK.	542
<i>Theodore Nicholas Gill.</i>	547
<i>Scientific Notes and News</i>	550
<i>University and Educational News</i>	553
<i>Discussion and Correspondence:—</i>	
<i>Dr. Bateson's Presidential Address:</i> DR. WM. H. DALL. <i>Heredity and Mental Traits:</i> PROFESSOR JOSEPH JASTROW. <i>Quantity and Rank of University Attendance:</i> DR. CHARLES R. KEYES. <i>The Fur Seal Inquiry, the Congressional Committee and the Scientist:</i> DR. RAYMOND C. OSBURN	554
<i>Scientific Books:—</i>	
<i>Recent Books on Mathematics:</i> PROFESSOR CASSIUS J. KEYSER. <i>Thorpe's Dictionary of Applied Chemistry:</i> DR. W. R. WHITNEY. <i>The Royal Society's Catalogue of Scientific Papers:</i> DR. F. H. GARRISON	559
<i>The National Conference Committee:</i> PROFESSOR FREDERICK C. FERRY	565
<i>Special Articles:—</i>	
<i>The "Multiple Unit" System as a Source of Electricity for Laboratories:</i> DR. C. L. V. HESS	566

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THE EARTH'S CRUST¹

THE idea of the greater inequalities of the globe being approximately static equilibrium has been recognized for many years: it was expressed by Babbage and Herschel; it was included in Archdeacon Pratt's theory of compensation; and it was accepted by Fisher as one of the fundamental facts on which his theory of mountain structure rested. But in 1889 Captain C. E. Dutton presented the idea "in a modified form, in a new dress, and in greater detail"; he gave the idea orthodox baptism and a name, which seems to be necessary for the respectable life of any scientific theory. "For the condition of equilibrium of figure, to which gravitation tends to reduce a planetary body, irrespective of whether it be homogeneous or not." Dutton² proposed "the name *isostasy*." The corresponding adjective would be *isostatic*—the state of balance between the ups and downs on the earth.

For a long time geologists were forced to content themselves with the conclusion that the folding of strata is the result of the crust collapsing on a cooling and shrinking core; but Fisher pointed out that the amount of radial shrinking could not account even for the present great surface inequalities of the lithosphere, without regard to the enormous lateral shortening indicated by the folds in great mountain regions, some of which, like the Himalayan

¹ Concluding part of the address of the president of the Geological Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Australia, 1914.

² Dutton, "On Some of the Greater Problems of Physical Geology," *Bull. Phil. Soc. Wash.*, XI, 53, 1889.

folds, were formed at a late date in the earth's history, folds which in date and direction have no genetic relationship to G. H. Darwin's primitive wrinkles. Then, besides the folding and plication of the crust in some areas, we have to account for the undoubted stretching which it has suffered in other places, stretching of a kind indicated by faults so common that they are generally known as normal faults. It has been estimated by Claypole that the folding of the Appalachian range resulted in a horizontal compression of the strata to a belt less than 65 per cent. of the original breadth. According to Heim the diameter of the northern zone of the central Alps is not more than half the original extension of the strata when they were laid down in horizontal sheets. De la Beche, in his memoir on Devon and Cornwall, which anticipated many problems of more than local interest, pointed out that, if the inclined and folded strata were flattened out again, they would cover far more ground than that to which they are now restricted on the geological map. Thus, according to Dutton, Fisher, and others, the mere contraction of the cooling globe is insufficient to account for our great rock-folds, especially great folds like those of the Alps and the Himalayas, which have been produced in quite late geological times. It is possible that this conclusion is in the main true; but in coming to this conclusion we must give due value to the number of patches which have been let into the old crustal envelope—masses of igneous rock, mineral veins and hydrated products which have been formed in areas of temporary stretching, and have remained as permanent additions to the crust, increasing the size and bagginess of the old coat, which, since the discovery of radium, is now regarded as much older than was formerly imagined by non-geological members of the scientific world.

The peculiar nature of rock-folds presents also an obstacle no less formidable from a qualitative point of view. If the skin were merely collapsing on its shrinking core we should expect wrinkles in all directions; yet we find great folded areas like the Himalayas stretching continuously for 1,400 miles, with signs of a persistently directed overthrust from the north; or we have folded masses like the Appalachians of a similar order of magnitude stretching from Maine to Georgia, with an unmistakable compression in a northwest to southeast direction. The simple hypothesis of a collapsing crust is thus "quantitatively insufficient," according to Dutton, though this is still doubtful, and it is "qualitatively inapplicable," which is highly probable.

