

MISCELLANY.

THE SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION TO CHILE.

The United States Naval Astronomical Expedition to the Southern Hemisphere, during the years 1839-40, '51-'52—Lieut. J. M. Gillies, Superintendent; Lieut. A. MacRae, Acting Master; S. L. Phelps, and Captain's Clerk E. R. Smith, assistants. Vols. 1 and 2, quarto. Published by order of Congress.

Whether progress be or be not considered an inherent element in the constitution of our globe, an increasing expansion of the moral and intellectual powers of man appears to be the characteristic of the present age, and the general tendency is, we believe, to exalt humanity at large, notwithstanding supposed indications to the contrary, arising chiefly from lingering reverences for ancient and effete institutions and ideas. Discoveries in science are becoming extended to all the pursuits of life, great and small, and are improving and refining them all.

There is no reading the reports of Fremont, Emory, Whipple, Stevens, and those of their associates without being impressed with the manifestations of varied talents and resources; nor without admiring the easy and unaffected appliances of science in carrying out the objects of the explorations in which they and other talented gentlemen of the army have been so honorably engaged.

Though we cannot boast of a personal acquaintance with the Chief of the United States Astronomical Expedition to the Southern Hemisphere, we have not been unobservant of his career from 1836, when he entered as assistant, and in the same year became superintendent of the depot of charts and instruments. Here his labors were appreciated, as having a high bearing on the true interests of the navy, and he was authorized by the Departments and the Board of Naval Commissioners to add to his apparatus and assistants, until he had six officers constantly employed in observations of the first importance to nautical men.

A new determination of the solar parallax, and by other methods than those of the last century, is a desideratum involving, among other important points, the distances at which the planets sweep round the sun. In 1847 the subject was introduced by Dr. Gerling, a distinguished German astronomer, in a letter to Lieut. Gillies, in which he stated that in his opinion astronomers have acted unwisely in considering the solar parallax deduced from the transits of Venus in 1761 and 1769 sufficiently correct, and do not avail themselves of more modern methods of observations.

To readers unacquainted with the bearings of astronomy on the ordinary affairs of life, it is apt to occur, Cui bono? The answer was given in the language of the Hon. F. P. Stanton, chairman of the Naval Committee of the House of Representatives:

It is proposed to set on foot an expedition to the most southern available position on the Western Continent for the purpose of making observations on the planet Venus during the period of her retrograde motion, in conjunction with similar observations to be made at the Observatory in this city, with a view to the more accurate de-

termination of the solar parallax, which involves not only the distance of our own planet from the sun, but the divisions of the orbits of all the bodies of the solar system in these observations, if successfully made.

The order proposed, will present data solely American for a sure and independent determination of this important element—an element which enters into all our determinations of longitude, affecting the accuracy and safety of all such calculations, and therefore possessed of the highest possible utility, not only to the Government, but to all the enterprising citizens of our country.

The correspondence of Dr. Gerling and Lieut. Gillies was submitted to the American Philosophical Society, the Academy of Arts and Sciences, to Professors Baché, Pierce, Walker, Loomis, and others eminent for mathematical and astronomical attainments. The proposition of an expedition to Chile was discussed and approved with unanimity.

Finally, Congress approved the plan of the expedition proposed, and in August, 1848, made the requisite appropriations for the construction of observatories and for the purchase of the requisite instruments, of both American and foreign manufacture.

Lieut. Gillies was appropriately charged with the undertaking that was designed to enlarge the boundaries of science and for the benefit of the world at large.

His three assistants having sailed via Cape Horn with the equipments and apparatus, Lieut. Gillies left New York in August, 1849, crossed the Isthmus of Panama, and proceeded thence to Santiago, the capital of Chile. The hill Lucia, overlooking that city and constituting one of its suburbs, was selected as the site of the observatory, the Chilean Government promptly recognizing the importance and utility of the enterprise and cheerfully according every facility.

It is impossible to comprise within the limits of this notice the briefest sketch of the progress and accomplishment of an enterprise which belongs to those that mark epochs in the intellectual history of nations.

"During the summer and autumn months succeeding our arrival there was almost uninterrupted fine weather. From the 10th of December, when the equatorial was first in serenity; and to the close of the first series of observations on the planet Mars—January 31—there were but four unquiet to work.

To his liberal and enlightened policy on all questions of science, literature, or art, the world is indebted for more than one valuable contribution. His schools of art, music, painting, and botany; his elaborate work on its natural and political history, and its geological and topographical survey, are all evidences of its generous patronage.

undivided attention to its erection and adjustment; so that the instrument was ready for use about the middle of February.

Observations for approximate place of the circle had commenced some days before, and extra hours of every night were spent in becoming familiar with the details of the super instrument that Messrs. Piator and Martins had sent us from Berlin; and thus, by the time its adjustments were perfected, both of us were expert in its manipulation.

The results of the special labors of the expedition, chiefly embodied in tabular form, will of course not be adapted for popular interest, nor have they yet passed through the press.

Volume I, besides Lieut. Gillies's narrative of the expedition, including graphic descriptions of Panama, Lima, Valparaiso, and other places, has two chapters interesting to meteorologists: being observations made in going out and returning in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, at Panama, Lima, Copiapo, and the Candelaria mine on the summit of Chancarcillo, &c.

Volume II opens with the report of the accomplished MacRae's solitary and to him most creditable mission. It consists of two parts: 1. The narrative of his journeys across the Andes and Pampas of the Argentine Republic; 2. The observations made for the determination of geographical positions, elevations, and magnetic elements of the several stations selected between Santiago and Montevideo.

"It was a great satisfaction to work with an instrument like ours, but there was almost too much of it. Out of one hundred and thirty-two consecutive nights after the equatorial was mounted there were only seven cloudy ones!

The narrative is very characteristic of the lamented author. A clever, dashing, and delightful journalist he is, playful and light-hearted under all circumstances; nothing could dishearten him, neither rascalery of artifice, loss of money, kicks from the beds, and fire.

The remainder of the volume is occupied with important contributions of the expedition to mineralogy, antiquities, zoology, ornithology, reptiles, fishes, crustacea, shells, plants, and fossils.

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It cannot be hoped that every member of Congress will see that those two volumes, which make such positive additions to the stock of useful knowledge, have a place in at least one public library within his district.

The third volume is devoted to the special observations for which the expedition was authorized by Congress—viz: to determine the parallaxes of Mars and Venus, from which, by Kepler's third law, that of the sun is deducible. To inspire the fullest confidence of astronomers it was considered proper that the discussion of the result should be assigned to a competent astronomer, who had borne no part in the observations, and who would treat them in a wholly impartial manner.

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The official documents will be eagerly looked for by the savans of both hemispheres. Reflecting honor on the Government, and especially on the department to which the gentlemen of the expedition belonged, they are such as tend to elevate us as a people and to secure to us a commanding influence among the most enlightened of nations.

Of the reputation of the Chief of the United States Naval Astronomical Expedition in Europe we are glad to perceive evidences in his name being already enrolled among the members of the academies of science in Marburg, Dantzig, Leipsig, and Berlin.

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