Sir Daniel Wilson's Ethnographic Studies

The Lost Atlantis, and Other Ethnographic Studies. By Sir Daniel Wilson. 8s. Edinburgh: David Douglas. New York: Macmillan & Co.

THE ADMIRABLE work with which the late distinguished President of Toronto University may be said to have crowned the labors of a long and useful life owes its origin mainly to his desire to fulfil his engagement made with the Marquis of Lorne, when the latter, in 1882, as Governor-General, called on the leaders in science and literature of his "Dominion" to aid him in founding the "Royal Society of Canada." The duty was one which exactly suited Prof. Wilson's talents and tastes. It afforded a medium not only for promoting scientific studies in Canada, but also for diffusing their results widely through the world, by the numerous exchanges of the volumes of the Society's transactions with those of kindred associations in all civilized countries. Next to his University, the Royal Society from that time occupied his thoughts. He became at once a central and important figure in its direction, though, with his usual modesty, he yielded the foremost place to others, until, in 1885, he consented to accept the office of President. He was assiduous in attendance and energetic in devising methods of extending the usefulness of the Society, which, by means of a well-devised system of connections, has now come to exercise a marked influence over all the local scientific and literary associations of Canada, greatly to their common benefit. To almost every annual meeting Dr. Wilson brought an important paper, in which he had summed up the results of his personal investigations and extensive reading in some special branch of those sciences to which he was particularly devoted. The value of these papers was much enhanced by the clear and happy style in which the facts and reasonings they embodied were set forth. Their interest was found to be so great that the author was strongly urged to bring them together in the volume which, as his daughter, Miss Sybil Wilson, tells us, in her brief but most interesting and affecting preface, occupied almost his latest thoughts.

The most striking characteristic of the essays which make up this volume is what may be styled their judicial quality. They are the productions of a clear-sighted and conscientious instructor, who had been accustomed for many years to lay before classes of intelligent students the latest results of historical and scientific research, with no other object than that of making the nearest possible approach to the absolute truth. He had no pet theories to maintain, no controversial temper or ambition of intellectual display to lead him aside from the direct track. He is careful to give all the facts on both sides of the question; and if the result is occasionally to leave his readers in some uncertainty, it is because the

case is one in which certainty has not thus far been found attainable. This is the case more particularly with the treatises which relate to the origin of the primitive American population, to the extent of the discoveries of the Northmen, and to questions of heredity and the effects of brain weight and size. All these are matters which are still in litigation, so to speak, in the courts of science. The author lays all the evidence carefully before his readers, and, while frankly indicating the bent of his own opinions, refrains from pronouncing a decided judgment.

Only six papers occupy the whole volume of four hundred pages, but each of them is a complete monograph on the special subject to which it relates, and every subject has its peculiar interest and value to students of history and of the science of man. "The Lost Atlantis" treats of the famous Platonic legend, and shows clearly, by the accumulated testimony of the best authorities, that no such mid-oceanic island can have existed since man appeared on the globe, and that nothing warrants the presumption which would make the story grow out of a former knowledge of the existence of the American Continent. "The Vinland of the Northmen" traces carefully the voyages of Leif Ericson and his companions and successors, with no ultra-skeptical objections, but with a cautious avoidance of the exaggerated claims by which the real discoveries have been overlaid and obscured. The papers on "Trade and Commerce in the Stone Age," "Pre-Aryan American Man," "The Æsthetic Faculty in Aboriginal Races," and "The Huron-Iroquois, a Typical Race," are treatises on a series of interesting topics, so mutually connected as to cast a bright illumination, like a group of electric lights, on the condition of prehistoric peoples, especially those of this continent. The two concluding papers, on "Hybridity and Heredity," and "Relative Brain-Weight and Size," take a wider scope, embracing races and individuals of all countries and times, and dealing with some of the most perplexing questions of modern philosophy and politics. What is the effect of a mixture of races on the character of a population? How far can hereditary traits be modified by the influences of culture and environment? What is the real significance of the differences in the size and weight of brains in different individuals and races? These and other inquiries of a similar cast are discussed with the author's usual keen and impartial discrimination, and are, if not completely answered, at least placed in new and unexpected lights by an accumulation of authentic evidence. Who, for example, would have supposed that the average "brain-weight" of Cuvier, Byron and Schiller exceeded that of Napoleon I., Daniel Webster and Agassiz by more than ten ounces, or that the two most philosophical, politic and dominant of conquering castes, the Aryan Hindoos and the Inca Peruvians, possessed the smallest brains among all the races of the globe? Such are some of the curious facts with which Sir Daniel Wilson brings to a pause the advocates of some popular theories, and compels them at least to follow his invariable example, and "look at the other side."

Next to this conscientious impartiality, the most marked and attractive trait of the volume is the generous and genial treatment of the writers to whom the author refers, in the way either of approval or of objection. In giving credit to those whom he quotes as authorities he is liberal without stint. In criticising he is always courteous and kindly, indicating his disapproval rather by the turn of a phrase than by any direct opposition. Only occasionally his sense of humor finds a pointed but still good-natured expression—as when in referring to such fanciful speculators on the lost Atlantis as Mr. Ignatius Donnelly and some others, he quietly remarks that "it is an easy as well as a pleasant pastime to evolve either a camel or a continent out of the depths of one's own consciousness."

The publisher's care has equipped the work with a copious index, which in its extent affords ample evidence of the number and variety of the subjects treated and the facts and authorities adduced.