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Synopsis: A review of the intercolonial weather conference of 1880

Summary: Weather telegrams should take precedence over other telegrams and include Tasmania and New Zealand; desirability of observing at same local hour with standardized equipment and trained observers. Observations from mountain sites

WEATHER CONFERENCE IN SYDNEY.

The report of the Intercolonial Meteorological Conference, held in Sydney, which has just been published, is a document of more than ordinary interest and importance. The object of the meeting, which was composed of Dr. Hector of New Zealand, Professor Ellery of Victoria, Mr. Russell of New South Wales, and Mr. Todd, CM.G., of this colony, was to consider generally the meteorology of Australia and New Zealand, with a view to united action in its investigation, the desirability of securing the co-operation of the meteorologists of New Zealand and Tasmania in the system of weather telegrams, the using of the same class of instruments at all stations, and making the observations at the same local hour. In addition to these subjects a variety of other matters were discussed. The importance of obtaining accurate weather reports, and the possibility of foretelling in some degree the approach and course of a storm, and thus enabling shipmasters and others to prepare beforehand for its coming, were long ago pointed out in England by the late Admiral Fitzroy. The system of signalling which he established is too well known to need any description, but it may be stated that it is acknowledged to have been the means of saving many valuable lives and much expensive property. The advantage of establishing a similar system along our own dangerous shores and those not less dangerous of the other colonies must be obvious to the meanest capacity. Alike in this and in some of the other colonies the Government astronomers have long been alive to the necessity of some movement of the kind, and weather observations have been for some time interchanged between South Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria. Much of the value of these observations has been lost, and the arrangement of a general code of weather signals has hitherto been impossible from a want of co-operation between the whole of the colonies. This has been especially the case with regard to New Zealand and Tasmania, The conference discussed the subject at length, and unanimously decided that the Governments of the various colonies should be asked to do their best to facilitate the publication and interchange of weather telegrams. In Tasmania the only meteorological observations that are made are not under Government supervision. It is, however, as pointed out by the members of this conference, of the greatest consequence that a first-class observing station should be established on that island, as observations made in Hobart Town would, if telegraphed to the other colonies, indicate the approach of gales frequently thirty hours in advance. An instance in proof of this is afforded by the gale in which the Dandenong was wrecked. That was indicated in Tasmania more than thirty hours before it touched Sydney, and had a proper system of weather messages been in existence there is but little doubt that vessel might have been saved. The co-operation of New Zealand is of still greater moment alike to that colony and Australia. Atmospheric disturbances are frequently indicated in New Zealand many hours before they reach Australia, and the approach of the dangerous cyclones that do so much damage on the New Zealand coast is known in Queensland a considerable time before. The advantage of obtaining a complete meteorological union between the colonies is so obvious, and the saving of life and property which may accrue from is so important, that there can be little doubt the Governments of Tasmania and New Zealand will agree to the suggestions of the conference. Another interesting point discussed by the astronomers was the use as far as possible at each observing station of instruments of the same pattern. Every one knows that thermometers and even barometers made by different manufacturers will give variable results. As, however, excellent instruments, duly tested at Kew Observatory, can now be obtained at a moderate price, there can be no difficulty in supplying all the weather stations throughout the colonies with proper instruments. In fact we believe at present at all the head stations instruments of the kind named are used, and that as far as practicable in this colony the same is the case at the various outlying stations.

It is satisfactory to observe that Mr. Ellery was supported by the conference in his resolution affirming that weather telegrams and forecasts should only be issued from the chief stations, and be under the

supervision of the Government astronomer. If there is to be any general system of publishing weather observations for the public guidance it is absolutely necessary that this should be the case, in order to secure confidence in their accuracy. It is worthy of remark also that too much care cannot be exercised in the appointment of observers at the secondary stations, as carelessness or ignorance on their part may materially affect the decision of the observers at the chief office. Another suggestion urged by the conference will, it is to be hoped, be acted upon by the several Governments. As Mr. Todd and Mr. Ellery pointed out, the value of weather telegrams is frequently diminished by delay in their transmission. This fact has been fully recognised in Europe and America, and such telegrams, alike in England, on the Continent and in the United States, by the direct order of the respective Governments take precedence in transmission of all others.

In Australia the Victorian Government have already taken the initiative in this matter, and it may be hoped that now the suggestion has been made by such high scientific authority the Governments of the other colonies will follow their example. Another resolution of the conference well worthy of consideration is that affirming the desirability of establishing observatories in mountains in each colony. The value of such stations is perhaps more scientific than practical, and the cost of establishing them would be considerable; but in Europe they have been found most useful in observations with respect to the force and direction of the wind, which are more easily made at a great elevation than on the plains. Such were the chief points discussed at this assembly of savants. Of the practical value of some of their suggestions there can be no doubt, and if the conference result in the establishment of a regular system of weather telegraphic communication between the various colonies, and the final introduction of the Fitzroy or some other efficient system of signalling, which appears likely to be the case, a great boon will have been conferred upon these provinces.