In addition to the facts that rock-folds are maintained over such great distances and that later folds are sometimes found to be superimposed on older ones, geologists have to account for the conditions which permit of the gradual accumulation of enormous thicknesses of strata without corresponding rise of the surface of deposition.

On the other hand, too, in folded regions there are exposures of beds superimposed on one another with a total thickness of many miles more than the height of any known mountain, and one is driven again to conclude that uplift has proceeded *pari passu* with the removal of the load through the erosive work of atmospheric agents.

It does not necessarily follow that these two processes are the direct result of loading in one case and of relief in the other; for slow subsidence gives rise to the conditions that favor deposition and the uplifting of a range results in the increased energy of eroding streams.

Thus there was a natural desire to see if Dutton's theory agreed with the variations of gravity. If the ups and downs are bal-

anced, the apparently large mass of a mountain-range ought to be compensated by lightness of material in and below it. Dutton was aware of the fact that this was approximately true regarding the great continental plateaus and oceanic depressions; but he imagined that the balance was delicate enough to show up in a small hill-range of 3,000 to 5,000 feet.

The data required to test this theory, accumulated during the triangulation of the United States, have been made the subject of an elaborate analysis by J. F. Hayford and W. Bowie.³ They find that, by adopting the hypothesis of isostatic compensation, the differences between the observed and computed deflections of the vertical caused by topographical inequalities are reduced to less than one tenth of the mean values which they would have if no isostatic compensation existed. According to the hypothesis adopted, the inequalities of gravity are assumed to die out at some uniform depth, called the depth of compensation, below the mean sea-level. The columns of crust material standing above this horizon vary in length according to the topography, being relatively long in highlands and relatively short under the ocean. The shorter columns are supposed to be composed of denser material, so that the product of the length of each column by its mean density would be the same for all places. It was found that, by adopting 122 kilometers as the depth of compensation, the deflection anomalies were most effectually eliminated, but there still re-

mained unexplained residuals or local anomalies of gravity to be accounted for.

Mr. G. K. Gilbert,⁴ who was one of the earliest geologists to turn to account Dutton's theory of isostasy, has recently offered a plausible theory to account for these residual discrepancies between the observed deflections and those computed on the assumption of isostatic compensation to a depth of 122 kilometers. An attempt had already been made by Hayford and Bowie to correlate the distribution of anomalies with the main features of the geological map and with local changes in load that have occurred during comparatively recent geological times. For example, they considered the possibility of an increased load in the lower Mississippi valley, where there has been in recent times a steady deposition of sediment, and therefore possibly the accumulation of mass slightly in advance of isostatic adjustment. One would expect in such a case that there would be locally shown a slight excess of gravity, but, on the contrary, there is a general prevalence of negative anomalies in this region. In the Appalachian region, on the other hand, where there has been during late geological times continuous erosion, with consequent unloading, one would expect that the gravity values would be lower, as isostatic compensation would naturally lag behind the loss of overburden; this, however, is also not the case, for over a greater part of the Appalachian region the anomalies are of the positive order. Similarly, in the north central region, where there has been since Pleistocene times a removal of a heavy ice-cap, there is still a general prevalence of positive anomalies.

These anomalies must, therefore, remain

³ J. F. Hayford, "The Figure of the Earth and Isostasy," U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, Washington, 1909. "Supplementary Investigation," Washington, 1910. See also *Science*, New Series, Vol. XXXIII., p. 199, 1911. J. F. Hayford and W. Bowie, "The Effect of Topography and Isostatic Compensation upon the Intensity of Gravity," U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Special Publication No. 10, Washington, 1912.

