

of submergence. It is, however, generally admitted that there have been oscillations both of level and of climate since any boulder clay was deposited in the district south of the Humber and the Ribble. The passing of the great ice age was not sudden, and glaciers may have lingered in our mountain regions when paleolithic man hunted the mammoth in the valley of the Thames, or frequented the caves of Devon and Mendip. But of these times of transition before written history became possible, and of sundry interesting topics connected with the ice age itself—of its cause, date and duration, whether it was persistent or interrupted by warmer episodes, and, if so, by what number, of how often it had already recurred in the history of the earth—I must, for obvious reasons, refrain from speaking, and content myself with having endeavored to place before you the facts of which, in my opinion, we must take account in reconstructing the physical geography of western Europe, and especially of our own country, during the age of ice.

Not unnaturally you will expect a decision in favor of one or the other litigant after this long summing up. But I can only say that, in regard to the British Isles, the difficulties in either hypothesis appear so great that, while I consider those in the "land-ice" hypothesis to be the more serious, I can not as yet declare the other one to be satisfactorily established, and think we shall be wiser in working on in the hope of clearing up some of the perplexities. I may add that, for these purposes, regions like the northern coasts of Russia and Siberia appear to me more promising than those in closer proximity to the north or south magnetic poles. This may seem a "lame and impotent conclusion" to so long a disquisition, but there are stages in the development of a scientific idea when the best service we can do it is by attempting

to separate facts from fancies, by demanding that difficulties should be frankly faced instead of being severely ignored, by insisting that the giving of a name can not convert the imaginary into the real, and by remembering that if hypotheses yet on their trial are treated as axioms, the result will often bring disaster, like building a tower on a foundation of sand. To scrutinize, rather than to advocate any hypothesis, has been my aim throughout this address, and, if my efforts have been to some extent successful, I trust to be forgiven, though I may have trespassed on your patience and disappointed a legitimate expectation.

T. G. BONNEY

#### THE FERTILITY OF THE SOIL<sup>1</sup>

I BELIEVE it is customary for any one who has the honor of presiding over a section of the British Association to provide in his presidential address either a review of the current progress of his subject or an account of some large piece of investigation by which he himself has illuminated it. I wish I had anything of the latter kind which I could consider worthy to occupy your attention for the time at my disposal; and as to a review of the subject, I am not without hopes that the sectional meetings themselves will provide all that is necessary in the way of a general review of what is going forward in our department of science. I have, therefore, chosen instead to deal from an historic point of view with the opinions which have prevailed about one central fact, and I propose to set before you this morning an account of the ebb and flow of ideas as to the causes of the fertility of the soil, a question which has naturally occupied the attention

<sup>1</sup>Address by the chairman of the Agricultural Sub-section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Sheffield, 1910.

of every one who has exercised his reason upon matters connected with agriculture. The fertility of the soil is perhaps a vague title, but by it I intend to signify the greater or less power which a piece of land possesses of producing crops under cultivation, or, again, the causes which make one piece of land yield large crops when another piece alongside only yields small ones, differences which are so real that a farmer will pay three or even four pounds an acre rent for some land, whereas he will regard other as dear at ten shillings an acre.

If we go back to the seventeenth century, which we may take as the beginning of organized science, we shall find that men were concerned with two aspects of the question—how the plant itself gains its increase in size, and, secondly, what the soil does towards supplying the material constituting the plant. The first experiment we have recorded is that of Van Helmont, who placed 200 lb. of dried earth in a tub, and planted therein a willow tree weighing 5 lb. After five years the willow tree weighed 169 lb. 3 oz., whereas the soil when redried had lost but 2 oz., though the surface had been carefully protected meantime with a cover of tin. Van Helmont concluded that he had demonstrated a transformation of water into the material of the tree. Boyle repeated these experiments, growing pumpkins and cucumbers in weighed earth and obtaining similar results, except when his gardener lost the figures, an experience that has been repeated. Boyle also distilled his pumpkins, etc., and obtained therefrom various tars and oils, charcoal and ash, from which he concluded that a real transmutation had been effected, “that salt, spirit, earth, and even oil (though that be thought of all bodies the

most opposite to water) may be produced out of water.”

