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I. Notes on a Visit to Algeria

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12th May 1859.—Professor BALFOUR, Vice-President, in the Chair.

The following donations to the Museum were announced:—

From Mr M'Nab—Portraits of Allan Cunningham and Daniel Ellis. These were directed to be framed and hung up with the other botanical portraits belonging to the Society.

Dr Harvey—Portion of a tree, in the hollow trunk of which a sermon was preached to thirty persons; also roots of a tree which were produced at a considerable height from the ground inside its hollow stem.

The following letter to Dr Balfour, from Mr Isaac Anderson, was read:—

“MARYFIELD, EDINBURGH, May 12, 1859.

“MY DEAR SIR,—As you expressed a desire to know the real facts as to the destruction of the city of Quito—reported in the newspapers to have been almost entire—and how it affected our excellent friend, Professor Jameson, of the University there, I have great pleasure in sending the Doctor's letter to me, dated the 23d March, the day after the earthquake, from which you will be glad to hear that not only is he unscathed in person, but also little injured in his property. And as he mentions that comparatively *few lives were lost*, the newspaper account of 5000 of the inhabitants having been killed must be a myth. From Doctor Jameson, however, saying that this earthquake has been the most severe he ever experienced, it must have indeed been an appalling one; for he has resided now thirty years continuously in that volcanic region, where these things are of frequent occurrence.

“You will observe that I am still receiving seeds of alpenes, &c., from that interesting locality, some of which I will have great pleasure in sending for the inspection of the members of the Botanical Society, as they come into flower. With this I send a *Berberis*, set with flowers, but not yet opened. I also send a *Vaccinium* with some of the spikes thickly set with pretty roseate blooms. It grows at 10,000 to 11,000 feet of elevation on the Andes, and bears eatable fruit.

“What, perhaps, will be most interesting to your Society will be such alpenes as the *Gentian*, *Swertia*, *Silene*, *Castilleja*, *Potentilla*, *Oenothera*, *Gaultheria*, &c., of which I have had various species sent me, now coming forward.—I am, very faithfully yours,

“ISAAC ANDERSON.”

The following is an extract from Professor Jameson's letter above referred to, dated 23d March 1859:—

“ Since yesterday morning we have been dreadfully alarmed by a violent shock of an earthquake, which has overthrown and ruined many of the public buildings, and damaged more or less *all* the houses of private individuals. The churches have suffered most, but fortunately *few* lives were lost. The earthquake (the most severe I ever experienced) commenced yesterday morning at half-past eight, and lasted about a minute. I had just reached my house, and had barely time to station myself in the centre of the courtyard. The movement of the ground resembled a succession of waves, and I found it impossible to remove from the spot I occupied. My house has suffered no further damage than several cracks in the walls, and having the tiles that covered it completely jumbled together, and a number of them thrown down and broken. I am at this moment occupied in superintending repairs. Many of the inhabitants have left the city, and are living in the suburbs. We are still ignorant of what may have occurred in the other towns and villages. In addition to our calamities, the port of Guayaquil is still closely blockaded by the Peruvian squadron.”

There was presented from Robert Daw, Esq., Plymouth, a specimen of coniferous wood, with the following note :—
 “ A ship from Puget Sound, lying to the north of Vancouver's Island, having not long since put into this port, for Liverpool, with timber, I have been able to procure some small pieces from a log of 200 *annual rings*. It appears to me to be peculiar, and similar to some which Dr Lawson, if I recollect right, procured from a Californian box.” The wood displays in a beautiful manner punctated tissue with spiral fibres.

The following Communications were read :—

I. *Notes on a Visit to Algeria.* By GEORGE S. LAWSON, Esq.

After a tour through France and Italy, I was agreeably surprised with the appearance of Algiers—beautifully situated and prettily built, the white houses imparting a gaiety to it under the darkest cloud, and making it brilliant as polished marble beneath the rays of an almost tropical sun. Luxuriant vegetation meets you on every side when you leave the city walls, and you may imagine yourself in the tropics from the agaves and cactuses which line the roads—the flowering stems of the former being from 20 to 30 feet high. About three

miles from the city you come upon the Jardin d'Essai, close to which is the Café Hammah, or café of the plantain trees, where your cup of coffee and pipe are completely à l'Arab, and by no means the less enjoyable ; the garden is supported by the government, and indeed receives the name of " Pépinière centrale du gouvernement," from its forming a nursery for the cultivation and the supply of plants suited to the country ; and it is a wise provision of the government which has a similar institution, on a smaller scale, in nearly every town. I saw an interesting experiment when there, in rearing the cochenille on the *Opuntia cochenillifera* ; it was a little protected but perfectly successful. Cotton proved a good introduction, so much so that a building was constructed and fitted up in the ground for its preparation ; indigo, also sugar-cane, and the *Sorgum saccharatum*, were quite naturalized. The chief supplies kept for distribution are oranges, olives, apricots, mulberries, pears, almonds, and a few kinds of grapes. If I remember right there were 40 varieties of oranges. Returning from the Jardin d'Essai by the sea, you are surprised to find the date palms by the shore, and growing well, though I do not think they ever ripen fruit there. Of the provinces which constitute Algeria, Algeria proper may be called the most fertile. I did not visit Oran, but made a small excursion to the plain of Metidja and gorge of Chiffa, lying south-westerly from Algiers. A rich calcareous soil, in the environs, supports a most luxuriant forage of leguminous plants, such as *Ornithopus*, *Hedysarum coronarium* and *capitatum*, *Astragalus*, *Medicagos*, and *Scorpiurus*. Once the summit of the chain of hills on which the town is built, which I believe gets the name of the Massifrange, is reached, a view the most enchanting bursts suddenly upon you. A plain 50 miles long and 30 broad forms, from its uniform flatness, one grand billiard-table before you ; encircled by the Atlas and Massiff ranges, darting up perpendicularly from the base ; and here and there over the plain in the distance, little green patches occur : oases in what you may call a desert, for it is remarkable that the antitheses, barrenness and fertility, are side by side ; the former, however, arising solely from a want of drainage and cultivation, and from no inherent paucity of rich elements. Besides a little maize, which is consumed when green, wheat and barley are nearly the only cereals cultivated. *Triticum*

