

Australasia's Rising and Falling Continental Neighbour—Lemuria

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Like all fictions, Plato's allegory [of a sunken continent] is based upon certain facts. But Plato would be astonished to learn that some people in later ages insisted on taking his yarn far more literally than he ever intended. L.S. and C.C. de Camp, *Ancient Ruins and Archaeology* (1964), pp.24-25.

The lost continent of Lemuria was, if it existed, more extensive than Atlantis and [has] inspired almost as much fantastic speculation. James Webb, *Man, Myth and Magic* (1971), p.1614.

Lemuria was first suggested in the mid-1800s by scientists trying to account for striking resemblances between the rocks and fossils of Central India and South Africa and for the spread of certain fauna and flora between these continents. E. van Zandt and R. Stemman, *Mysteries of the Lost Lands* (1975), p.196.

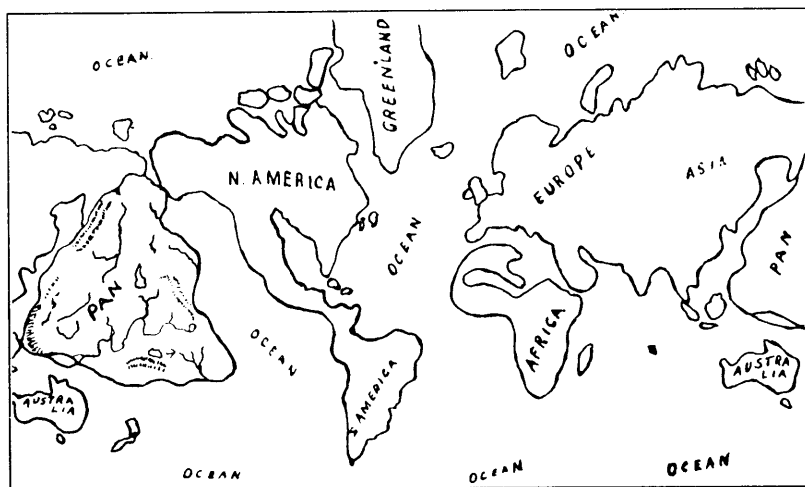
The genesis of the idea

The concept of a drowned continent in the ocean depths of the Southern Hemisphere comes from the Indian Ocean and also from the central southern Pacific, both of which regions are held to have had sunken lands which were deemed to be parts of the whole land mass, best known later as Lemuria. The myth is part navigational, part pseudo-religious and nowadays being slowly forgotten, despite occasional reappearances. The more eastern concepts, being those first advanced, may be treated first in a chronological order of publication:

(A) Easter Island, its statues and their meaning—the continent of Mu

On the evening of Easter Sunday, 1722, the Dutch Admiral Jaakob Roggeveen and his men reached a tiny island in the South Pacific, where, the following morning, they beheld people apparently worshipping before colossal statues, all being huge elongated heads of varying heights¹, and some 600 in number. This expedition was one following on a voyage of 1687, by John Dans in *The Batchelor's Delight*, which had reported a land-mass in lat. 27° 30' south, 'about 14 or 15 leagues in a range', a discovery written up by crew-member Wafer in his *Description of the Isthmus of Darien* (1688). Roggeveen could not find Dans' Land, any more than could the 1770 Spanish expedition led by Felipe Gonzalez, or Beechy who also visited the island in 1825. All believed that Dans' Land, an island or archipelago of considerable extent, had foundered² in this area of the Pacific at some time between 1687 and 1722.

The Easter Island itself, dominated by three extinct volcanoes, is 13 miles long and 7 miles across, and has roads, temples, and ancient tablets, the *rongorongo* boards, inscribed with what appears to be picture writing. Early explorers found that the people there could not read the boards which were later linked



J.B. Newbrough's Map of Pan, the Northern Pacific submerged continent.

with ancient America by the French Abbe, Charles-Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, who later put them beside the Mayan alphabet of Yucatan. Texts in the last script he held do tell of a volcanic eruption and of a land that sank beneath the waves. Two of the letters M and U gave him the name Mu for the submerged land.³ These investigations of Brasseur's were followed by those of Auguste Le Plongeon (1826-1908), physician and archaeologist, who created fanciful translations of the *Troana Codex*, linking Mu with Atlantis and making Egyptian civilization a product of the latter. (His *Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx* [1896] is still in print.) According to him, volcanic convulsions caused the ten countries of Mu to sink with their 64,000,000 inhabitants some '8060 years before the writing of this book'.

