

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1876

OUR NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

THOSE who pass along Cromwell Road, South Kensington, will not fail to observe on the site of the former International Exhibition, a stately building rising from the ground under the superintending genius of Mr. Waterhouse. The contractors have labelled it "The Museum of Natural History," but when the building is completed (which will be the case in November, 1877, according to the Office of Works) it may "surprise" our readers to be told that there will be no "Natural History" to put into it. The Natural History Collections in the British Museum—which are commonly supposed to be national property—belong not to the people of England nor to the "Government," but to fifty "Trustees" who are obliged by statute to keep them in Great Russell Street, and nowhere else. In order to enable these collections to be removed to South Kensington when the new building is ready to receive them, it will be necessary to pass an Act of Parliament discharging the Trustees from their present statutory duties and enacting others applicable to the new site. Now the Royal Commissioners on Science, who have recently terminated their labours, have devoted a good deal of time and attention to this branch of their subject. They have come to the conclusion that the removal of the Natural History Collections to another building will be a good opportunity for effecting a radical change in their administration, which, as it is now conducted, is by no means satisfactory either to men of science or to the public. It must be recollected that the British Museum was originally instituted as a great public library, to which the collections of art and science were considered merely as appendages. The director of the whole institution is still called the "Principal Librarian," and even up to a recent period the whole of the staff, even in the scientific departments, was classified under the fiction that they were "assistants" in the Library. The consequence of this leading idea is that everything in the British Museum, even up to the present time, is sacrificed to the extension and glorification of a single department. The Natural History Collections have, it is true, a nominal head, and a very eminent person he is, but Prof. Owen has nothing to do with the government of the institution, and has not even access to the trustees when they meet in solemn conclave. All he can do, when anything is wanted or something goes wrong in one of the Natural History Departments, is to approach the trustees through the principal librarian, an excellent individual, no doubt, but a gentleman entirely unacquainted with natural science and its requirements. It will be easily imagined, therefore, that under this system everything is sacrificed to the Library. The head-executive officer, naturally enough, thinks that his own branch of the business is of by far the greatest importance, and that everything else should knock under to it. As an illustration of this fact we have only to turn to the Civil Service Estimates for the current year. It will be found that 10,000*l.* is to be spent upon the purchase of printed books for the British Museum although

copies of all those published in the United Kingdom are obtained gratis, whereas the miserable pittance of 1,200*l.* is allowed for zoological specimens, 800*l.* for fossils, and 400*l.* for botany! It may be alleged by the trustees that these amounts are sufficient, but the contrary is notoriously the case. The general level of the zoological and botanical collections in the British Museum is undoubtedly far below what it ought to be. The finest specimens in nearly every department of natural history fall into the hands of amateurs because the National Collection is so badly supplied with funds for purchases of this kind. No dealer would think of offering a new butterfly or a new humming-bird to the British Museum. With the former he would go to Mr. Hewitson with the latter to Mr. Gould. Again, the staff of officers in the Natural History Departments is inadequate in point of numbers. Their salaries likewise are much below those of other branches of the Civil Service, and quite insufficient for the duties expected of them. Hence it follows that there is little temptation for young men of ability and education to accept such a career. These deficiencies might have been remedied long ago if the trustees had been content to give up their patronage. But the right of presentation to all places in the British Museum is vested by statute in the three principal trustees, and the Government, naturally enough, declines to increase the value of appointments over which they have no sort of control.

Under these circumstances it is not to be wondered at that the Royal Commissioners on Science have come to the conclusion that, as regards the Natural History Departments shortly to be removed to South Kensington, the irresponsible rule of the fifty trustees should altogether cease, and a more simple form of government come into existence on the new site. Nothing can be more successful than the National Botanical establishment at Kew, governed by a Director immediately responsible to one of the Ministers. The Science Commissioners, with good reason, recommend a similar form of administration for the National Zoological Museum at South Kensington.

In this view, as will be seen by reference to their report, the Commissioners are supported by the best men of science of the day, many of whom have emphatically condemned the present system. One short clause in the Bill which must be brought in to authorise the transfer of the Natural History Collections to South Kensington will be sufficient to discharge the trustees from all future responsibility connected with them, and we trust there will be no hesitation on the part of her Majesty's Government in following the excellent advice tendered to them by the Science Commissioners on this subject.

CENTRAL AFRICA

Naked Truths of Naked People: an Account of Expeditions to the Lake Victoria N'yanza and the Makraka Niam-Niam, West of the Bahr-el-Abiad (White Nile).
By Col. C. Chaillé Long, of the Egyptian Staff.
(London: Sampson Low and Co., 1876.)

THIS work is more than usually interesting, as the author was an American officer in the Egyptian army attached to the expedition of Col. Gordon, the successor