

THE

METRIC SYSTEM

OF

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

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AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE CONVOCATION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK,
AT ALBANY, AUGUST 1, 1871

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PREFACE

On the eighth day of August, 1866, the Convocation of the University of the State of New York, being then in session at Albany, was addressed by the Hon. John A. Kasson, a member of the House of Representatives of the Congress of the United States from Iowa, and Chairman of a Committee of that body appointed to consider the possibility of securing a uniform system of Coinage, Weights and Measures for all nations. Congress had then recently (July 27th, 1866), passed an act legalizing the use of the metrological system known as "The Metric System of Weights and Measures," in all business transactions in the United States; and, two years earlier, a similar act had passed the British Parliament. It was known that the system had met with large acceptance on the continent of Europe, and also in the greater portion of the American continent south of our own territory; and it was also known that the use of this system was becoming more extended every year.

The aim and hope of Mr. Kasson had been that he might enlist the large body of enlightened educators forming the University Convocation, in an active effort to advance the cause of metrological reform in our country, by diffusing among the people information in regard to the Metric System; by pointing out the merits of this system; and by meeting the objections with which the proposition to naturalize it here, like every other threatened innovation upon established usages, however in its own nature desirable or prospectively beneficent, is sure to be encountered. And the appearances at the time were certainly favorable to the fulfillment of this hope; for the address of the honorable gentleman was received with evident marks of approval.

A committee was accordingly appointed, charged with the duty of reporting on the subject to the Convocation at a future meeting. This committee consisted of the Hon John. V. L. Pruyn, LL.D. (Chancellor of the University), Charles Davies, LL.D., Professor Emeritus of the Higher Mathematics in Columbia College, and Robert S. Hale, LL.D., one of the Regents of the University. Prof. Davies, who was charged with the preparation of the report, states that it originally "seemed to be the unanimous opinion of the committee that a report would be made favorable to the introduction of the [metric] system into general use;" but that reflection and inquiry led to a modification of views, especially on his own part; and that the conclusion was reached that the Convocation should not "commit itself hastily to the great and radical changes which the introduction of the metric system would occasion." It was not, therefore, until after three years of deliberation, that the committee presented their report; and the report then made, which is said to have been partial, was apparently oral.

This committee — was thereupon discharged, and a new one appointed, consisting of Prof. Davies, Regent Hale, and Prof. James B., LL.D. It is stated in the preface to the final report, that Prof. Thomson did not act with the committee. The report of this reconstructed committee was presented to the Convocation at the session of August 1870. It consisted mainly in an argument to demonstrate the inexpedience and impracticability of introducing the Metric System of Weights and Measures into the United States. By order of the Convocation this report was published and extensively circulated.

The Trustees and Faculty of the College with which the chairman of the Committee held formerly an official, and holds still an honorary, connection, have for some years been upon the record as advocates of legislation by the Congress of the United States, favorable to the unification of the Moneys, Weights and Measures of the world. In their view, the object desired, so far as it regards Weights and Measures, is most likely to be secured through the universal acceptance of a metrological system which is already generally received; and that is the Metric System. To them it appeared that the publication of a report prepared by a gentleman in nominal connection with them, maintaining an opposite opinion, was likely to produce an erroneous impression in the public mind in regard to their own position. At a meeting therefore of the Trustees, held on the first day of May, 1871, a resolution was adopted, on motion of the Hon. Samuel Blatchford, LL.D., Judge of the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, requesting the President of the College to attend the meeting of the Convocation to be held in the August next ensuing, and to state to that body how far the

views set forth in the report of the committee above referred to are in harmony with those entertained by the Faculty of the College.

It was in obedience to this resolution that the address contained in the following pages was prepared. The address was listened to with evidently interested attention by the Convocation; and, by the courtesy of the Regents of the University, it was immediately published, in advance of the report of the Proceedings of the Convocation, in pamphlet form. Some copies of this publication having been laid before the Trustees of Columbia College at a meeting held on the second day of October, 1871, it was, on motion of Judge Blatchford, resolved, that a revised edition of one thousand copies be printed for general circulation. In the present edition, issued in conformity with this order, some slight modifications have been made in the original text; and some additional information presumably of interest has been appended in the form of notes.