(B) The Northern Pacific's Lost continent of Pan

In 1882 there appeared *Oahspe: A Kosmon Bible in the Words of Jehovah and His Angel Ambassadors*, a work of automatic writing, 'angel inspired', from Dr John Ballou Newbrough. It was concerned with a sunken triangular land, Pan, in the North Pacific which had sunk 24,000 years earlier, but which would surface again soon.

(C) MacMillan Brown, from New Zealand

This polymath from Christchurch⁴, New Zealand, turned to the problem of Easter Island, drawing upon his knowledge of geology, anthropology and archaeology, to speculate on the pre-history of the South Pacific. His *The Riddle of the Pacific* (1906), which has been described as both 'simple' and 'excessively imaginative' argues, *inter alia*, that:

there had once been a continent or densely populated archipelago of white men in the South Pacific;

by the end of the Secondary Period it was in process of foundering;

the Polynesian cosmology is conscious of such a former great area of land;

Darwin's theory that reefs were built on submerged or sinking land⁵ is valid;

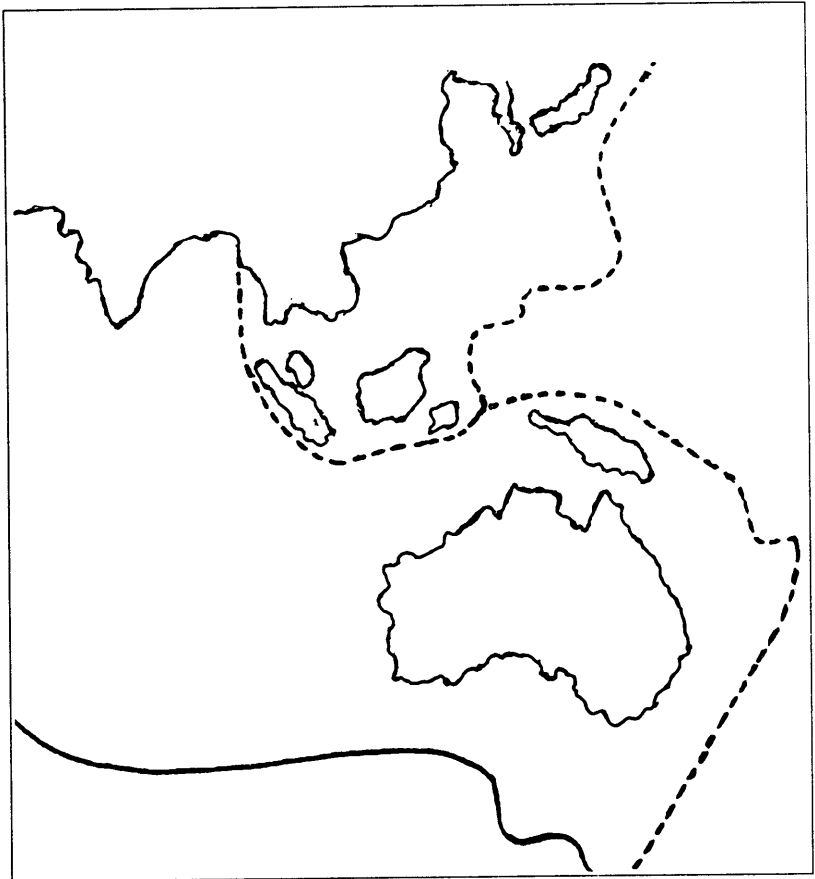
some islands, like the phosphate agglomerates of Makalea, Ocean Island or Nauru, have both risen and fallen several times;

once Easter Island had served as a collective burial ground⁶ for its region;

the original inhabitants of New Zealand, the Moriori, had built stone terraces and vast drainage systems quite unlike subsequent simple Maori structures;

etc. etc.

In short, his dynamic work raised many issues which are still in need of solution, such as Polynesian influences⁷ on Peruvian monuments.



Ocean Ridges of the Pacific. New Zealand is 'subsumed' in the dotted line.

