

*Copy of a letter addressed to Prof. George Gabriel Stokes, M.A., D.C.L., LL.D, &c.  
President of the Royal Society.*

MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL,

Feb. 17th, 1887.

DEAR PROF. STOKES,

Referring to your recent presidential address, and to that of last year by Prof. Huxley, and to the proposed action of the Council of the Royal Society on the subject of a scientific federation of the empire under the auspices of that Society, I beg leave respectfully to invite your attention and that of the Council to the aspect of the matter with reference to Geological Science, which in some important respects will lend itself to such union more readily than most other departments of scientific work. I had the honour to refer to this subject in my presidential address at the meeting of the British Association in September last, and also in a paper previously read before the Geological section of the Royal Society of Canada, and trust therefore that you will not consider it out of place on my part to address this communication to you.

It is, I think, evident from the report of the last meeting of the International Congress of Geologists, that great, if not insuperable, difficulties lie in the way of any general agreement as to geological classification, nomenclature and mapping. These difficulties, however, depend so largely on difference of language and of habits of thought, that they would not affect a union for scientific purposes on the part of the geologists of the British Empire, and ultimately of all English-speaking countries. It therefore appears that such a more limited union might with advantage be undertaken in the first instance, and with the view not of obstructing but of aiding the wider movement.

The British Empire also possesses exceptional facilities for taking the lead of other nations in so far as Geology and Physical Geography are concerned. The British Islands, as is well known, are remarkable for the great variety of their formations and the excellence of their exposures, and much of the present classification and methods of representation in Geology has originated in Great Britain, and has been adopted with slight variation in all English-speaking countries, and to a considerable extent in other countries as well. In Canada we have the larger half of North America, and much of this very satisfactorily explored. We have also the advantages of the best exposures of the older crystalline rocks, of a development of the Palæozoic series in the Eastern Provinces, more closely allied to that of Europe than to that of the interior American plateau, and of Pleistocene deposits so extensive and complete that they must ultimately decide many of those questions of glacial geology which have been so much agitated. In India, Australasia and South Africa, with the western districts of Canada and various smaller dependencies, we hold a controlling influence in the Geology of the great Pacific and Indian ocean areas. Arctic and Antarctic geology and modern oceanic deposits have been worked principally by English observers, and English-speaking geologists have been and are exploring in many countries not under the British flag. More especially the large amount of geological work done in the United States is based on English methods, and is published and discussed in the English language, and the most intimate and friendly relations subsist between the geologists of the United States and those of Great Britain and the colonies.

In these circumstances it would seem that a union of British and English-speaking geologists might overcome the difficulties which appear so formidable as between the different European nations, and might lay a broad foundation of geological fact, classification, nomenclature and representation which would ultimately be adopted by other countries as far as local diversities and differences of language might permit. Such a geological union would naturally be accompanied or followed by similar co-operation in other departments of investigation in natural science.

It seems probable that the Geological Survey of Great Britain and the Geological Surveys of the Colonies and of India, with the British Association and the Geological Societies and Geological sections of societies in all parts of the empire, would be willing to co-operate in such a movement under the auspices of the Royal Society, and that the Council might usefully invite communications on the subject from public departments and societies, beginning with those of the mother country and its colonies and dependencies, but looking ultimately to union with those of the United States also.

In the meantime, I propose to mention the subject to the Council of the British Association, to the English and American committees of the International Congress of Geologists, and to the Council of the Royal Society of Canada, and shall be glad to have your permission to regard this communication as an open letter to be used in any way likely to promote the object in view.

I have the honour to be, with all kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) J. WM. DAWSON.