# SCIENCE.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 11, 1884.

## *COMMENT AND CRITICISM.*

THE authorities at Washington show hopeful signs of an interest in the administration of the Naval observatory by proposing the appointment of three eminent astronomers as a board of visitors, who shall annually inspect the establishment, advise with the superintendent respecting the scientific portion of his duties, and report to the secretary of the navy. This measure was recommended by the secretary in his annual report, with the hope that many of the objections now urged against the administration might thus be removed. That he should have expected such a result from this simple measure, leads us to doubt whether the grounds of the objections referred to are fully appreciated, and to suspect that the subject is viewed too much from the stand-point of the politician. The astronomers of the country stand in readiness to give any department of the government any advice which they are assured will be followed, at least in spirit; but they have no taste for the cheap compliment of being consulted for the pleasure of the thing. That fondness of being 'consulted,' that appreciation of the privilege of giving advice, and that love of carrying 'weight' in public affairs, which are so strong in the breast of the politician, are nearly unknown among eminent astronomers. The latter have too many more important affairs on hand to permit of their enjoying the pleasures and duties which fall annually to the boards of visitors of the naval and military academies. They are quite ready to give the government the benefit of their advice, provided they have some assurance that the advice will be acted upon, but not otherwise. Their complaint against the observatory is not that they are not sufficiently consulted, but that the organization of the establishment does not fulfil the condition which common sense shows to be necessary to the efficient administration of a scientific institution.

We have already pointed out what we believe to be the chief administrative wants of the observatory. Briefly summarized, they are, a well-considered plan of operations, to be devised by the highest expert talent of the country, within or without the establishment, and to be obligatory upon the superintendent, and such an organization as shall give reasonable assurance that the plan agreed upon shall be carried out in all the details necessary to its success. For a mere board of advice, it is difficult to see the slightest necessity. The observatory has never been without one or more able astronomers, whose advice the superintendent can command whenever he desires, and who have the great advantage of an intimate acquaintance with the instruments and other means at the disposal of the superintendent. If there is any difficulty in getting and using advice from this source, it is because the situation is such that something else is needed.

JAPAN may well be proud of the honors that have just been won by two of her sons in two of the best universities in Germany. A gold medal was offered about a year ago, by the University of Leipzig, for the best original work that should be produced within a year, on the embryology of the fresh-water planarians. The subject is a very difficult one, and on this account has hitherto received very little attention. Mr. Isao Iijima, formerly a student in the University of Tokio, under Professor Morse, and subsequently under Mr. Whitman, was one of the few students selected by the Japanese government in 1882 to be sent to German universities. Mr. Iijima began work at Leipzig, in the laboratory of Professor Leuckart, early in the spring of 1882. At the

suggestion of Professor Leuckart, he turned his attention to the subject announced for the prize. From the report of the rector, Professor His, which was read at the last *Rectorwahl*, it appears that the prize has been awarded to Mr. Iijima. The following remarks, taken from the printed report, will certainly be of interest to all who are watching the course of events in Japan: —

"The work receives the highest commendation of the faculty. With regard to its actual contents, it must be pronounced a highly successful work. It is rich in fine observation and thoughtful discussion, and furnishes the best evidence of the ability, knowledge, and insight of the author. It is a permanent gain for zoölogy, inasmuch as it places in clear light the organization and development of a group of animals, which, notwithstanding the importance of its systematic relations, was hitherto very imperfectly understood. *Aperta scidula repertum est nomen auctoris, Isao Iijima.*"

In Berlin another Japanese student, whose name we have not obtained, has recently been appointed, over the heads of able competitors, to the post of assistant in anatomy.

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THE report of the secretary of the navy for 1883 contains a repetition of his recommendations of last year, that all national work connected with the ocean, carried on by other departments, should be transferred to the navy department, to be supervised and performed by naval officers. Most important among the transfers suggested is that of the coast-survey, which is now under the treasury. This he would have placed under the naval hydrographic office, because there are now sixty-seven naval officers and two hundred and eighty seamen employed in the coast-survey; and he adds, that in view of the facts that no part of the hydrographic work of the coast-survey has the faintest traceable connection with the general purposes of the treasury, that its effectual performance is of vital importance to the navy, and that an office exists to-day in the navy department where similar work is necessarily carried on, it is inconceivable why so inconvenient, artificial, and indefensible an arrangement should be perpetuated.

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The secretary ignores the fact that the work which these officers perform is routine, the plans and methods for which have been devised and developed by civilian experts; and he fails to compare the character and quality of the work which the hydrographic office and the coast-survey have performed, and to show that an improvement in the quantity or quality of work would be consequent on the transfer.

Since, then, the present method of employing our superfluous navy, under the intelligent supervision of civilian experts, works no injustice to the navy, and since it is and has been found essential to employ civilian experts to carry on the work of the hydrographic office, we see no benefit which can result from the transfer, except the aggrandizement of the navy; and we doubt if this be a sufficient reason. Should the efforts of Mr. Chandler to absorb all the national work on the ocean prove successful, the fish-commission, like the coast-survey, must be transferred to the navy department.

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THE red glow in the skies long after sunset and before sunrise has attracted the attention of every one in all parts of the world during the last few months. As showing the hesitation of physicists to attack the matter, it is singular that nothing on the subject had been sent to us until within three weeks, since which time a number of letters, describing the appearance as seen by single observers, have been received. In this number an article is printed in which the facts at the disposal of the signal-service are made use of, and the often-broached Java earthquake theory, which has so many adherents among the best scientific men, is again put forward. The not inconsiderable upheaval in Alaska may also have played its part. It would be interesting to know if the records of earlier times contain any mention of similar red skies following large volcanic eruptions.