⁴ "Interpretation of Anomalies of Gravity," U. S. Geol. Surv. Professional Paper 85-C, 1913, p. 29.

unexplained by any of the obvious phenomena at the command of the geologist. G. K. Gilbert now suggests that, while it may be true that the product of the length of the unit column by its mean density may be the same, the density variations within the column may be such as to give rise to different effects on the pendulum. If, for instance, one considers two columns of the same size and of exactly the same weight, with, in one case, the heavy material at a high level and in the other case with the heavy material at a low level, the center of gravity of the former column, being nearer the surface, will manifest itself with a greater pull on the pendulum; these columns would be, however, in isostatic adjustment.⁵

Gilbert's hypothesis thus differs slightly from the conception put forth by Hayford and Bowie; for Gilbert assumes that there is still appreciable heterogeneity in the more deep-seated parts of the earth, while Hayford and Bowie's hypothesis assumes that in the nuclear mass density anomalies have practically disappeared, and that there is below the depth of compensation an adjustment such as would exist in a

⁵ It is interesting to note that the idea suggested by G. K. Gilbert in 1913 was partly anticipated by Major H. L. Crosthwait in 1912 (Survey of India, Professional Paper No. 13, p. 5). Major Crosthwait in discussing the similar gravity anomalies in India remarks parenthetically: "Assuming the doctrine of isostasy to hold, is it not possible that in any two columns of matter extending from the surface down to the depth of compensation there may be the same mass, and yet that the density may be very differently distributed in the two columns? These two columns, though in isostatic equilibrium, would act differently on the plumb-line owing to the unequal distribution of mass."

"The drawback to treating this subject by hard and fast mathematical formulæ is that we are introducing into a discussion of the constitution of the earth's crust a uniform method when, in reality, probably no uniformity exists."

mass composed of homogeneous concentric shells.

In order to make the Indian observations comparable to those of the United States as a test of the theory of isostasy, Major H. L. Crosthwait⁶ has adopted Hayford's system of computation and has applied it to 102 latitude stations and 18 longitude stations in India. He finds that the unexplained residuals in India are far more pronounced than they are in the United States, or, in other words, it would appear that isostatic conditions are much more nearly realized in America than in India.

The number of observations considered in India is still too small for the formation of a detailed map of anomalies, but the country can be divided into broad areas which show that the mean anomalies are comparable to those of the United States only over the Indian peninsula, which, being a mass of rock practically undisturbed since early geological times, may be regarded safely as having approached isostatic equilibrium. To the north of the peninsula three districts form a wide band stretching west-north-westwards from Calcutta, with mean residual anomalies of a positive kind, while to the north of this band lies the Himalayan belt, in which there is always a large negative residual.

Colonel Burrard⁷ has considered the Himalayan and Sub-Himalayan anomalies in a special memoir, and comes to the conclusion that the gravity deficiency is altogether too great to be due to a simple geosynclinal depression filled with light alluvium such as we generally regard the Gangetic trough to be. He suggests that the rapid change

⁶ Survey of India, Professional Paper No. 13, 1912.

⁷ Survey of India, Professional Paper No. 12, 1912.

in gravity values near the southern margin of the Himalayan mass can be explained only on the assumption of the existence of a deep and narrow rift in the sub-crust parallel to the general Himalayan axis of folding. A single large rift of the kind and size that Colonel Burrard postulates is a feature for which we have no exact parallel; but one must be careful not to be misled by the use of a term which, while conveying a definite mental impression to a mathematician, appears to be incongruous with our geological experience. There may be no such thing as a single large rift filled with light alluvial material, but it is possible that there may still be a series of deep-seated fissures that might afterwards become filled with mineral matter.

With this conception of a rift or a series of rifts, Colonel Burrard is led to reverse the ordinary mechanical conception of Himalayan folding. Instead now of looking upon the folds as due to an overthrust from the north, he regards the corrugations to be the result of an under-creep of the sub-crust towards the north. Thus, according to this view, the Himalaya, instead of being pushed over like a gigantic rock-wave breaking on to the Indian *Horst* is in reality being dragged away from the old peninsula, the depression between being filled up gradually by the Gangetic alluvium. So far as the purely stratigraphical features are concerned, the effect would be approximately the same whether there is a superficial overthrust of the covering strata or whether there is a deep-seated withdrawal of the basement which is well below the level of observation.

Since the Tibetan expedition of ten years ago we have been in possession of definite facts which show that to the north of the central crystalline axis of the Himalaya there lies a great basin of marine sediments forming a fairly complete record from

Paleozoic to Tertiary times, representing the sediments which were laid down in the great central Eurasian ocean to which Suess gave the name *Tethys*. We have thus so far been regarding the central crystalline axis of the Himalaya as approximately coincident with the old northern coastline of Gondwanaland; but, if Colonel Burrard's ideas be correct, the coast line must have been very much further to the south before the Himalayan folding began.