There were not, however, wanting among Boyle's contemporaries men who pointed out that spring water used for the growing plants in these experiments contained abundance of dissolved material, but in the then state of chemistry the discussion as to the origin of the carbonaceous material in the plant could only be verbal. Boyle himself does not appear to have given any consideration to the part played by the soil in the nutrition of plants, but among his contemporaries experiment was not lacking. Some instinct seems to have led them to regard niter as one of the sources of fertility, and we find that Sir Kenelm Digby, at Gresham College in 1660, at a meeting of the Society for Promoting Philosophical Knowledge by Experiment, in a lecture on the vegetation of plants, describes an experiment in which he watered young barley plants with a weak solution of niter and found how their growth was promoted thereby; and John Mayow, that brilliant Oxford man whose early death cost so much to the young science of chemistry, went even further, for, after discussing the growth of niter in soils, he pointed out that it must be this salt which feeds the plant, because none is to be extracted from soils in which plants are growing. So general has this association of niter with the fertility of soils become that in 1675 John Evelyn writes: “I firmly believe that where saltpeter can be obtained in plenty we should not need to find other composts to ameliorate our ground”; and Henshaw, of University College, one of the first members of the Royal Society, also writes about saltpeter: “I am convinced indeed that the salt which is found in vegetables and animals is but the niter which is so universally diffused through all the elements (and must therefore make the

chief ingredient in their nutriment, and by consequence all their generation), a little altered from its first complexion."

But these promising beginnings of the theory of plant nutrition came to no fruition; the Oxford movement in the seventeenth century was but the false dawn of science. At its close the human mind, which had looked out of doors for some relief from the fierce religious controversy with which it had been so long engrossed, turned indoors again and went to sleep for another century. Mayow's work was forgotten, and it was not until Priestly and Lavoisier, De Saussure, and others, about the beginning of the nineteenth century, arrived at a sound idea of what the air is and does that it became possible to build afresh a sound theory of the nutrition of the plant. At this time the attention of those who thought about the soil was chiefly fixed upon the humus. It was obvious that any rich soils, such as old gardens and the valuable alluvial lands, contained large quantities of organic matter, and it became somewhat natural to associate the excellence of these fat, unctuous soils with the organic matter they contained. It was recognized that the main part of a plant consisted of carbon, so that the deduction seemed obvious that the soils rich in carbon yielded those fatty, oily substances which we now call humus to the plant, and that their richness depended upon how much of such material they had at their disposal. But by about 1840 it had been definitely settled what the plant is composed of and whence it derives its nutriment—the carbon compounds which constitute nine tenths of the dry weight from the air, the nitrogen, and the ash from the soil. Little as he had contributed to the discovery, Liebig's brilliant expositions and the weight of his authority had driven this broad theory of plant nu-

trition home to men's minds; a science of agricultural chemistry had been founded, and such questions as the function of the soil with regard to the plant could be studied with some prospect of success. By this time also methods of analysis had been so far improved that some quantitative idea could be obtained as to what is present in soil and plant, and, naturally enough, the first theory to be framed was that the soil's fertility was determined by its content of those materials which are taken from it by the crop. As the supply of air from which the plant derives its carbonaceous substance is unlimited, the extent of growth would seem to depend upon the supply available of the other constituents which have to be provided by the soil. It was Daubeny, professor of botany and rural economy at Oxford, and the real founder of a science of agriculture in this country, who first pointed out the enormous difference between the amount of plant food in the soil and that taken out by the crop. In a paper published in the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1845, being the Bakerian Lecture for that year, Daubeny described a long series of experiments that he had carried out in the botanic garden, wherein he cultivated various plants, some grown continuously on the same plot and others in a rotation. Afterwards he compared the amount of plant food removed by the crops with that remaining in the soil. Daubeny obtained the results with which we are now familiar, that any normal soil contains the material for from fifty to a hundred field crops. If, then, the growth of the plant depends upon the amount of this material it can get from the soil, why is that growth so limited, and why should it be increased by the supply of manure, which only adds a trifle to the vast stores of plant food already in the soil? For example, a turnip

