

But in merely making incidental memoranda of the every-day experiences of life in his northern home, Mr. Smith has mentioned not a few interesting things; and for these one soon begins to be grateful in reading a volume that is otherwise none too lively. He tells us, for example, how a heron was suspected of stealing ducklings, was watched, and finally caught in the act of devouring one of the birds—which seems a singular occurrence. On the other hand, the appearance of a bat in January, when the West Highlands happen to be visited by a spell of mild weather, is by no means the rare phenomenon he supposes it to be. There are some interesting remarks on the incubation of the cuckoo's egg (pp. 13 and 16) which seem to suggest a need for further inquiry. But we cannot say that we place implicit faith in Mr. Anderson Smith as an observer. His story of how, on one occasion, in passing through a wood, he startled a number of fallow-deer and roebuck may be forgiven on account of the darkness prevailing at the time: we should prefer to wait for some daylight notes before believing that the fallow-deer and the roe have agreed to lay aside their long-standing and mutual antipathy. "The pheasant is an unwieldy bird and of no great power of flight." Did the writer of that sentence ever try to "stop" a rocketer well on the wing and coming down wind; and what was the expression of his face when he wheeled round to find the "unwieldy" bird already disappearing into the next parish? Mr. Smith in this volume revives a controversy in which, as it appears, he has been engaged before, with regard to the lower animals committing suicide; and remarks that it may be assumed they know what death is from the fact that many of them can simulate it with marvellous accuracy. It is no doubt true that the young of certain animals, when confronted with danger, will suddenly become motionless, and remain so until the danger is removed—just as it is a common trick among street arabs for a small boy, when pursued by a bigger boy, to throw himself down in the roadway and lie perfectly still, prepared for the worst. But to assume that the young curlew or the young rat that suddenly stiffens itself and shuts its eyes is aware that it is simulating death, or has any understanding of such a state, is a far jump. Mr. Smith cites the case of a terrier belonging to a friend of his which, having the distemper, deliberately went off and drowned itself. Clearly the verdict here must be temporary insanity; the dog did not know what it was doing. The chief reason for concluding that the lower animals are not aware that they possess the liberty of suicide is that so few of them (or none of them) take advantage of it; if they did know, the overworked cart-horse, the mangy cur, the long-enduring donkey, would forthwith knock their heads against the nearest wall—unless, indeed, it is to be supposed that these animals are so highly intelligent as to have heard of the significant French proverb: "Quand on est mort, c'est pour longtemps." But this question of suicide among animals has always been a stumbling-block. Prof. Edward Forbes accused a whole tribe of star-fish of having a suicidal instinct on no better grounds than that they, on being brought into the air, or put in fresh water, went to bits. He even describes one of them as rejoicing in its power of eluding scientific scrutiny:—"I saw its limbs escaping through every mesh of the dredge.

In my despair I seized the largest piece, and brought up the extremity of an arm with its terminal eye, the spinous eyelid of which opened and closed with something exceedingly like a wink of derision." After this we shall not be surprised to hear of a body of scientific experts meeting to consider the question of suicide among animals—with Mark Twain as President of the Committee.

"Loch Creran" is not a vivacious book; but it is unpretentious; and the author, in a rambling and hap-hazard fashion, contrives to give us some idea of his surroundings and pursuits. Indeed, the dweller in towns, who has the patience to follow this somewhat prolix writer, will probably part company with him with no slight feeling of envy.

OUR BOOK SHELF

The Encyclopædic Dictionary. Vol. VI. Part 1. (London: Cassell and Co., 1887.)

THE work to which this volume belongs is much more than a mere dictionary in the ordinary sense. It includes the description of things as well as of words, special attention being given to objects and processes indicated by scientific and technical terms. The information offered is never, of course, exhaustive, but it is sufficient for the purposes the compilers have had in view, and generally it has the merit of being clear, concise, and, as far as it goes, accurate. As a dictionary the work deserves high praise. It contains all the English as well as all the Scotch words now in use, with their significations re-investigated, re-classified, and re-illustrated by examples. A large number of obsolete words have also been introduced. The etymology is inclosed within brackets immediately following each word; and the pronunciation is indicated by diacritical marks, a key to which is given at the foot of the several pages. The present volume includes all words from "quoi" to "shipp," and, so far as we have been able to test it, we have found it lucidly arranged and thoroughly trustworthy.

Descriptive Catalogue of the General Collection of Minerals in the Australian Museum. By A. Felix Ratte. Printed by order of the Trustees. (Sydney: Thomas Richards.)

THIS Catalogue has been carefully compiled, and no doubt it has already been of considerable service to persons making use of the Australian Museum. For the classification of silicates the compiler has taken as a guide Dana's "System of Mineralogy"; for the classification of metallic minerals, Roscoe's "Chemistry." But these authors' systems have not been entirely followed, especially where rare mineral products are concerned. The notes, although generally brief, are adequate, and there is a valuable appendix on gems and ornamental specimens.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. Neither can he undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.]

[The Editor urgently requests correspondents to keep their letters as short as possible. The pressure on his space is so great that it is impossible otherwise to insure the appearance even of communications containing interesting and novel facts.]

West Indian Meteorological Confederation

IN the leading article in NATURE, vol. xxxv. p. 241, remarks were made respecting the advantages which would accrue to the West Indian Islands, and to the Meteorological Council of the