Representing what the Geological Survey of India regards as the orthodox view, Mr. H. H. Hayden⁸ has drawn attention to some conclusions which, from our present geological knowledge, appear to be strange and improbable in Colonel Burrard's conclusions, and he also offers alternative explanations for the admitted geodetic facts. Mr. Hayden suggests, for instance, that the depth of isostatic compensation may be quite different under the Himalayan belt from that under the regions to the south. His assumptions, however, in this respect are, as pointed out by Colonel G. P. Lenox Conyngham,⁹ at variance with the whole theory of isostasy. Mr. Hayden then suggests that most of the excessive anomalies would disappear if we took into account the low specific gravity of the Sub-Himalayan sands and gravels of Upper Tertiary age as well as of the Pleistocene and recent accumulations of similar material filling the Indo-Gangetic depression. It would not be at all inconsistent with our ideas derived from geology to regard the Gangetic trough as some three or four miles deep near its northern margin, thinning out gradually towards the undisturbed mass of the Indian peninsula, and Mr. R. D. Oldham,¹⁰

⁸ *Rec. Geol. Surv. Ind.*, Vol. XLIII., Part 2, p. 138, 1913.

⁹ *Records of the Survey of India*, Vol. V., p. 1.

¹⁰ *Proc. Roy. Soc.*, Series A, Vol. 90, p. 32, 1914.

with this view, has also calculated the effect of such a wedge of alluvial material of low specific gravity, coming to the conclusion that the rapid change in deflection, on passing from the Lower Himalaya southward towards the peninsula, can mainly be explained by the deficiency of mass in the alluvium itself.

It is obvious that, before seeking for any unusual cause for the gravity anomalies, we ought to take into account the effect of this large body of alluvium which lies along the southern foot of the range. It is, however, by no means certain that a thick mass of alluvial material, accumulated slowly and saturated with water largely charged with carbonate of lime, would have a specific gravity so appreciably lower than that of the rocks now exposed in the main mass of the Himalaya as to account for the residual anomalies. Some of the apparent deficiency in gravity is due to this body of alluvium, but it will only be after critical examination of the data and more precise computation that we shall be in a position to say if there is still room to entertain Colonel Burrard's very interesting hypothesis.

By bringing together the geological and geodetic results we notice five roughly parallel bands stretching across northern India. There is (1) a band of abnormal high gravity lying about 150 miles from the foot of the mountains, detected by the plumb-line and pendulum; (2) the great depression filled by the Gangetic alluvium; (3) the continuous band of Tertiary rock, forming the Sub-Himalaya, and separated by a great boundary overthrust from (4) the main mass of the Outer and Central Himalaya of old unfossiliferous rock, with the snow-covered crystalline peaks flanked on the north by the (5) the Tibetan basin of highly fossiliferous rocks formed in the great Eurasian Mediterranean ocean that

persisted up to nearly the end of Mesozoic times.

That these leading features in North India can hardly be without genetic relationship one to another is indicated by the geological history of the area. Till nearly the end of the Mesozoic era the line of crystalline, snow-covered peaks now forming the Central Himalaya was not far from the shore-line between Gondwanaland, stretching away to the south, and Tethys, the great Eurasian ocean. Near the end of Mesozoic times there commenced the great outwelling of the Deccan Trap, the remains of which, after geological ages of erosion, still cover an area of 200,000 square miles, with a thickness in places of nearly 5,000 feet. Immediately after the outflow of this body of basic lava, greater in mass than any known eruption of the kind, the ocean flowed into Northwest India and projected an arm eastwards to a little beyond the point at which the Ganges now emerges from the hills. Then followed the folding movements that culminated in the present Himalayan range, the elevation developing first on the Bengal side, and extending rapidly to the northwest until the folds extended in a great arc for some 1,400 miles from southeast to northwest.

New streams developed on the southern face of the now rising mass, and although the arm of the sea that existed in early Tertiary times became choked with silt, the process of subsidence continued, and the gradually subsiding depression at the foot of the hills as fast as it developed became filled with silt, sand, gravel and boulders in increasing quantities as the hills became mountains and the range finally reached its present dimensions, surpassing in size all other features of the kind on the face of the globe.

Now, it is important to remember that for ages before the great outburst of Dec-

can Trap occurred there was a continual unloading of Gondwanaland, and a continual consequent overloading of the ocean bed immediately to the north; that this process went on with a gradual rise on one side and a gradual depression on the other; and that somewhere near and parallel to the boundary line the crust must have been undergoing stresses which resulted in strain, and, as I suggest, the development of those fissures that let loose the floods of Deccan Trap and brought to an end the delicate isostatic balance.

