

Anniversaries of Science

February 10, 1913.—A report was published that Capt. R. F. Scott had reached the South Pole, but on the return journey he and four members of his party perished.

When we read of the deaths of such men as Captain Scott, the explorer, and his companions, we are profoundly moved but we rarely stop to analyze our emotions. If we did so, we should discover that they were those of acute happiness and entirely removed from pity. We should not even wish these men alive again—as little as we should wish to destroy a work of art which they, as supreme artists, had been able to complete with that final gesture. But we refuse to acknowledge that war is the average man's unique opportunity to follow their example.

—I. A. R. Wylie: *Gentlemen Prefer Wars* in *Harper's Magazine*, January, 1927.

February 11, 1847.—Thomas A. Edison was born at Milan, Ohio.

Edison came of plain people who were of the pioneer stock that built up the Middle West. At the age of eleven he was experimenting with chemicals in the cellar of his father's house. From many sources he had gathered together 200 large bottles, which he marked "Poison" to keep intruders from meddling with them. Then he filled them with mixtures and solutions of his own making, obtaining the materials from the village drug-store. At the age of fifteen he was the possessor of important books on chemistry and physics, and the owner of an apparatus for his experiments. So great a drain on his scant allowance were his experiments, that he persuaded his parents to permit him to become a train news-boy. By this time the Edisons had moved to Port Huron, and the young inventor made the daily run from that town to Detroit, a distance of sixty-three miles, by the Grand Trunk Railroad. He carried his experimental apparatus with him, for in the baggage-car he had a small laboratory and also a printing-press.

From train-boy he graduated into a telegraph-operator, and thus came in touch with the powerful force of which he was to become a master. By 1877, he was well established in a laboratory at Menlo Park, near Elizabethport, New Jersey, with sufficient capital to engage assistants and to work out one of the ambitions of his life, the subdivision of the electric current.

Arc-lights were clearly too big and dazzling for the home. What was wanted was a little lamp to which a comparatively small amount of current from a main conductor could be fed, just as small gas-pipes tap large gas-mains for home gas-lighting. Contemporary scientists were quite sure that this could not be done, and they were very solemn and profound when they learned of the unusual proposal of Edison. John Tyndall, one of the most eminent physicists of England, smiled when he read of the great task which the former train-boy had set for himself, and in extenuation said that he would rather have Edison attack the problem than himself.

—M. Luckiesh: *From Rushlight to Incandescent Lamp* in *A Popular History of American Invention*.

February 11, 1650.—Death of Rene Descartes, the French philosopher.

To his French followers and English enemies the central notion in Descartes was the primacy of consciousness—his apparently obvious proposition that the mind knows itself more immediately and directly than it can ever know anything else; that it knows the "external world" only through that world's impress upon the mind in sensation and perception; that all philosophy must in consequence (though it should doubt everything else) begin with the individual mind and self, and make its first argument in three words: "I think, therefore I am" (*Cogito, ergo sum*). Perhaps there was something of Renaissance individualism in this starting-point; certainly there was in it a whole magician's-hat-full of consequences for later speculation.

—Durant: *The Story of Philosophy*.

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ASTRONOMY Second Comet Found

The second cometary discovery of the year has just been made, like the first, by an amateur astronomer in South Africa, according to Dr. Harlow Shapley, director of the Harvard College Observatory.

The new comet, which is of the eighth magnitude, too faint to be seen except with telescopic aid, was found by William Reid, of Rondebosch, South Africa, on the evening of Wednesday, January 26. It was then in the constellation of the Toucan, a star group near the south pole of the heavens which can never be seen from countries in the northern hemisphere. As astronomers express it, in the celestial equivalent of latitude and longitude, its position at the time of discovery was 22 hours 30 minutes 40 seconds right ascension and 57 degrees 49 seconds south declination. It was moving southwest, so it is doubtful whether it will come into a position that will make it visible to northern observers, but as soon as two more observations of it are made, its exact path can be computed.

The year's first comet was discovered on January 11, by Blathwayt, another South African amateur. Reid and Blathwayt each discovered a comet last year.

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Bushmen, once numerous in Africa, are rapidly becoming extinct.

In ancient times standard weights of high accuracy were made from glass.

Almost 500 varieties of narcissus were imported into this country last autumn.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Geography of Heaven

If a geographer ever tries to include heaven, its population, climate, resources, and occupations in a text book, he will have to describe a country more varied than the United States or any other country on earth, according to the specifications discovered by G. T. Renner, Jr., instructor at Columbia University. He pointed out that nearly every race of men have conceived of an ideal environment for a future life. Each race has pictured this ideal country as having none of the disadvantages of its own surroundings and all of the advantages of its environment at its best.

"The typical forest man," Mr. Renner says, "conceives of heaven as a remote village in a land of inactivity, with no heat or mosquitoes, and plenty of wives and yams. The Eskimo places heaven in the warm earth and hell in the cold sky. The Comanche Indian conceived of heaven as a prairie full of bison; the Todas, as a land of pastures and dairies. Heaven to the Hebrew was a city on a height, walled off from the desert nomad. The Mohammedan pictures heaven as a delightful well watered oasis, and hell as a hot scorching place with hot desert winds to breathe and bitter desert water to drink."

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SEISMOLOGY

To Watch Quakes Closer

A more careful study of earthquake waves that travel along the surface of the earth may permit seismologists to determine more accurately where an earthquake occurs.

Seismic disturbances send out three kinds of waves, says Frank Neumann, of the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, the first two sets of which travel through the inside of the earth and the third along the surface crust. Though the first two in their travel encounter material of various densities, the third set go only through a layer of the earth of approximately the same density throughout. Mr. Neumann suggests that this third set is really several phases, rather than one, and that it might be possible in cases where the second set is doubtful, to locate the earthquake from them.

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The cactus is exclusively American in origin.

Strawberries are grown in every one of the United States.