crop will only take away about 30 pounds per acre of phosphoric acid from a soil which may contain about 3,000 pounds an acre; yet, unless to the soil about 50 pounds of phosphoric acid in the shape of manure is added, hardly any turnips at all will be grown. Daubeny then arrived at the idea of a distinction between the active and dormant plant food in the soil. The chief stock of these materials, he concluded, was combined in the soil in some form that kept it from the plant, and only a small proportion from time to time became soluble and available for food. He took a further step and attempted to determine the proportion of the plant food which can be regarded as active. He argued that since plants only take in materials in a dissolved form, and as the great natural solvent is water percolating through the soil more or less charged with carbon dioxide, therefore in water charged with carbon dioxide he would find a solvent which would extract out of a soil just that material which can be regarded as active and available for the plant. In this way he attacked his botanic garden soils and compared the materials so dissolved with the amount taken away by his crops. The results, however, were inconclusive and did not hold out much hope that the fertility of the soil can be measured by the amount of available plant food so determined. Daubeny's paper was forgotten, but exactly the same line of argument was revived again about twenty years ago, and all over the world investigators began to try to measure the fertility of the soil by determining as "available" plant food the phosphoric acid and potash that could be extracted by some weak acid. A large number of different acids were tried, and although a dilute solution of citric acid is at present the most generally accepted solvent I am still of opinion that we shall

come back to the water charged with carbon dioxide as the only solvent of its kind for which any justification can be found. Whatever solvent, however, is employed to extract from the soil its available plant food, the results fail to determine the fertility of the soil, because we are measuring but one of the factors in plant production, and that often a comparatively minor one. In fact, some investigators—Whitney and his colleagues in the American Department of Agriculture—have gone so far as to suppose that the actual amount of plant food in the soil is a matter of indifference. They argue that as a plant feeds upon the soil water, and as that soil water must be equally saturated with, say, phosphoric acid, whether the soil contains 1,000 or 3,000 pounds per acre of the comparatively insoluble calcium and iron salts of phosphoric acid which occur in the soil, the plant must be under equal conditions as regards phosphoric acid, whatever the soil in which it may be grown. This argument is, however, a little more suited to controversy than to real life; it is too fiercely logical for the things themselves and depends upon various assumptions holding rigorously, whereas we have more reason to believe that they are only imperfect approximations to the truth. Still this view does merit our careful attention, because it insists that the chief factor in plant production must be the supply of water to the plant, and that soils differ from one another far more in their ability to maintain a good supply of water than in the amount of plant food they contain. Even in a climate like our own, which the textbooks describe as "humid" and we are apt to call "wet," the magnitude of our crops is more often limited by want of water than by any other single factor. The same American investigators have more recently engrafted on to their theory another sup-

position, that the fertility of soil is often determined by excretions from the plants themselves, which thereby poison the land for a renewed growth of the same crop, though the toxin may be harmless to a different plant which follows it in the rotation. This theory had also been examined by Daubeny, and the arguments he advanced against it in 1845 are valid to this day. Schreiner has indeed isolated a number of organic substances from soils—dihydroxystearic acid and picoline-carboxylic acid were the first examples—which he claims to be the products of plant growth and toxic to the further growth of the same plants. The evidence of toxicity as determined by water-cultures requires, however, the greatest care in interpretation, and it is very doubtful how far it can be applied to soils with their great power of precipitating or otherwise putting out of action soluble substances with which they may be supplied. Moreover, there are as yet no data to show whether these so-called toxic substances are not normal products of bacterial action upon organic residues in the soil, and as such just as abundant in fertile soils rich in organic matter as in the supposed sterile soils from which they were extracted.