During the secular subsidence of the northern shore line of Gondwanaland, accompanied by the slow accumulation of sediment near the shore and the gradual filing away of the land above sea-level, there must have been a gradual creep of the crust in a northerly direction. Near the west end of the Himalayan arc this movement would be towards the northwest for a part of the time; at the east end the creep would be towards the north-northeast and northeast. Thus there would be a tendency from well back in Paleozoic times up to the end of the Cretaceous period for normal faults—faults of tension—to develop on the land, with a trend varying from W.S.W.–E.N.E. to W.N.W.–E.S.E. across the northern part of Gondwanaland. We know nothing of the evidence now pigeon-holed below the great mantle of Gangetic alluvium, while the records of the Himalayan region have been masked or destroyed by later foldings. But in the stratified rocks lying just south of the southern margin of the great alluvial belt we find a common tendency for faults to strike in this way across the present peninsula of India. These faults have, for instance, marked out the great belt of coal-fields stretching for some 200 miles from east to west in the Damuda valley. On this, the east side of India, the fractures

of tension have a general trend of W.N.W.–E.S.E. We know that these faults are later than the Permian period, but some of them certainly were not much later.

If now we go westwards across the Central Provinces and Central India and into the eastern part of the Bombay Presidency, we find records of this kind still more strikingly preserved; for where the Gondwana rocks, ranging from Permo-Carboniferous to Liassic in age, rest on the much older Vindhyan series, we find three main series of these faults. One series was developed before Permo-Carboniferous times; another traverses the lower Gondwanas, which range up to about the end of Permian times; while the third set affects the younger and Upper Gondwanas of about Rhætic or Liassic age. Although the present topography of the country follows closely the outlines of the geological formations, it is clear from the work of the Geological Survey of India that these outlines were determined in Mesozoic times, and that the movements which formed the latest series of faults were but continuations of those which manifested themselves in Paleozoic times. According to Mr. J. G. Medlicott, the field data showed “that a tendency to yield in general east and west or more clearly northeast and southwest lines existed in this great area from the remote period of the Vindhyan fault.”¹¹ The author of the memoir and map on this area was certainly not suspicious of the ideas of which I am now unburdening my mind; on the contrary, he attempted and, with apologies, failed to reconcile his facts to views then being pushed by the weight of “authority” in Europe. This was not the last time that facts established in India were found (to use a field-geologist’s term) unconformably to lie on a basement of

¹¹ *Mem. Geol. Surv. Ind.*, Vol. II., 1860, Part 2, p. 256.

geological orthodoxy as determined by authority in Europe. It is important to notice that the series of faults referred to in the central parts of India are not mere local dislocations, but have a general trend for more than 250 miles.

A fault must be younger, naturally, than the strata which it traverses, but how much younger can seldom be determined. Intrusive rocks of known age are thus often more useful in indicating the age of the fissures through which they have been injected, and consequently the dykes which were formed at the time of the eruption of the great Deccan Trap give another clue to the direction of stresses at this critical time, that is towards the end of the Cretaceous period, when the northerly creep had reached its maximum, just before Gondwanaland was broken up. If, now, we turn to the geological maps of the northern part of Central India, the Central Provinces, and Bengal, we find that the old Vindhyan rocks of the Narbada valley were injected with hundreds of trap-dykes which show a general W.S.W.-E.N.E. trend, and thus parallel to the normal tension faults, which we know were formed during the periods preceding the outburst of the Deccan Trap. This general trend of faults and basic dykes is indicated on many of the published geological maps of India covering the northern part of the peninsula, including Ball's maps of the Ramgarh and Bokaro coalfields¹² and of the Hutar coalfield,¹³ Hughes's Rewa Gondwana basin,¹⁴ Jones's southern coalfields of the Satpura basin,¹⁵ and Oldham's general map of the Son valley.¹⁶

We see, then, that the development of

fissures with a general east-west trend in the northern part of Gondwanaland culminated at the end of the Cretaceous period, when they extended down, probably, to the basic magma lying below the crust either in a molten state, or in a state that would result in fluxion on the relief of pressure. That the molten material came to the surface in a superheated and liquid condition is shown by the way in which it has spread out in horizontal sheets over such enormous areas. Throughout this great expanse of lava there are no certain signs of volcanic centers, no conical slopes around volcanic necks; and one might travel for more than 400 miles from Poona to Nagpur over sheets of lava which are still practically horizontal. There is nothing exactly like this to be seen elsewhere to-day. The nearest approach to it is among the Hawaiian calderas, where the highly mobile basic lavas also show the characters of superfusion, glowing, according to J. D. Dana,¹⁷ with a white heat, that is, at a temperature not less than about 1,300° C.