(D) Colonel James Churchward on Mu

In 1926 this then elderly American issued his first book on Mu, *The Lost Continent of Mu*, a work based on reflections over various Asian tablets and Mexican stone figurines, some of which were deemed to be at least 12,000 years old. He claimed that the tablets contained extracts from the Sacred Inspired Writings of Mu. Some of his more intriguing words are:

The Garden of Eden was not in Asia but on a now sunken continent, Mu, in the Pacific Ocean;

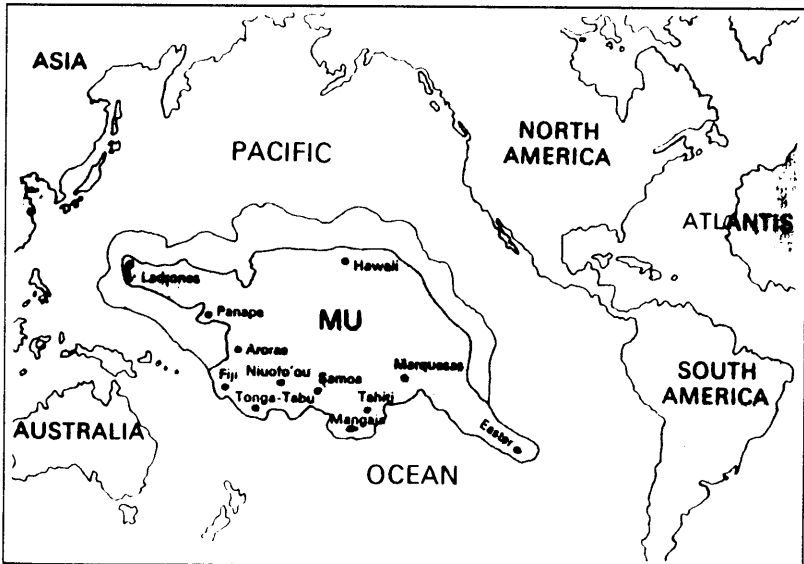
its 64,000,000 inhabitants⁸ had created, some 50,000 years ago, a civilization much like ours;

his continent in the central Pacific, sank into the sea some 12,000 years ago, leaving only various Polynesian islands visible on the surface (see sketch);

there were ten tribes, the dominant of which had white skin while others were yellow, brown, or black;

and

some 50,000,000 square miles of water poured over the continent, drowning the inhabitants.



Churchward's Map of Mu

Now while questions were soon asked of Churchward as to the exact location of the source tablets and how he deciphered them so quickly, they were, he maintained, revealed as to their sense by his concentration over their meaning which would then come to his consciousness. While many of the concepts may be shown to come from Le Plongeon, one can but quote a sympathetic early appraisal of his work—

With the best will in the world, one cannot find in Colonel Churchward's pages a scheme of such judicious demonstration as the nature of his subject demands. Lewis Spence, *The Problem of Lemuria, the Sunken Continent of the Pacific* (1932), p.92.

Others since have regarded it as but pleasant fantasy, yet with great potential attractiveness for popular speculation as to the movements of the floor of the Pacific Ocean.

The central and western Pacific theories

As was indicated in the second initial quotation, Lemuria was first postulated as a means of accounting for the location and spread of certain flora and fauna in various countries then separated by vast zones of sea. One such animal was the lemur, a small mammal of monkey-like appearance with scattered areas of domicile.

These zones were linked, relatively easily, by the English Zoologist, Philip L. Sclater, who gave the name Lemuria to a former land bridge across the Indian Ocean.

His contemporary, geologist H.F. Blandford, in his 1875 essay, 'The plant-bearing series of India and the former existence of an Indo-Oceanic Continent', included these observations:

'With the decrease of Permian cold, the flora and reptilian fauna of those times were diffused to Africa, India, and ... Australia; or the flora may have existed in Australia somewhat earlier, and have been diffused thence';

and

'India, South Africa and Australia were connected by an Indo-Oceanic Continent in the Permian epoch'.



