

chair at Harvard College together with the well-worn comment of

Columbia College a year or two since refused to appoint him to a chemical professorship. Because he did not understand chemistry? No; because he was a Unitarian!

At the time of the death of Professor Gibbs this statement also appeared in several of the "official" sketches that were published. As the story differed somewhat from the one that prevailed at Columbia when I was an undergraduate, I undertook to ascertain the facts for my own satisfaction and have arrived at the following conclusions:

In 1854 Wolcott Gibbs (easily the most distinguished of the many eminent scientists who have graduated from Columbia) was filling the chair of physics and chemistry in the College of the City of New York. He had only recently returned from Europe, where he had studied in Germany under Liebig and in France under Regnault, but had not as yet given any distinct evidence of his brilliant powers as an investigator, nor had he published papers that indicated his great genius.

It was also in that year that a successor was sought at Columbia for the illustrious James Renwick, who since 1820 had added to the prestige of his alma mater by serving her as professor of chemistry.

Various candidates were proposed and among them naturally enough the young alumnus of Columbia, who was then filling acceptably a teaching professorship in the Free Academy, as the City College was then commonly called. The trustees, however, in their wisdom chose Richard McCulloh, a man of more mature years than Gibbs and one who had already given promise of the future by his valuable work on the United States Coast Survey, then the foremost scientific bureau of the national government. That he filled the place satisfactorily is shown by the fact that three years later he was transferred to the chair of mechanics and physics, which he then held until October, 1863, when, as the General Catalogue has it, he "abandoned his post and joined the rebels."

Admirers of Professor Gibbs, however, have ever since persistently contended that Gibbs was rejected because he was a Unitarian, and even an appeal was presented to the New York state legislature¹ in which it was claimed that his rejection was made for sectarian reasons.

That Columbia has always had leanings toward the Protestant Episcopal faith is perhaps most significantly shown by the facts that the Bishop of New York and the rector of Trinity Church are ex-officio members of the board of trustees. But it must be remembered so also is the senior minister of the Dutch Reformed Church; and also again it must be remembered, that no evidence has ever been presented as to the faith of Professor McCulloh.

Much as I regret the decision of the trustees in depriving Columbia of the services of him, who, in the paths of science proved himself to be her most eminent alumnus, and also who ever inspired those who were so fortunate as to study under him with a true love of science, nevertheless, in these modern days, when church unity is the hope of so many, is it not time to cease the persistent criticism of Columbia for her sectarianism and to accept the more reasonable conclusion, entirely consistent with the facts, that McCulloh was chosen to the faculty because the trustees believed him to be the better man and not because Gibbs was a Unitarian.

MARCUS BENJAMIN

THE LAW OF PRIORITY

ON general principles it can not be denied

¹ Professor J. H. Van Amringe, Columbia's most beloved alumnus, in a recent letter, calls my attention to the fact that in response to this appeal a committee of the New York Senate was appointed to ascertain whether the trustees had required any "religious qualifications or test from any candidate as a condition of any professorship in said college." As a result of the inquiries the committee "arrived at the clear and decided conviction that there had been no such violation." See "A History of Columbia University. 1754-1904," New York, 1904, page 129.

that we must have uniform and consistent law, as has been stated by a recent contributor to the discussion, if we desire a stable system of nomenclature; in fact it goes without saying that this is quite essential.

But sundry knotty problems arise. For example when we observe in a recent catalogue that the word *Sunius*, for a well-known genus of beetles, which we have known hitherto only by that name, which our fathers and grandfathers knew only by that name, which in fact is the only name by which the genus has been known in virtually the entire domain of literature, must be changed and replaced by *Astenus*, we pause to ask why. It may be admitted that some one connected with the catalogue has gone back and at least thought he understood that the original diagnosis—these old descriptions being almost meaningless nine times out of ten—of *Astenus*, applied better to what we have known as *Sunius* than to anything else; but we are given no visible evidence whatever. Are we blindly to change the lifelong conception of several generations and reverse all published literature of the genus, on the authority of a guess and without presentation of any sort of proof? The language of the original description must alone afford this proof, for there is no way of knowing that the original type label may not have been shifted in some way, if the type chance to be in existence.

The pity of the interminable tangle may be reduced to this: If these over-zealous advocates of strict priority had only refrained from such publication until some system could be formulated, it would have been possible to adopt a uniform and consistent law which need not be necessarily that of rigid priority. One that might, for example, be analogous to the legal rule of exemption after a certain time limit. That is: If a genus name has not been challenged or corrected during a continuous period of say sixty or seventy years after its introduction in the commonly accepted sense, then it is to be considered permanent. This is absolute and consistent law and nothing else.

But the enthusiastic explorers of antiquity have spoiled this otherwise available recourse and I am free to confess that, as matters now stand, there seems to be no rational way out of the trouble but definitely to adopt the law of absolute priority. I would, however, only accept the identifications made by a competent commission, which should be compelled to publish its results in the fullest and broadest possible manner and in such a convincing way, by adducing the necessary proofs, that there could be no just ground for dissent. I feel that the enthusiasts aforesaid have compelled this course, because if we now use the old genus name *Ips*, for example, without further qualification, one would not know whether we refer to a Nitidulid or a Rhynchophorid beetle (*Tomicus* Latr.), to give only one instance among many.

So the very chaos which has come about through premature efforts to adhere to the law of strict priority now forces the adoption of that law, but only in the rigid way suggested above. In other words, incontrovertible evidence must be clearly and widely published, proving that the change is necessary. This opens up another vexing field of dispute. The subject is really serious and should be given the attention of the ablest natural historians now and without further delay, so that a secure foundation may be laid for future generations. Other work should be laid aside until this foundation is secure.

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SCIENTIFIC BOOKS

Geometrical Optics. By ARCHIBALD STANLEY PERCIVAL. London, Longmans, Green, and Company. 1913. Pp. vi + 132.

This volume, issued recently, is intended for medical students as a text-book introducing them to so much of optical theory as may be necessary for the ophthalmic surgeon. The mathematics of the subject is hence free from applications of calculus, but the algebra involved is enough to cause most American