

THE DISCOVERY OF FINGER-PRINTS.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—Before I say my say on this heading I have a duty to Mr. Galton in response to his late letter in your columns. It is to confirm his words emphatically about myself, that he has done me justice.

When communicating to him in 1888 and subsequently all he desired to hear, I merely stipulated that he would recognize the fact of my having put the finger-print system into full and effective work in three departments of my office in Bengal as early as 1877, after some 20 years' experimenting for this one definite purpose. He did more than keep his promise at all times; for, having made historical investigation, he assigned to me the priority of devising and adopting officially a feasible method of turning the finger-marks to practical use for identification.

But I have somewhat more to say about his work. The correspondence started by Sir George Darwin contained a casual error of time, on which he had concluded that Mr. (now Sir Edward) Henry visited Mr. Galton's laboratory in England before he evolved the system of criminal identification in Bengal, which in fact he did early in 1893, with the vigour characteristic of Government impulse in India, and with a success in devising his own machinery which at once lifted the system into national acceptance. In correcting the mistake Sir Henry Cotton (who was Secretary to the Government of Bengal under Sir Charles Elliott at that time) spoke in general terms of Mr. Henry's work, with an eye only to the chronological error. It is fair, however, after Mr. Galton's letter to say (and my old friend Sir Henry Cotton tells me he would gladly do it himself) that Mr. Galton's book (Finger-Prints, Oct., 1892) was the power which forbade hesitation about starting business, and that it was at once placed in the hands of the officials concerned. They had, no doubt, a certain local advantage on their side; but there exists no question as to what they learnt from Mr. Galton, and when. Without asking either of these gentlemen for permission, I am sure I may say that the correspondence with which they favoured me shows abundantly that when they met at the South Kensington Laboratory they thoroughly understood the position, and esteemed each other's labours heartily.

To turn to my own interests, if I may do so. I fear that, unless I take this opportunity of making my own position clear, future discussions, like some in the past, may continue to darken knowledge about it. I am 76 years of age, and am anxious to propound (at least) what I believe to be the pure truth lest my sluggishness perpetuate error.

After all that has been written, I claim that to myself was first given the idea of finger-prints affording the irresistible proof of identity which it is now notorious that they can be made to yield; also the perception of the simplicity with which their power can be brought to bear on the great bulk of those frauds that corrupt public morality; and so the conviction of their enormous value to the cause of justice and of truthfulness. Further, that I worked it out from 1858 to 1879, directly in order to satisfy a crying need, amid the depressing difficulties of a Government official in India.

With all possible respect for several other persons, I sincerely believe that no such thoughts had occurred to any one else before 1877.

I desire next to disclaim having made any attempt to apply it to police purposes. I deliberately set that aside as premature; and so I disclaim what I attribute to Mr. Galton, the perception of the need for classification in that department. I disclaim the establishment of a lifelong persistence of the marks, claiming only to have shown their resistance to change for some 15 years when I left India in 1878. You, Sir, may perhaps be satisfied with the 50 years' endurance which the enclosed two prints exhibit. Nothing like such evidence (in a single case) can be produced elsewhere to-day.

Again, I disclaim priority of publication in the Press; that belongs to Professor Faulds, of Tokio. But I do claim to have lavishly disseminated the facts in several parts of the Bengal Presidency; to many superiors in the service, and among others to the then Inspectors of Police in the early sixties, and, as I have been reminded, to the Government itself in the later sixties, besides the heads of departments in which I was using it; and, on a wider field, to all the passengers in the steamer Mongolia bound for China in 1877.

If this does not constitute a case for "discovery," I shall not be much distressed about nomenclature.

I end by disclaiming any personal credit for the idea; I am only too thankful that it took such firm root where it was first implanted.

Yours faithfully,

Walsall, Beds.

W. J. HERSCHEL.