LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by 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 urgenty 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.]

"A Conspiracy of Silence."

The article which I contributed to the September number of the Nineteenth Century, on the Coral Islands of the Pacific, has done what I intended it to do. It has called wide attention to the influence of mere authority in establishing erroneous theories and in retarding the progress of scientific truth. The vehement assault made upon it in the current number of the same review by Prof. Huxley, and the article by Prof. Bonney in this journal, are to me gratifying evidences of success. But both of these writers are entirely wrong in the interpretation they put on a few expressions in my paper. They interpret these expressions as conveying imputations on the probity and honour of scientific men in the habitual and willful suppression or discouragement of what they know to be truth. But there is nothing to justify this interpretation. I have made no such accusation, and if any one else were to make it I should join the two indignant Professors in repudiating it. Scientific men are not only as good as other men in this way, but generally a great deal better. Prof. Huxley has been irriated by some "anonymous sermon," which I have not seen and for which I am not responsible. He admits that it is in this anonymous production that the "slanders" against scientific men have been conveyed. I maintain that this unknown writer has been "inspired" by my article on Coral Islands. On the strength of this assumption—which may be true for aught I know—he goes on through some seven pages to dissect certain parts of my paper, and to read into it a great deal that is due to his own excitement and to nothing else.

I have no difficulty in expressing clearly and without any circumlocution exactly what I do mean, and what I have intended to say. Prof. Bonney interprets it very fairly, in abstract, when he says that the moral of my paper is, "Beware of idolatry." Some theory, hypothesis, or doctrine, is propounded by a great man. It becomes established, partly perhaps by certain inherent elements of strength, or at all events of attractiveness. But soon it stands unsailable, and unsailed, upon the vast foundations of general acceptance and admitted authority. It becomes what Prof. Huxley on a celebrated occasion, and with at least a momentary insight, called "a creed." The effect of such a position is tremendous. Some men who see cause to doubt are daunted. They keep silence. Others are prevented from even thinking on the subject. A few who do think, and who do doubt, and who do venture to express their doubts, are discouraged and discouraged. A great many others take refuge in a suspended judgment, even after the production of evidence which, in the absence of a "creed" and of authority, would have been deemed conclusive. In all this there may be, and in general there is, nothing worse than timidity on the part of those who are the laggards, or the opponents, in some great advance. It is more difficult for some men than for others to face a prevalent opinion or an accepted doctrine. It is all very well to say, as Prof. Bonney says, that "to the man of science truth is a pearl of great price, to buy which he is ready to part with everything previously obtained." But scientific men are human. They are, I admit, immensely superior to the politicians, especially just now. But they have their failings, and everyone who knows the history of science must be able to call to mind not one instance only, but many instances, in which the progress of knowledge has been delayed for long periods of time by the powerful and repressive influences of authority, exerted in one or other of many ways. My contention is that Darwin's theory on the origin of the Coral Islands is a case in point. I believed in it or accepted it, for many years, as others did. Prof. Bonney admits that I have described it not only fairly, but as forcibly as if I were still its advocate. This is exactly what I tried to do. I now hold that it has been disproved, and has been replaced by another theory quite as grand, and more in harmony with other natural laws which are of universal operation, but have been only lately recognized. I affirm, farther, that this new theory or explanation has been received with the timidity, the discouragement, the discouragement, and the obstruction which are characteristic in such cases. That Dr. Geikie has supported it, is most creditable to him. But his voice is not enough to disprove the truth of my contention. That Prof. Huxley and Prof. Bonney should be unable to make up their minds upon such evidence as has been before us now for several years is, in my opinion, a strong confirmation of the law which is operating upon them. There are some discoveries in science—some explanations of curious phenomena—which are of so novel a light. The moment they are suggested, with a few cardinal and certain facts to illustrate them, they are their own proof. Everything that turns up speaks in support of them. My conviction is that such is the character of Mr. Murray's theory of the coral island formations in the Pacific.

Prof. Huxley challenges me to re-affirm with better proof the fact I allege—that Mr. Murray has met with discouragement. I respond at once to that challenge. I have seen the letter from Sir Wyville Thomson in which that naturalist urged and almost insisted that Mr. Murray should withdraw the reading of his papers on the subject from the Royal Society of Edinburgh. This was in February 1877. No special reason was assigned, but the terms of the letter indicate clearly that Sir Wyville dreaded some injury to the scientific reputation of the body of naturalists of whom he was the chief, and for whom, as connected with the Challenger Expedition, he was in some degree responsible. He had not himself at that time, I believe, fully accepted the new doctrine. But that would have been no sufficient reason for discouraging free discussion, if it were indeed as free as it ought to be. In my article I understated the delay which was thus occasioned. Three years, not two, elapsed.
The Theories of the Origin of Coral Reefs and Islands.

