SCIENCE.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 1885.

COMMENT AND CRITICISM.

THE NOMINATION of Hon. Norman J. Coleman of Missouri to be commissioner of agriculture, if it is to be taken as the expression of a distinct policy on the part of the new administration, shows that no radical change in the status of the department of agriculture is to be looked for. The selection in itself is a commendable one. Mr. Coleman has for years been one of the prominent agriculturists of the Mississippi valley, and, so far as we know, is well fitted by his knowledge of practical agriculture, and his experience of men and affairs, for the position to which he has been nominated. We believe he will compare favorably with previous commissioners. But, whether Mr. Coleman be better or worse than his predecessors, the difference is in degree. We do not understand that he has, or claims to have, any special and intimate acquaintance with the science of agriculture, and we do not anticipate that under him the department will be essentially other than it has been. Its organization as a scientific bureau, with a technical expert at its head, as advocated in a recent number of *Science*, is apparently as remote as ever.

THE IMMEDIATE effect of a meeting of the American association for the advancement of science is a large increase in its membership, not only in the place which offers its hospitalities any given year, but also in the whole section of which the place is a centre. Thus the meeting in Philadelphia last year not only increased the membership in that city from 56 to 150, but spread its influence into the whole surrounding region; so that, whereas a year ago there were in Pennsylvania only 111 members, there are now 267, while the membership in New Jersey has also increased from 50 to 73,—a total increase in these two states of nearly the entire advance which was made in the list of membership of the association for the past year. It now numbers 2,347 members, against 2,011 last year. The membership in Philadelphia is thus at once raised to the first rank, in which only three cities may claim a higher place,—New York, with 171; Boston, with 161; and Washington, with 155 members.

How long this membership is retained in such places seems to depend largely upon circumstances. It may be noted, however, that in no place where the meeting has been held since the civil war, until the meeting in Boston (at which the membership was at once doubled), are there more than two cities—Chicago (1868, 30 members) and St. Louis (1878, 52 members)—where there are now more than twenty-five members. In four of them, indeed, there are less than ten, of which Dubuque (1872), with its single member, is the most striking example. With its great increase of membership, it is now, more than ever, plain that the association can only meet in cities of considerable size, unless it be in a university town, or in some far-off place where the expense of travel compels a small attendance. The falling-off of membership in the cities which have held the association since it grew to enormous proportions, has not been very large, at least during the past year, and offers great hope that a much more permanent interest in the association is secured by one of these meetings than could be expected. Thus Boston, where the association met in 1880, gained five members last year; Cincinnati lost nine; Montreal, four; while the membership at Minneapolis remained the same.

We have scanned the list with a view of finding out how largely membership in the association is influenced in smaller places by

such an interest in science as is indicated by the presence of local scientific societies strong enough to publish proceedings of some sort; and the result appears to be, that these societies are not, to any appreciable extent, feeders of the association. It is more probable that they are oftener its children. Thus San Francisco numbers but seven members; Denver, two only, losing one during the past year, which has witnessed the publication of a whole volume of proceedings from the local society; the great city of Chicago has but thirty members, even with an increase of four during the past year; Davenport, Io., has only two; Albany, with its long-established Albany institute, only fifteen, a loss of one during the year; Buffalo, with more than one society flourishing from time to time, eleven, a loss of one member during the year; Poughkeepsie, five, a loss of one; Troy, twelve, a gain of three; Wilkesbarre, six, a gain of four during the past year; Milwaukee, four, a gain of one; Toronto, twelve, a gain of one; and Halifax, N.S., a single member.

University and college towns are very generally represented, but, excepting at large centres, by only three or four members. How widely distributed the membership has become, is shown by the significant fact that no less than 597 places contribute to the list; indicating clearly that the assembling of five hundred or a thousand scattered members once a year, must be an important factor in the advance of science in this country, far more than it is possible it should become in such a country, for instance, as England.

Among recent naval orders, we note that of Rear-Admiral Franklin to the command of the European squadron. That this able officer, who has been superintendent of the observatory only about a year, should be so soon relieved of his duties and assigned to another station, will be a matter of regret to all those friends of the observatory who hold to the belief that its efficiency under an exclusively naval management is as great as it ever would be under any other.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

**** *Correspondents are requested to be as brief as possible. The writer's name is in all cases required as proof of good faith.*

The carnivorous habits of the Rodentia.

In recent numbers of *Science* several observers have spoken of the habit possessed by the muskrat, Fiber zibethicus, of feeding upon certain mussels to be found at its places of resort. As already referred to by one of these contributors, instances were brought up before the Biological society of Washington, a few months ago, of their destroying for food-purposes carp in the carp-ponds. I wish to enter here but one additional charge against this animal, which has been the subject of so much abuse lately. Several years ago, when I lived in a town situated upon Long Island Sound, I saw upon a number of occasions, when collecting during moonlight nights, muskrats swimming along the stone wharves where the shipping moored. It never struck me, however, that they were in search of food, until I observed one, on one occasion, dive, and return in a moment to the surface with a fish in its mouth some five or six inches long. I killed the animal in the act, and secured both fish and rat. The former proved to be a specimen of Gadus tomcod, — a fish which in early winter swims sluggishly along close to the wharves in those latitudes, and one easily captured, I imagine, by such a good swimmer.

The muskrat, however, does not stand alone in this particular propensity among the Rodentia. While collecting near Fort Wingate, N. Mex., a few days ago, I was so fortunate as to capture alive a specimen of Hesperomys, of what species I am not positive as yet. This truly beautiful little animal was taken from its nest in a tree in the immediate vicinity of several lodges of Neotoma floridana. On arriving home, about nightfall, it was consigned to a wooden box in my study. My work-table in this room was covered with things familiar to those who are acquainted with the doings of a naturalist in the field. Among them was a vessel containing coarse cornmeal, used in skinning animals and birds. Near this lay fresh specimens of pine-linnets, blue crows, and several other birds, which I intended to convert into skeletons. My Hesperomys escaped during the night, and although he had been a prisoner but a few hours, and presumably not hungry, he ate nearly the entire body of one of my pine-linnets, never touching the saucer of cornmeal which stood immediately by it.

Next morning the contents of his stomach proved his guilt. The flesh-eating habits of rats are too well known to call for comment in this connection.

R. W. Shufeldt.

Fort Wingate, N. Mex.,
March 20.

Mr. Melville's plan of reaching the north pole.

If you can spare the space in your journal, I would like to make a few concluding remarks on Dr Boas's criticism of my proposed route toward the north pole, and my theory thereon.

Dr. Boas, in his letter to *Science*, confines me to