As then we have failed to base a theory of fertility on the plant food that we can trace in the soil by analysis let us come back to Mayow and Digby and consider again the niter in the soil, how it is formed and how renewed. Their views of the value of nitrates to the plant were justified when the systematic study of plant-nutrition began, and demonstrated that plants can only obtain their supply of the indispensable element nitrogen when it is presented in the form of a nitrate, but it was not until within the last thirty years that we obtained an idea as to how the niter came to be found. The oxidation of am-

monia and other organic compounds of nitrogen to the state of nitrate was one of the first actions in the soil which was proved to be brought about by bacteria, and by the work of Schloesing and Müntz, Warington and Winogradsky we learned that in all cultivated soils two groups of bacteria exist which successively oxidize ammonia to nitrites and nitrates, in which latter state the nitrogen is available for the plant. These same investigators showed that the rate at which nitrification takes place is largely dependent upon operations under the control of the farmer: the more thorough the cultivation, the better the drainage and aeration, and the higher the temperature of the soil the more rapidly will the nitrates be produced. As it was then considered that the plant could only assimilate nitrogen in the form of nitrates, and as nitrogen is the prime element necessary to nutrition, it was then an easy step to regard the fertility of the soil as determined by the rate at which it would give rise to nitrates. Thus the bacteria of nitrification became regarded as a factor, and a very large factor, in fertility. This new view of the importance of the living organisms contained in the soil further explained the value of the surface soil, and demolished the fallacy which leads people instinctively to regard the good soil as lying deep and requiring to be brought to the surface by the labor of the cultivator. This confusion between mining and agriculture probably originated in the quasi-moral idea that the more work you do the better the result will be; but its application to practise with the aid of a steam plough in the days before bacteria were thought of ruined many of the clay soils of the Midlands for the next half century. Not only is the subsoil deficient in humus, which is the accumulated débris of previous applications of manure and

vegetation, but the humus is the home of the bacteria which have so much to do with fertility.

The discovery of nitrification was only the first step in the elucidation of many actions in the soil depending upon bacteria—for example, the fixation of nitrogen itself. A supply of combined nitrogen in some form or other is absolutely indispensable to plants and, in their turn, to animals; yet, though we live in contact with a vast reservoir of free nitrogen gas in the shape of the atmosphere, until comparatively recently we knew of no natural process except the lightning flash which would bring such nitrogen into combination. Plants take combined nitrogen from the soil, and either give it back again or pass it on to animals. The process, however, is only a cyclic one, and neither plants nor animals are able to bring in fresh material into the account. As the world must have started with all its nitrogen in the form of gas it was difficult to see how the initial stock of combined nitrogen could have arisen; for that reason many of the earlier investigators labored to demonstrate that plants themselves were capable of fixing and bringing into combination the free gas in the atmosphere. In this demonstration they failed, though they brought to light a number of facts which were impossible to explain and only became cleared up when, in 1886, Hellreigel and Wilfarth showed that certain bacteria, which exist upon the roots of leguminous plants, like clover and beans, are capable of drawing nitrogen from the atmosphere. Thus they not only feed the plant on which they live, but they actually enrich the soil for future crops by the nitrogen they leave behind in the roots and stubble of the leguminous crop. Long before this discovery experience had taught farmers the very special value of these

leguminous crops; the Roman farmer was well aware of their enriching action, which is enshrined in the well-known words in the *Georgics* beginning, "*Aut ibi flava seres*," where Virgil says that the wheat grows best where before the bean, the slender vetch, or the bitter lupin had been most luxuriant. Since the discovery of the nitrogen-fixing organisms associated with leguminous plants other species have been found resident in the soil which are capable of gathering combined nitrogen without the assistance of any host plant, provided only they are supplied with carbonaceous material as a source of energy whereby to effect the combination of the nitrogen. To one of these organisms we may with some confidence attribute the accumulation of the vast stores of combined nitrogen contained in the black virgin soils of places like Manitoba and the Russian steppes. At Rothamsted we have found that the plot on the permanent wheat field which never receives any manure has been losing nitrogen at a rate which almost exactly represents the differences between the annual removal of the crop and the receipts of combined nitrogen in the rain. We can further postulate only a very small fixation of nitrogen to balance the other comparatively small losses in the drainage water or in the weeds that are removed; but on a neighboring plot which has been left waste for the last quarter of a century, so that the annual vegetation of grass and other herbage falls back to the soil, there has been an accumulation of nitrogen representing the annual fixation of nearly a hundred pounds per acre. The fixation has been possible by the *azotobacter* on this plot, because there alone does the soil receive a supply of carbohydrate, by the combustion in which the *azotobacter* obtained the energy necessary to bring the nitrogen

into combination. On the unmanured plot the crop is so largely removed that the little root and stubble remaining does not provide material for much fixation.