Mellard Reade has pointed out that the earth's crust is under conditions of stress analogous to those of a bent beam, with, at a certain depth, a "level of no strain." Above this level there should be a shell of compression, and under it a thicker shell of tension. The idea has been treated mathematically by C. Davison, G. H. Darwin, O. Fisher, and M. P. Rudski, and need not be discussed at present. Professor R. A. Daly has taken advantage of this view concerning the distribution of stresses in the crust to explain the facility for the injection of dykes and batholiths from the liquid, or potentially liquid, gabbroid magma below into the shell of tension.¹⁸ He also shows

¹⁷ "Characteristics of Volcanoes," 1891, p. 200.

¹⁸ R. A. Daly, "Abyssal Igneous Injection as a Causal Condition and as an Effect of Mountain-building," *Amer. Jour. Sci.*, XXII., September, 1906, p. 205.

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. VI., Part 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. XV.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXI., Part 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXIV.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXXI., Part 1.

that the injection of large bodies of basic material into the shell of tension tends on purely mechanical grounds to the formation of a depression, or geosyncline. If this be so, are we justified in assuming that the heavy band following the southern margin of the Gangetic geosyncline is a "range" of such batholiths? The idea is not entirely new; for O. Fisher made the suggestion more than twenty years ago that the abnormal gravity at Kalianpur was due to "some peculiar influence (perhaps of a volcanic neck of basalt)."¹⁹

Daly's suggestion, however, taken into account with the history of Gondwanaland, may explain the peculiar alignment of the heavy subterranean band, parallel to the Gangetic depression and parallel to the general trend of the peninsular tension-faults and fissures that followed the unloading of Gondwanaland and the heavy loading of the adjoining ocean bed along a band roughly parallel to the present Himalayan folds.

R. S. Woodward objected that isostasy does not seem to meet the requirements of geological continuity, for it tends rapidly towards stable equilibrium, and the crust ought therefore to reach a stage of repose early in geologic time.²⁰ If the process of denudation and rise, with adjoining deposition and subsidence, occurred on a solid globe, this objection might hold good. But it seems to me that the break-up of Gondwanaland and the tectonic revolutions that followed show how isostasy can defeat itself in the presence of a sub-crustal magma actually molten or ready to liquefy on local relief of pressure. It is possible that the

protracted fling off of Gondwanaland brought nearer the surface what was once the local level of no-strain and its accompanying shell of tension.

The conditions existing in northern Gondwanaland before late Mesozoic times must have been similar to those in southwest Scotland before the occurrence of the Tertiary eruptions, for the crust in this region was also torn by stresses in the S.W.-N.E. direction with the formation of a remarkable series of N.W.-S.E. dykes which give the one-inch geological maps in this region a regularly striped appearance.

There is no section of the earth's surface which one can point to as being now subjected to exactly the same kind and magnitude of treatment as that to which Gondwanaland was exposed for long ages before the outburst of the Deccan Trap; but possibly the erosion of the Brazilian highlands and the deposition of the silt carried down by the Amazon, with its southern tributaries, and by the more eastern Araguay and Tocantins, may result in similar stresses which, if continued, will develop strains, and open the way for the subjacent magma to approach the surface or even to become extravasated, adding another to the small family of so-called fissure-eruptions.

The value of a generalization can be tested best by its reliability as a basis for prediction. Nothing shows up the shortcomings of our knowledge about the state of affairs below the superficial crust so effectually as our inability to make any useful predictions about earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. For many years to come in this department of science the only worker who will ever establish a claim to be called a prophet will be one in Cicero's sense—"he who guesses well."

THOMAS H. HOLLAND

¹⁹ "Physics of the Earth's Crust," 2d ed., 1889, p. 216.

²⁰ "Address to the Sect. of Mathematics and Astronomy of the Amer. Assoc.," 1889, *Smithsonian Report*, 1890, p. 196.