

- Berättelse om Framstegen i Fysik under år 1852. Af E. Edlund.  
8vo.—*From the same.*
- Kongliga Svenska Fregatten Eugenie's Resa Omkring Jorden under befäl af C. A. Virgin. Aren, 1851–1853. Häft 1–5. 4to.  
—*From the same.*
- Journal of the Royal Dublin Society, Nos. 9–11. 8vo.—*From the Society.*
- The Assurance Magazine and Journal of the Institute of Actuaries, No. 34.—*From the Institute.*
- Meteorologische Beobachtungen aufgezeichnet an der Königl. Sternwarte bei Munchen in den Jahren, 1825–37. 8vo.—*From the Royal Observatory of Munich.*
- Annalen der Königl. Sternwarte bei Munchen. 10 Band. 8vo.—*From the same.*
- Astronomische Beobachtungen auf der Königl. Universitäts-Sternwarte zu Königsberg. 33 Abtheilung. Folio.—*From the University.*
- Observations on British Zoophytes, Descriptions of New Protozoa and of two Tubicular Animals. By Dr T. Strethill Wright. 7 Pamphlets. 8vo.—*From the Author.*

*Monday, 7th February 1859.*

PROFESSOR KELLAND, Vice-President, in the Chair.

The following Communications were read :—

1. Biographical Memoir of the late Dr D. Skene of Aberdeen.  
By Alex. Thomson, Esq. of Banchory.

This memoir commences by stating that it seemed desirable to arrange and preserve what memorials could still be found of one who had done very much to promote the study of natural science in Scotland, but whose memory had well-nigh perished.

Dr Skene's father and grandfather were both eminent physicians in Aberdeen, where he was born, on 13th August 1731.

His early education was conducted in Aberdeen. He spent the winter of 1751–2 in Edinburgh, attending various medical classes; and in the autumn of 1752 proceeded to London, where he studied under Hunter and Smellie, besides attending several of the hospitals.

In January 1753 he went for a few months to Paris, in order still further to advance his professional studies. Extracts from letters to his family were read, giving vivid and interesting descriptions of men and manners, and especially of his various teachers; of the insolence of the Parisian Perruquiers, and how they obstructed the other students; and of the cost and worthlessness of the Rheims degrees of M.D., the possession of which was concealed by the owner like the commission of a crime.

Dr Skene returned to Aberdeen in the summer of 1753, and on 8th September of that year received the degree of M.D. from King's College and University; and settled permanently as assistant to his father in Aberdeen.

From 1753 to 1765, he carried on his researches in Natural History without aid, except from such books as then existed.\* No trace of scientific correspondence has been discovered, until his first letter to Mr Ellis, the well-known writer on corallines, in 1765. From that time to his death he kept up a close correspondence and interchange of specimens with Mr Ellis—discussing particularly, at great length, the whole question of the nature of zoophytes, sponges, and corallines; the correspondence throwing much light on the state of natural science at the time.

In the same year Skene commenced a correspondence with Linnæus; and the original letters of Linnæus were laid on the table, with the scroll-letters of Skene. Skene wrote good Latin, and frankly controverted the opinions of the illustrious Swede on the nature of zoophytes,—maintaining them to be animals,—the constructors of their dwellings, and in opposition to the theory that the dwellings constructed the animals.

During their correspondence, the twelfth edition of the *Systema Naturæ* was in the press, and Skene is repeatedly given as authority by Linnæus. It is evident that he was much pleased with his only Scottish correspondent—"Ubi præter te nullum curiosum novi."

In 1769, Skene began to correspond with Pennant; and a regular correspondence was maintained during the rest of his life. He is frequently quoted in the *Fauna*, prefixed to Lightfoot's *Flora Scotica*.

Several proposals were made to make Skene a professor in Aberdeen, and Glasgow, and Edinburgh, but he showed no great desire

\* The only instructions he had on any branch were during a few weeks' attendance on Dr Alston's Lectures, in the Botanic Garden, Edinburgh.

to quit his established position in his native town, in many respects well suited to his tastes.

One correspondence, which was read, laid open a singular negotiation for the *sale* of an Edinburgh Professorship, the most remarkable feature of which was, that none of the parties concerned seem to have had the slightest idea that they were engaged in a most improper transaction.

Among his school correspondents whose letters have been preserved, are to be found Dr Hope, Dr Reid, whose letters to Skene were printed by Sir William Hamilton in his *Life of Reid*, Mr Walker of Moffat, Lord Kaimes, &c. &c.

Skene was an active member of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, where he read many papers on a great variety of subjects; and he was also a member of a Musical Society. In 1769 he was admitted a member of the Edinburgh Philosophical Society, but did not contribute any papers.

He died in December 1770, at the early age of 38. He left behind him a very considerable quantity of MSS., embracing, in one form or other, most branches of human knowledge; and the catalogue of his library proves him to have been a very accomplished general scholar.

Several volumes of these papers were laid on the table; the most important of which were three volumes of botanical, zoological, and entomological descriptions; and one containing a "Discourse on the Study of Natural History," on which he had bestowed much pains, as several copies have been found among his papers, in various stages of progress.

Few of his papers are dated, so that it is not easy from them to trace his progress; but much of his knowledge must have been acquired before the commencement of his scientific correspondence, which extends only over the last three or four years of his life. His letters show that he possessed one characteristic of a true naturalist, viz., his willingness to communicate to others whatever facts he had ascertained, and whatever specimens he could collect. Though his early death prevented his publishing, it is very clear that he contemplated the preparation of a complete Fauna and Flora of his own neighbourhood, if not of the whole of Scotland; and it is impossible to say how much natural science in Scotland may have been indebted to him, from the impulse he communicated to all with whom he came in contact.

The memoir concluded by stating, that though the subject could not be very interesting to those devoted to the active study of natural science at the present day, it had its value to those who took pleasure in studying the progress of human knowledge.

## 2. On a new Arrow-Poison from China. By Dr Christison.

In a newspaper printed at Shanghae, in the spring of 1857, a wonderful account was given of a poison, which was said to be employed in the interior of China for destroying the largest animals. Instant death was said to be produced, when an animal was struck in the trunk of the body with an arrow poisoned with it. Such was its potency, according to the opinion of the Chinese, that a scheme was said to have been set on foot for destroying the British army during the late war, by bringing down to Canton the natives who were in the practice of using it. But the scheme was frustrated by peace being unfortunately proclaimed too soon.

The poison, and apparently the plant also, are known by the Chinese name of *Wu-Tsau*, or Tiger-poison. The author received very lately from Dr Macgowan, an American physician residing at Shanghae, a specimen of the poison, and of the root of the plant from which it is prepared. The root presents all the characters of an *Aconitum* on a very small scale. This corresponds with the conclusion to be drawn from the characters of a few leaves which were also sent, and which scarcely differ from those of *Aconitum ferox*. A farther proof is, that the root produces in an intense degree the very singular combination of numbness and tingling, which is occasioned by chewing the root of any of the active aconites known in Europe, such as *A. Napellus*, *ferox*, *sinense*, or *uncinatum*. The poison itself, contained in a little porcelain bottle, is obviously a very well prepared extract; and, if not entirely composed of the extract of the wu-tsau root, at all events must contain it largely, for a very minute quantity produces the most intense tingling and numbness of the tongue and lips after it is chewed.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that the wu-tsau poison must be extremely energetic. But the author objected to the admission that either this or any other arrow-poison can produce instant death, as is often stated by travellers. Every poison, however energetic, must be absorbed into the blood before it can act. Even from a