Though numerous attempts have been made to correlate the fertility of the soil with the numbers of this or that bacterium existing therein, no general success has been attained, because probably we measure a factor which is only on occasion the determining factor in the production of the crop. Meantime our sense of the complexity of the actions going on in the soil has been sharpened by the discovery of another factor, affecting in the first place the bacterial flora in the soil and, as a consequence, its fertility. Ever since the existence of bacteria has been recognized attempts have been made to obtain soils in a sterile condition, and observations have been from time to time recorded to the effect that soil which has been heated to the temperature of boiling water, in order to destroy any bacteria it may contain, had thereby gained greatly in fertility, as though some large addition of fertilizer had been made to it. Though these observations have been repeated in various times and places they were generally ignored, because of the difficulty of forming any explanation: a fact is not a fact until it fits into a theory. Not only is sterilization by heating thus effective, but other antiseptics, like chloroform and carbon bisulphide vapor, give rise to a similar result. For example, you will remember how the vineyards of Europe were devastated some thirty years ago by the attacks of phylloxera, and though in a general way the disease has been conquered by the introduction of a hardy American vine stock which resists the attack of the insect, in many of the finest vineyards the owners have feared to risk any possible change in the quality of the grape through the intro-

duction of the new stock, and have resorted instead to a system of killing the parasite by injecting carbon bisulphide into the soil. An Alsatian vine-grower who had treated his vineyards by this method observed that an increase of crop followed the treatment even in cases where no attack of phylloxera was in question. Other observations of a similar character were also reported, and within the last five years the subject has received some considerable attention until the facts became established beyond question. Approximately the crop becomes doubled if the soil has been first heated to a temperature of 70° to 100° for two hours, while treatment for forty-eight hours with the vapor of toluene, chloroform, etc., followed by a complete volatilization of the antiseptic, brings about an increase of 30 per cent. or so. Moreover, when the material so grown is analyzed, the plants are found to have taken very much larger quantities of nitrogen and other plant foods from the treated soil; hence the increase of growth must be due to larger nutriment and not to mere stimulus. The explanation, however, remained in doubt until it has been recently cleared up by Drs. Russell and Hutchinson, working in the Rothamsted laboratory. In the first place, they found that the soil which had been put through the treatment was chemically characterized by an exceptional accumulation of ammonia, to an extent that would account for the increased fertility. At the same time it was found that the treatment did not effect complete sterilization of the soil, though it caused at the outset a great reduction in the numbers of bacteria present. This reduction was only temporary, for as soon as the soil was watered and left to itself the bacteria increased to a degree that is never attained under normal conditions. For example, one of the Rothamsted soils employed con-

tains normally about seven million bacteria per gram—a number which remains comparatively constant under ordinary conditions. Heating reduced the numbers to 400 per gram, but four days later they had risen to six million, after which they increased to over forty million per gram. When the soil was treated with toluene a similar variation in the number of bacteria was observed. The accumulation of ammonia in the treated soils was accounted for by this increase in the number of bacteria, because the two processes went on at about the same rate. Some rearrangements were effected also in the nature of the bacterial flora; for example, the group causing nitrification was eliminated, though no substantial change was effected in the distribution of the other types. The bacteria which remained were chiefly of the class which split up organic nitrogen compounds into ammonia, and as the nitrate-making organisms which normally transform ammonia in the soil as fast as it is produced has been killed off by the treatment, it was possible for the ammonia to accumulate. The question now remaining was, What had given this tremendous stimulus to the multiplication of the ammonia-making bacteria? and by various steps, which need not here be enumerated, the two investigators reached the conclusion that the cause was not to be sought in any stimulus supplied by the heating process, but that the normal soil contained some negative factor which limited the multiplication of the bacteria therein. Examination along these lines then showed that all soils contain unsuspected groups of large organisms of the protozoa class, which feed upon living bacteria. These are killed off by heating or treatment by antiseptics, and on their removal the bacteria, which partially escape the treatment and are now relieved from attack, increase

