

William Gilson Farlow.

THE news of Professor Farlow's death on June 3 has been received with sincere regret by British botanists, more especially by those who are connected with the 'Annals of Botany'. All who have had the pleasure of working with him mourn the loss of a loyal and able colleague and a genial friend.

It is only fitting that some notice of him should appear in this periodical, of which he was formerly one of the editors: but nothing like an exhaustive account of his life or a critical estimate of his writings need be attempted. It will suffice to give, in this short sketch, some general appreciation of his significance as a botanist.

William Gilson Farlow was born in Boston on December 17, 1844. He studied at Harvard, and concluded his University career by taking the degree of M.D. in 1870. Although he graduated in Medicine, his intention was to devote himself to Botany, no doubt inspired by Asa Gray. How he proceeded to carry out this intention is told in a pamphlet, 'Cryptogamic Botany at Harvard University, 1874-96', published when his life-work was about half done. He narrates how he was invited by Asa Gray in 1870 to give instruction in Cryptogamic Botany, and how impossible he found it to acquire in America even a passable knowledge of the subject that he had to teach. Consequently he came to Europe for instruction, and spent two years studying in Germany and France.

It may be remarked incidentally that a considerable portion of this time was spent in the laboratory of de Bary at Strasburg. Whilst working there, he made the interesting discovery, which has made his name familiar to all botanists, that the prothallus of certain Ferns gives rise vegetatively to young Fern-plants (Bot. Zeitg., 1874). This remarkable substitution of vegetative propagation for sexual reproduction was subsequently further investigated by de Bary and termed 'apogamy' (Bot. Zeitg., 1878). Farlow's attention was, however, mainly directed to Algae and Fungi, a study in which at that time de Bary was pre-eminent.

On his return, fully equipped, to America, Farlow was appointed Assistant Professor of Botany at Harvard (1874). In the pamphlet he tells by what slow and painful degrees he established a laboratory and accumulated a herbarium for the proper teaching and study of his subject. His efforts were crowned with such success that they were soon recognized by his promotion to full professorial rank as Professor of Cryptogamic Botany

(1879), a title which he bore until his death although he had not been engaged in active teaching for some years previously.

The pamphlet contains striking evidence of the activity that prevailed in the cryptogamic department during the first twenty years of its existence, in the form of a list of the numerous papers, all relating to Algae or Fungi, published as the outcome of work accomplished within it. Among the authors, besides Farlow himself, are many whose names have since become well known, such as Thaxter, Humphrey, Davis, Richards, Burt, Peirce, Galloway. Were there a similar record of the doings of the department during the succeeding twenty years, it would be at least as brilliant as that of the earlier period.

Farlow goes on to contrast the position of his study at the beginning and at the end of the period under review. He points out that whereas in 1872 he had 'found it impossible to obtain instruction in Cryptogamic Botany anywhere in the United States, there are in 1896 many institutions scattered over the country where a student can in a few weeks acquire the knowledge which it took the writer several years to gather together in different European countries'. It is for us to say, what Farlow himself could not say, that this great change was, directly or indirectly, due to his own efforts. When it is remembered that these 'institutions scattered over the country' taught not only Cryptogamic Botany but all the other branches of the science as well, some idea can be formed of the revolution that had been brought about, affecting the national attitude towards Botany so profoundly that in no country in the world has botanical organization, both academic and practical, become more extensive and efficient than in the United States. Farlow had brought back with him from Europe not only the information necessary for his work, but also, what was far more important, the inspiration of the modern spirit, of which, as he points out, Sachs's 'Lehrbuch' was to him the embodiment. Without at all under-estimating the value of his published work, it may be truly said that Farlow's real significance is that of a pioneer or missionary.

He readily associated himself with those who had been working on similar lines in this country, when they founded a modern and adequate periodical for the publication of the results of botanical research. He at once accepted the position of American Editor, and his name appears on the title-page of vols. i-xx of the 'Annals of Botany' (1887-1906). His co-operation was invaluable, and contributed largely to establish the friendly relations existing between English-speaking botanists on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

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