

LOUIS AGASSIZ AND THE HALL OF FAME¹

NEARLY a century ago Louis Agassiz, following his friend Charpentier, boldly set before his confreres in the infant Academy of Neufchatel the novel and apparently revolutionary theory of a Glacial Age in which a mantle of ice covered the Alps and extended widely over Europe. This induction, conceived during his youthful encampment upon the Aar Glacier and his descent into its very heart, led step by step to our present knowledge of the repeated glaciations not only of the northern hemisphere but of the entire globe. The ten years between 1837 and 1847 Agassiz devoted to establishing this theory, and from the time of his arrival in Massachusetts in 1846 he was delighted to witness the vestiges of glaciation in North America, and before he passed away in 1873 he experienced the conversion of a startling and fantastic hypothesis into a well-established principle of the earth's history. This brilliant induction at the age of thirty yields the secret of Agassiz's great career, epitomized on the walls of his Penikese laboratory in four words: "Read Nature Not Books." For, next to his unrivaled inspiration as a teacher came his revolutionary insistence upon direct recourse to nature summed up in one of his most beautiful sentences, "If you study nature in books, when you go out-of-doors you can not find her." There never was a day in American educational history in which this observational method of Agassiz was more glaringly needed than the present day.

The little Swiss Canton of Neufchatel yielded not less than three great gifts of Switzerland to the United States—to Princeton University Arnold Guyot, comrade of Agassiz in glaciation; to our National Geological Survey Leo Lesquereux, classmate and comrade in botany; to all America Louis Agassiz, naturalist, geologist, zoologist. The French and Swiss social revolution of 1848, which hastened the departure to our shores of these three great men, inaugurated among us a scientific metempsychosis, the effects of which are quite beyond calculation. Into our practically virgin field of natural history, Agassiz brought the great traditions of his master, Cuvier, the brilliant founder of paleontology; of Humboldt, then the most influential scientist of Europe; of the British geologists, Buckland, Murchison, Sedgwick and Lyell. While never destined to be a disciple of Darwin, he paved the way for evolution through newer conceptions of creation in his titanic researches on living and fossil fishes, as well as through the vistas of geo-

logic time in his glaciation theory and in his insistence upon the observation of nature.

Following to America the ardent French pioneers and explorers, Rafinesque, Bonaparte, Audubon and Lessen, Agassiz brought with him the great traditions and canons of the European school as well as the example of research and publication in all branches of natural history, especially the life of the sea. Our birds, mammals and reptiles had been discovered and described by early French, Spanish and English explorers; it remained for Agassiz to explore our beautiful seacoast and to show the romance in the life of the sea. Thus his third great contribution to America was his creation of a school of explorers of the world beneath the waters—a school which numbered among its pupils all the distinguished men of American biology enrolled in our National Academy of Sciences between the years 1846 and 1873, besides the hundreds and even thousands of laymen who were attracted by his contagious enthusiasm.

To his leadership, exerted to arouse public interest and attention, we owe directly our seashore laboratories and many of our museums. It was he who inspired young Albert Bickmore, the creator of the American Museum of Natural History, and his own son Alexander, the founder and benefactor of the Cambridge Museum of Comparative Zoology, in the days when the National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution and others were not yet dreamed of. Every American college and university of the fifties, sixties and seventies filled its chairs of zoology by a pupil of Agassiz. Thus his influence extended a thousandfold.

These are the four outstanding reasons why the bronze portrait of Louis Agassiz should be placed in this Hall of Fame to-day. Is it not a felicitous example of the power of heredity that Alpheus Hyatt, perhaps the most original and skilful disciple of Agassiz and a master of form in the science of paleontology, should be the father of Anna Vaughn Hyatt, the very gifted sculptress, who has to-day in this beautiful bronze perpetuated the name and fame of Louis Agassiz.

HENRY FAIRFIELD OSBORN

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF
NATURAL HISTORY

ERNST J. LESSER

THE sudden death of Dr. E. J. Lesser, biological chemist at the City Hospital in Mannheim, Germany, involves a very great loss to medical science. He possessed the qualities of the true research worker in a very exceptional degree. He had insight and enthusiasm;—and these were combined with exemplary

¹Address at the Hall of Fame of New York University, on Thursday, May 10, 1928, at the unveiling of a bust of Jean Louis Rudolphe Agassiz.