to the enormous degree that we have specified. According to this theory the fertility of a soil containing a given store of nitrogen compounds is limited by the rate at which these nitrogen compounds can be converted into ammonia, which, in its turn, depends upon the number of bacteria present effecting the change, and these numbers are kept down by the larger organisms preying upon the bacteria. The larger organisms can be removed by suitable treatment, whereupon a new level of ammonia-production, and therefore of fertility, is rapidly attained. Curiously enough one of the most striking of the larger organisms is an amœba akin to the white corpuscles of the blood—the phagocytes, which, according to Metchnikoff's theory, preserve us from fever and inflammation by devouring such intrusive bacteria as find entrance in the blood. The two cases are, however, reversed: in the blood the bacteria are deadly, and the amœba therefore beneficial, whereas in the soil the bacteria are indispensable and the amœba become noxious beasts of prey.

Since the publication of these views of the functions of protozoa in the soil confirmatory evidence has been derived from various sources. For example, men who grow cucumbers, tomatoes and other plants under glass are accustomed to make up extremely rich soils for the intensive culture they practise, but, despite the enormous amount of manure they employ, they find it impossible to use the same soil for more than two years. Then they are compelled to introduce soil newly taken from a field and enriched with fresh manure. Several of these growers here have observed that a good baking of this used soil restores its value again; in fact, it becomes too rich and begins to supply the plant with an excessive amount of nitrogen. It has also been pointed out



that it was the custom of certain of the Bombay tribes to burn vegetable rubbish mixed as far as possible with the surface soil before sowing their crop, and the value of this practise in European agriculture, though forgotten, is still on record in the books on Roman agriculture. We can go back to the Georgics again, and there find an account of a method of heating the soil before sowing, which has only received its explanation within the last year, but which in some form or other has got to find its way back again into the routine of agriculture. Indeed, I am informed that one of the early mysteries, many of which we know to be bound up with the practises of agriculture, culminated in a process of firing the soil, preparatory to sowing the crop.

My time has run out, and I fear that the longer I go on the less you will feel that I am presenting you with any solution of the problem with which we set out—"What is the cause of the fertility of the soil?" evidently there is no simple solution; there is no single factor to which we can point as *the* cause; instead we have indicated a number of factors any one of which may at a given time become a limiting factor and determine the growth of the plant. All that science can do as yet is to ascertain the existence of these factors one by one and bring them successively under control; but, though we have been able to increase production in various directions, we are still far from being able to disentangle all the interacting forces whose resultant is represented by the crop.

One other point, I trust, my sketch may have suggested to you: when science, a child of barely a century's growth, comes to deal with a fundamental art like agriculture, which goes back to the dawn of the race, it should begin humbly by accepting and trying to interpret the long

chain of tradition. It is unsafe for science to be dogmatic; the principles upon which it relies for its conclusions are often no more than first approximations to the truth, and the want of parallelism, which can be neglected in the laboratory, give rise to wide divergencies when produced into the regions of practise. The method of science is, after all, only an extension of experience. What I have endeavored to show in my discourse is the continuous thread which links the traditional practises of agriculture with the most modern developments of science.

A. D. HALL

#### THE INTERNATIONAL ESPERANTO CONGRESS

AMERICA has been the scene of many conventions and congresses of a more or less international character, at which delegates representing many diverse lands and nationalities have gathered to discuss subjects of common interest. At these congresses, those attending have been almost as diverse with respect to language as to nationality and the halls of the congress and the places of social gathering and entertainment in connection with it, have usually been filled with well-nigh as much confusion as the historic plain of Shinar. Of course, each of these congresses has had its one or more official languages, in which papers were presented and official business transacted; many of those present being unable to take part in or fully enjoy the proceedings, because of lack of sufficient knowledge of some or all of the languages so used—to say nothing of the embarrassment caused when groups of the delegates met casually outside the regular sessions and free intercourse was restricted, or altogether prohibited, by the barrier of language. How many of those attending, handicapped by the paucity of their linguistic attainments, have looked back upon such gatherings with more or less regret, feeling that they had lost much, yet knowing full well, that from lack of time or otherwise, the possibility of increasing their