

Obituary

Prof. A. W. Bickerton.

ALEXANDER WILLIAM BICKERTON was born at Alton in Hampshire on January 7, 1842. He was originally intended for the engineering profession, but was attracted to the study of science by successes gained at some evening classes that he

attended, and in 1866 he went to Birmingham, obtaining in the following year an exhibition at the Royal School of Mines, and later, at the Royal College of Chemistry, the Senior Royal Scholarship. At the same time he organised evening technical classes in London, and it has been claimed for him that he was the originator of the present technical education in London. He possessed great teaching gifts, and in 1874 he went to Canterbury College, Christchurch, in the University of New Zealand, as Professor of Chemistry; and here he remained until 1902, teaching chemistry, electricity and physics. He had students who subsequently became eminent men of science, and they always continued to hold him in the highest esteem. He was certainly not a conventional man in his ideas; it has been told that at one time he conceived—and put into practice for a while—the idea of turning a large residence into a communal home, where he lived with his baker and plumber and other necessary aids to civilised life.

But in 1876 his attention was turned to astronomy by the appearance of Nova Cygni, and in 1878 he enunciated his theory of "Partial Impact," or the "Third Body," and this theory he urged in season and out of season, in all its essentials unchanged for the next fifty years. Most astronomers would have been willing to accept it as an occasional cosmogonical method or event, but in his zeal as a teacher of this theory, Prof. Bickerton was apt to urge upon his listener that it was the one and only method, the universal cosmical cause—or at least to give that impression. In England the opposition he met was chiefly the inertia of boredom, but the opposition of the Board of Governors of Canterbury College was not of this order, and in 1894 they objected so strongly to his advocacy of this theory that an attempt was made to oust him from his chair, unsuccessful in that year but eventually successful. Later the Governor-General of Australia started a fund which enabled him to return to England, and in the summer of 1928 Canterbury College appointed him Professor Emeritus, and the New Zealand Government added a pension of £120 a year. He died at his home in Pembridge Mansions, Hyde Park, on Wednesday, January 23, 1929. He joined the Association through the New South Wales Branch on 1904 October 1, and his name remained on the Association Register until October, 1927.