RICHARD SPRUCE.

(*With Portrait.*)

THE life of Richard Spruce impresses one as that of a man from whom the scientific world did not obtain all that he might have given. That it was not otherwise may be attributed to the demon of ill-health which overshadowed him from an early period in life, and which, if it determined the sphere of his work during that portion of his career which was active, crippled him as an acute sufferer during the later half. In all the circumstances we can but wonder that he accomplished so much.

The story of his life is in brief:—Born a Yorkshireman, at Ganthorpe, in 1817, Spruce having a mathematical gift followed the profession of his father, and became for a short period a dominie. But his unquenchable love of natural history, more especially of the Bryophyta, backed probably by a temperament unsuited to the schoolroom, ere long weaned him from the desk, and the calls of health imperatively demanding his sojourn in a climate less rigorous than that of Britain, he spent a short year in botanical exploration upon the Pyrenees, and subsequently migrated to South America upon a like errand with the support of the leading British botanists of the time. Landing at Para, in 1849, he began a series of explorations and botanical collections which employed him for a dozen years, in course of which he traversed South America by divergent routes from East to West, passing but a few degrees northwards or southwards of the equator over a region—including many important rivers, some of them up to that time unexplored—extending from British Guiana and Venezuela on the north-east to Peru on the south-west. In

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addition to his botanical zeal which enabled him to reap a rich harvest of plants which were from time to time transmitted to Europe for distribution and sale for his support, Spruce's skill as a cartographer enabled him to add materially to our knowledge of the geography of South America. When at Ambato, on the Quitensian Andes, in 1859, his services were secured as one of the band under Mr. Clements Markham, to which, in imitation of the example set by the Dutch, was entrusted the work of securing plants and seeds of *Cinchona* for transmission to India—work which was to lay the foundation of the important enterprise which has been so successful and so beneficial. To Spruce the chief duty of looking after the supply of *Cinchona succirubra* from the slopes of Chimborazo devolved, and his mission was accomplished successfully in so far as the *Cinchona* plants were concerned, but disastrously for himself. Early in 1860, during its progress, his health entirely broke down, and thus maimed he made his way to Guayaquil, only to find himself financially ruined by fraud. A couple of years more concluded his fifteen years' life in South America, and he returned to England. A small Government-pension relieved his straitened circumstances to some extent, and this was increased subsequently by a belated grant from the Government of India in recognition of his services in connexion with *Cinchona*. Settling first at Hurstpierpoint, Spruce then moved to Welburn in Yorkshire, and ultimately to Coneysthorpe, where he died December 28, 1893, having by careful regimen prolonged his life to the advanced age of seventy-six years.

The botanical work of Spruce falls into two distinct periods, leaving out of account his few early essays. The first, that of his American travels, credits him with an enormous increase to our knowledge of plant-forms through the collections he poured into Europe, estimated to include some seven thousand species of Flowering Plants and Ferns, besides a vast number of lower Cryptogamia, especially of Mosses and Liverworts. Few travellers have ever collected so extensively, and with so much judgement and skill; his neatness of hand and

methodical habits peculiarly suited his work. In addition to this provision of these material accessions to our knowledge of the Vegetable Kingdom, Spruce's service to the cause of humanity in his *Cinchona* work must always be reckoned as of his greatest. Sojourn in the American forests, whilst it fascinated did not stimulate him to be a dreamer of scientific dreams as it did his fellow traveller Wallace, and Bates and Belt; or, if it did, he did not write the interpretation. The few letters of his fitfully describing his progress to Sir William Hooker, Mr. Bentham, and other botanists, which appeared in the *Kew Journal of Botany* in the fifties, and which are marked by a clear and facile diction, show him as a shrewd observer, and as a naturalist alive to biological problems wanting solution for which the materials might be at his hand. But he never achieved any compendious account of his travels, through which he might have conveyed the impressions of his long American experience, and the glimpses that his writings give us of the keenness of his perception and of his critical faculty indicate that Science is in this a loser.

The second period—that in England of the latter half of his life, when, as he says, he was 'never more able to sit straight up or walk about without great pain or discomfort,' and was obliged to work therefore in a reclining posture—was that of the production of the permanent records of his collections so far as he could work them up. His *Essay upon the Palms of the Amazon* is classical, but his chief publications are within the domain of the *Hepaticae*. From his earliest years this group attracted him, and his largest and most comprehensive publication is that upon the *Hepaticae* of the Amazon and Andes, now generally recognized as the most important book upon the *Hepaticae* that has appeared in recent years. The titles of Spruce's publications upon the *Hepaticae* hardly give an idea of the full extent of his work upon them and of its merit. Ostensibly descriptive and systematic, his writings are weighty in the discrimination of characters and in the adjustment of boundaries; but over and above this, they have the charm of deserving to be read between the lines, for

they abound with interjected suggestions, often most pregnant. For instance, the question of the evolution of the leafage of the Hepaticae and its relation to that of higher plants may be raised in a foot-note; the water-supply and the biological relationships of the group may be incidents of the description of the finding of a new species, and so forth. The inspiration, if not the facts, of many of the supposed new points in the biology of the Hepaticae, which their study as fashionable ancestral land-forms has recently been bringing forward, will be found by the diligent student in Spruce's writings. Had he published, as one gathers he had the intention of doing, a general treatise upon the Hepaticae, instead of dispersing his biological observations through a series of systematic papers, there is little doubt the value of his work would have been recognized earlier and more widely.

Tall and spare of frame, Spruce had, despite ill-health, a constitution of some power to endure the hardships of his many years of American life. 'I am not one of the forwardest to face perils, but once embarked I think no more of the consequences,' he says of himself, and his travels confirm it. Warm-hearted and impulsive, he was quick to wrath, yet readily appeased. A natural shyness was the frequent cause of misunderstanding between himself and others, and doubtless had, along with ill-health, to do with the comparative isolation from the botanical world of his later life. At the same time there was in him a touch of imperiousness, and whether from mortified vanity or ungratified sympathy he was inclined to resent what he regarded as his neglect by the botanical world, and showed it in a cynicism which his sense of humour at times made genial.

Mr. Slater, of Malton, and Mr. Massee, of Kew, have been so good as to furnish information regarding Dr. Spruce, and the former gentleman has also supplied the photograph of him in his later years—the only one available—from which our portrait is taken.

ISAAC BAYLEY BALFOUR.

Walter L. Gott
Yours very faithfully
Richard Spruce.

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