

SCIENCE.

FRIDAY, MAY 20, 1887.

COMMENT AND CRITICISM.

WE MEET ALMOST DAILY with evidence of the increasing interest in folk-lore. There is, however, in some quarters a lack of specific knowledge as to the exact aims and methods of folk-lore studies, which must be removed before that general co-operation can be secured on which the success of these investigations is so largely dependent. Mr. Gomme, director of the English folk-lore society, is about to publish a book in order to present in simple and accessible form the needed information. This book will both supply collectors with suggestions as to what is required of them, and also form a scientific guide to the work of classification and comparison. Mr. Gomme points out the conditions of human life which would naturally give rise to religious beliefs, customs, and traditions, and then shows how the existence of such a thing as folk-lore is recognized when it is observed that there either exists or has existed, among the least cultured of the inhabitants of all the countries of modern Europe, a vast body of curious beliefs, customs, and narratives which are by tradition handed from generation to generation. These are essentially the property of the least-advanced portion of the community. They are neither supported nor recognized by the prevailing religion, by the established law, nor by the recorded history of the various countries. To this body of customs and beliefs there is constant addition made, arising from the explanation of newly observed phenomena by the uncultured portion of the community. The writer differentiates carefully savage custom and folk-lore, and says that the study of the former is necessary for the explanation of the latter. In not a few cases folk-lore is almost our only means of approaching the prehistoric period in the life of nations. Mr. Gomme offers as a definition of the science of folk-lore the following: it is "the comparison and identification of the survivals of archaic beliefs, customs, and traditions in modern ages." In this connection, it may be well to call attention to the letter, on another page, pleading for an American dialect society.

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THE AMERICAN ORIENTAL ASSOCIATION.

THE American oriental association met in annual session in the Athenaeum building, Boston, on Wednesday morning, May 11. In the absence of the president, Prof. W. D. Whitney, who, though considerably improved, has not yet, we are sorry to say, recovered his usual health, Vice-President Dr. A. Peabody presided. Considering the season fixed for the meeting, which is a particularly unfortunate one for those heavily engaged in university-work, the attendance was fair. Professor Lanman, in his report as secretary of the association, referred to the loss the society had incurred in the death of four of its members, — Professor Stenzler of Breslau (Germany); Dr. Alexander Wylie of London; Mr. H. C. Kingsley, treasurer of Yale college; and Prof. Charles Short of Columbia college. After speaking briefly of the services rendered by these gentlemen to the cause of learning, further remarks eulogizing the memory of the last named were made by Professors Thayer of Harvard, and Hall of the Metropolitan museum, New York.

The number of papers presented at the meeting was unusually large, a most welcome indication of the growth of oriental scholarship in this country. The reading of them, some merely in extract, consumed the greater part of the session, which lasted till late in the afternoon, with a short intermission at noon. Perhaps the most interesting of all was the first, by Dr. W. Hayes Ward, editor of the *Independent*, who offered a new and most happy interpretation of a scene depicted on a number of Babylonian seals which had hitherto baffled the ingenuity of scholars. On these seals we find a mythical figure in the act of ascending or resting his hands on what the late George Smith, the eminent Assyriologist, had taken to be a tower, but which Dr. Ward showed was a mountain. Behind the figure there is a portal out of which the personage ascending the mountain, or resting his hands upon the mountain-peaks, had evidently come. This scene, Dr. Ward proved, by a chain of arguments which left no doubt as to the correctness of his interpretation, is a symbolical representation of the rising of the sun, who at daybreak proceeds from the 'gate' behind which he was shut in during the night, and now climbs to the mountain-heights in order to illumine the world.

In the course of a discussion on this very suggestive paper, participated in by Professors Lyon