durum is the favourite with the Arabs, and from it they make their cuscoussoo, which is a coarse kind of flour made by bruising the wheat, which is baked with milk into little round pellets, spices being sometimes added. It is kept for several months sometimes in this condition, and, when wished for consumption, they are fried with butter or fat. The *Hordeum hexastichon* is the variety of barley chiefly grown, but it is only given to horses,—oats I do not believe are known at all. Sowing time is from November to January, the barley harvest coming in May, and the wheat in June. The Arabs in reaping clip only the ears, and leave the straw to be eaten by the cattle, or more frequently to be burnt, the ashes forming manure for the succeeding crop. It was evening before I descended the Massiff range, and it will be long ere I forget the glorious sunset I then witnessed: the whole plain was one mass of gold, the water was in a blaze, and the lofty palms, in clumps, with their reflections, stood erect, and seemed to enjoy the scene with myself; while the deep blue haze in the distant mountains—deeper under an unclouded sky of peculiar brightness—presented a picture difficult to be realized by the most skilful brush, and impossible to be exaggerated. On my way towards Blidah I halted at Bouffarick, a little village from which, as a centre, nineteen small farms radiate. Blidah (another village) possesses orange groves surpassing those of the Governor of Malta; and the fragrance of the trees is at times so powerful as to be almost suffocating. I picked up in the plain some Mignonette, French and African Marigold, several kinds of Orchis (*O. mascula*, *pyramidalis*, and *latifolia*), *Papilionaceæ*, &c. Nearly two-thirds of the plain is monopolized by the dwarf-palm (*Chamærops humilis*),* and though no favourite with the farmer, from its creeping stems and roots having such a firm hold of the soil, it is almost indispensable to the wandering Arab, who makes ropes, sacks, and matings from its leaves, while the heart and buds form the only food he can rely on in the spring of the year. The most valuable production of this palm, however, is a substance made of its fibres, and which gets the name of “crin

* Dr Greville mentioned at the meeting, that a variety, *Ch. elatior*, was to be seen near Algiers; and I am inclined to think that those clumps I have referred to in the description of the plain were composed of that variety, which I thought at the time were the date-palm.

végétal." It is so very fine that it resembles horse-hair so much, when dyed black, that it can hardly be distinguished from it. I may mention that one of our most eminent paper-makers in this city is now in the habit of importing it as a basis for his manufacture.*

II. *Botanical Intelligence.* By Professor BALFOUR.

1. *Biographical Sketch of Baron Von Humboldt, one of the Foreign Honorary Members of the Society.*

Frederick Henry Alexander, Baron Von Humboldt, the most learned man of the present age, was born at Berlin on 14th September 1760, and died on 7th May 1859. He lost his father when he was ten years old; his mother was a cousin of the Princess Blucher. From 1787 to 1789 he studied at the Universities of Frankfort-on-the-Oder and Göttingen, when, among others, he had for his teachers Gottlieb Heyne and Blumenbach. During his holidays he made geological excursions in the Harz and on the banks of the Rhine, and wrote a work on the Basalts of the Rhine, which was the first of his publications. He early displayed a taste for travelling. On this subject he says:—"Brought up in a country which has no direct communication with the colonies of the two Indies, an inhabitant of the mountains, removed from the coasts, I felt the progressive development in me of a real passion for the sea and for long voyages. A taste for herborization, the study of geology, a rapid tour made in Holland in spring 1790, in England and in France with a celebrated man, George Forster, who had the good fortune to accompany Captain Cook in his second voyage round the world, contributed to give a determined direction to the plans for travelling which I had formed at the age of 18. It was no longer the desire of agitation and of a wandering life,—it was that of coming into immediate contact with wild nature, majestic and varied in its productions; it was the hope of finding some facts useful to the sciences which made me constantly sigh for an opportunity of visiting those beautiful regions situated in the torrid zone. My circumstances not permitting me to execute then the projects which occupied my mind, I had leisure during six years to prepare myself for the observations which I hoped to make on the new continent."

After his return from his excursion with Forster, Humboldt, destined at first for financial occupations, passed some months in the school of Busch and Eheling at Hamburg. From June 1791, however, he attended the lectures of the celebrated Werner in the School of Mines at Freiberg, where he enjoyed the friendship of Leopold Van Buch and André de Rio.

* Had I been able to carry away with me some of the books published by the French Government, I could here have given some correct statistical information with regard to the agriculture of the country; and so soon as I can lay my hands on these publications, I shall be happy to continue these notes on a tour fraught with the deepest interest to myself, and, I am sure, to every botanist who may have the good luck to make it.