I was pleased to see Prof. Bonney’s article on the Duke of Argyll’s strictures on scientific men (“A Conspiracy of Silence,” Nature, November 10, p. 25). It is to be hoped that the rhetoric and methods of Parliamentary debate will not become common in scientific controversy. The Duke is, however, not the first who has tried to show “that if Darwin had lived he would with his well-known candour have been the first to admit the truth of Murray’s theory,” &c., &c. This I submit is a species of rhetoric which is out of place in scientific discussion.

It so happens that shortly after the appearance of Mr. Murray’s paper on the Structure and Origin of Coral Reefs and Islands, in Nature, August 24, 1880 (p. 331), I had occasion to write to Dr. Darwin, and in my letter the following passage occurs, which I quote to make Darwin’s answer intelligible:

“September 21, 1880.

“I think the theory Mr. Murray sets forth—that the cones or peaks, on which he considers atolls have been formed, have been jumbled up by pelagic deposits, and thus brought within the limits of reef-building coral growth—a very far-fetched idea.”

To which Darwin with his usual acumen replies:

“Beckenham, September 22, 1880.

“I am not a fair judge, but I agree with you exactly that Murray’s view is far-fetched. It is astonishing that there should be rapid dissolution of carbonate of lime at great depths and near the surface, but not at intermediate depths where he places his mountain peaks.”

“Dear Sir, yours faithfully,

“C. Darwin.”

As so far there appears to have been no written expression of Darwin’s views published, this quotation may be of value.

T. Mellard Reade.

Park Corner, Blundellsands, November 11.

Earthquake at the Bahamas.

I am instructed by the Meteorological Council to inclose copies of reports from the Resident Justice and Light-keepers of Inagua, Bahamas, relating to an earthquake on September 23 last, which you may think worthy of a place in Nature.

Robert H. Scott,

Meteorological Office,

116 Victoria Street, London, S.W.

November 11.

The Resident Justice at Inagua to the Colonial Secretary, Nassau.

In re Earthquake at Inagua.

Resident Justice’s Office, Inagua, September 27, 1887.

I have to report that this island was visited by a severe shock of earthquake at 7 a.m. of the 23rd instant; the effect on the light tower, the keeper reports, was terrific, two nuts on the iron stanchion of the smoke-stack were broken, and several cylinders. A portion of the stone wall around the Residency, and another private property, were thrown down in Mathew Town.

At 8.10 p.m. another shock was felt, no damage at the township; at the light-station the cylinder on the lamp was broken, and the keepers were compelled to extinguish the light to prevent conflagration. A new cylinder having been placed in position, the light was again lit in about six or eight minutes after the accident.

At midnight another shock was felt, and the light-keeper reported next morning several cracks in mortar inside of the light tower; the light continued good.

Since the 23rd instant several light shocks have been felt, which keeps the people in a state of alarm.

We have had no arrival from Hayti and neighbouring islands, and it is feared that some of them have greatly suffered.

(Signed) G. R. McGregor,

Resident Justice.

The Hon. Roht. Butler, Acting Colonial Secretary.

Principal and Assistant Light-keepers, Inagua, to the Inspector of Lighthouses, Nassau.

Inagua Light Station, September 29, 1887.

Sir,—I beg most respectfully to report for your information that this station and island was visited by several severe shocks of earthquakes on the 23rd, 24th, 25th, and 26th instants. The shock on the former date was felt at 7 a.m., which shook the tower and dwelling severely. Two nuts forming a part of fastening of iron rods in the upper part of lantern supporting upper harred and smoke-pipe were wrenched off and smashed several cylinders.

The second shock, at 8.10 p.m., shook the tower very much, and smashed the cylinder on lamp. The light was then extinguished to prevent fire, which lasted about eight minutes [sic], when the light was again exhibited and kept burning bright and clear until daylight. There was another shock felt during the night, but not so severe. I noticed several cracks on the walls in the tower, which may be the mortar only. The latest shock was on the morning of the 26th at 1.3.

I am glad to say that the lamp and machinery are in good working order, but there will be slight repairs required.

The latest shock felt was at midnight of the 27th. I also inclose the head of nut, the length of which is seven-eighths of an inch on inside.

I have, &c.,

(Signed) Byron N. Jones,

Principal;

Cornelius S. E. Lotman,

Assistant,

The Inspector of Lighthouses.