

Cutting from
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Relating to Appointment of Prof. Nat. Hist
Chair Edinburgh - & J. W. D.'s Candidature.

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74 THE NATURAL HISTORY CHAIR.

Scottish Review - Friday 1853
 SINCE the lamented death of Professor Edward Forbes, we have not interfered with the question of a successor to him, beyond stating the objections which we thought the public would and ought to feel to the appointment of M. Agassiz, eminent as he undoubtedly is as a man of science, and the claims preferred by Mr Dawson of Pictou, Nova Scotia, as a geologist of high and rising celebrity, and with no mean knowledge of zoology—the branches, a competent knowledge of which is requisite to enable any one to fill with advantage the Chair of Natural History in the University of Edinburgh. From the moment it became known that it was hopeless to propose Agassiz, a good many little coteries, we will not say factions, have been busy, whispering and consulting and communicating with everybody who was supposed to have any influence in the appointment. It would be more amusing than edifying were we to rehearse the gossip that is afloat of round-robins signed on behalf of eminence on crutches here, and of Mr So-and-so, “who has been too long kept back,” there,—and Sir George Grey, the Duke of Argyll, and the Lord Advocate have had their names freely quoted and bandied about, with the same mysterious and suggestive winks and shrugs and pokes of the elbow wherewith the knowing ones hint the favourites and the state of the odds at the betting houses the night before the Derby. On ourselves was bestowed the comforting assurance that, succeed who might, Mr Dawson had no chance, and by-and-by some great light would be proposed to eclipse all lesser luminaries.

We knew, however, the man whose claims on public grounds we had ventured to urge, and although aware that a distant colonist must necessarily suffer, when pitted against candidates who are on the spot and who had each his circle of supporters around him, we were content to allow matters to take their course. When Mr Dawson's testimonials appeared, a wonderful revolution in public sentiment took place—the man who was nobody was found to be a co-operator with, and friend of, some of the most eminent savans in Britain; and two of them, the late lamented Sir Henry de la Beche, and still more Sir Charles Lyell, whose noble and disinterested friendship stamps him as a man as good as he is distinguished, came forward to testify the very high opinion they entertained of Mr Dawson's merits. Evidence crowded upon us, and some of the stray sheets recently found their way into circulation of Mr Dawson's work, “Acadian Geology,”—which has just issued from the press of Messrs Oliver and Boyd, of Edinburgh; and the “young naturalist,” as the author describes himself, “labouring in a comparatively remote and isolated position,” came into repute “in the great literary centre of the Anglo-Saxon world.” Meanwhile, perhaps, Sir George Grey and his coadjutors had found a moment's leisure to glance at the noble appeal made by Joseph Howe, the colonial Prime Minister, in the legislature of Nova Scotia—the country of Mr Dawson—in which, claiming for British colonists the rights of citizenship, and contrasting the rewards which the American Republic offers her sons with those of British America, he says, “I yield to no man in respect for the flag of my fathers, but I will live under no flag with a brand of inferiority to the other British races stamped upon my brow.” All these were needed to give Mr Dawson fair play—for when it was found vain to attempt to neutralise the testimony of Sir Charles Lyell in his favour, by representing a most independent thinker to be a slavish follower of the learned knight, a cry was raised that Mr Dawson was a mere colonist, and it would be a slight on British talent to cross the Atlantic for one to fill the chair in a Scottish university, a cry that was not once heard so long as Agassiz was the coming man.

The Government seemed non-plussed, but the community, as well they might, was getting impatient, and at the last meeting of the Edinburgh Town Council, the Lord Provost and Bailie Morrison were commissioned to proceed to London to press the question to an issue. And accordingly the Court Gazette tells us that, accompanied by the city members, Mr Macaulay and Mr Cowan, they met the Home Secretary (Sir George Grey), and the Lord Advocate on Tuesday. It was now found that Mr Dawson, the unknown Nova Scotian, was not a distanced competitor—on the contrary, had it not happened that Sir Roderick Murchison had been induced to take Professor Nichol of Aberdeen by the hand, and to urge his claims with that authority which this eminent naturalist possesses with the Government, Mr Dawson would have received the appointment. But mark the way in which men in office “split a difference;” Sir George Grey could not afford to offend Sir Charles Lyell, who demanded the office for Mr Dawson—“the right man in the right place”—or Sir Roderick Murchison, who demanded it for Professor Nichol—and so he resolved, it is said, to give it to neither, but to Dr Allman of Dublin—this last agreeing, which we suppose the others would not have agreed—should the Chair be afterwards divided, and separate professorships of Zoology and Geology appointed—to confine himself to the former, leaving the latter vacant. It is understood the appointment will be made immediately.

Were it not for the important interests involved, one could scarce help being amused with the issue of this important arrangement. It was objected—it was the only objection—to Mr Dawson that he is a Geologist, and not a Zoologist—a statement by no means borne out by the fact. But let that pass. Who is preferred to him? The Dublin Professor of *Botany*. A man whose profession relates to the structure of trees and plants is supposed to understand comparative anatomy better than a Professor of Geology, whose testimonials speak to his competent knowledge of Zoology! We do not know if it be too late, but we trust Sir George Grey will more truly consult the interests of the University—and we say this, while we by no means withhold our meed of respect for the attainments of Dr Allman.