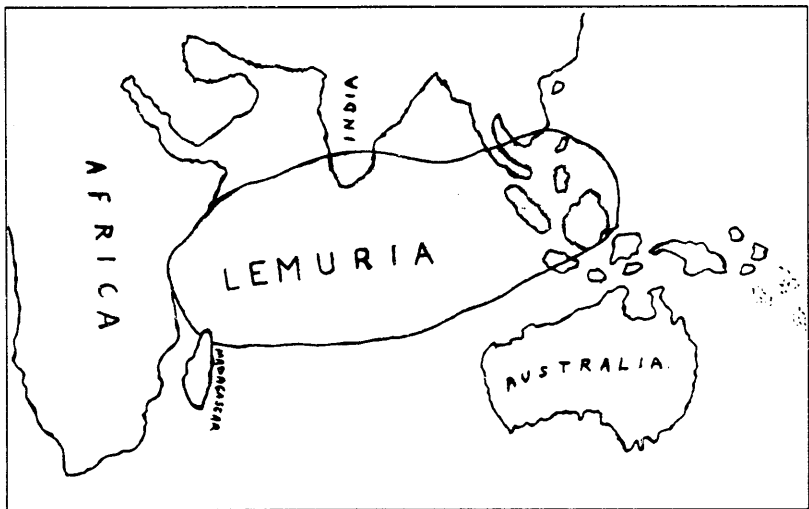
Lemur Catta Linn

The contribution of Ponape and Nan Matol in the Carolines

At another 'boundary' of Lemuria, there occur cyclopean ruins, namely those at Ponape in the Caroline Islands, lying between the Equator and the eleventh north parallel. Around the 164 square miles of this island there extend a complex of coral reefs and islets, on which stand a variety of huge, dark, strange buildings of deep blue stone, the ruins of Nan Matol. The first white men to see

Ponape were under Fernandez de Quiros, who sighted the island on 23 December 1595. He had sailed under his by-then-dead captain, de Mendana, from Peru in four ships to hunt for *Terra Australis*, the unknown Southland⁹, which in his day was thought to fill most of the Southern Hemisphere. The desperate attempt of the surviving ship, under de Quiros, to reach safety, resulted in this landfall. The next recorded visitant there is James O'Connell, the survivor of an 1826 shipwreck.

O'Connell's account¹⁰ of Ponape is presented as a careful and detailed description of the ruins which he styled the 'Venice of the Pacific'. Others to visit included: the Russian Lütke in 1828; various whalers; Royal Naval crews; and American and Spanish missionaries. Late in the century natives were kidnapped from there to work on Australian plantations. Meanwhile the Theosophists and other occultists argued Nan Matol to be a relic of Lemuria, surviving the inundation by reason of its height.



Slater's Sketch

The occultist use of Lemuria

While geologists and zoologists had developed various theories of the sunken Pacific continent, evolutionists went further. Alfred Russell Wallace, an English naturalist, had outlined his views of land-bridges and of geologically similar ridges in various parts of the Pacific in his *The Geographical Distribution of Animals*, while

the German evolutionist, Ernst Haeckel, had written on the various species of men from Lemuria, proposing that the evidence of man's descent from the apes was on Lemuria, but that this fossil material had necessarily disappeared with its submergence.

These scientific writers and speculators gave an impetus to the Russian Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of the arcane theories known as 'Theosophy'. In 1888 she published the vast text, *The Secret Doctrine*, asserted to be based on messages transmitted by ethereal beings from the ancient *Book of Dzyan*, and concerned with both Atlantis and Lemuria. On the head of the emergence of life on earth, she declared that we present mortals were the 'Fifth Root Race'. The Third Root Race were the Lemurians¹¹, whose land stretched from the Indian Ocean to Australia, and she allowed that Wallace:

'extends the Australia of the Tertiary Period to New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and perhaps to Fiji'?

She also declared that the South Sea Islands were all that remained of that once-immense continent. The race inhabiting it had been bi-sexual, Lemurian man having an astral body only. She also quotes Haeckel as saying that the Australians (i.e. Aborigines) are direct descendants of the Lemurians as are the Papuans and Hottentots. Elsewhere she stated that Tasmanians, Australians, Andaman Islanders and others were 'races of remote Lemurian origin'. The original proto-Lemurians were large, ape-like creatures of little brain, some having four arms, some an eye in the back of the head. Their homeland occupied practically the whole Southern Hemisphere.

This hodge-podge of earlier writers and garbled Sanskrit texts¹² led, after H.P.B.'s death, to William Scott-Elliott's *The Story of Atlantis and The Lost Lemuria* (1896), a most readable text, chatting about

twelve-foot, skin-clad Lemurians leading pet pleisosaurs on leashes [and] the adepts from Venus who guided the evolution of these sub-men into the wholly human Atlanteans. L.S. and C.C. de Camp, *Ancient Ruins, and Archaeology* (1965), p.231.

Scott-Elliott also published a set of six maps of Lemuria, referring to periods from about 60 million years ago. Amidst his

innumerable speculations is one concerning the creation of the banana in these southern climes.

This encyclopaedic interpretation of the lost continents was succeeded by Rudolf Steiner's *Cosmic Memory: Atlantis and Lemuria* (1923), a work deriving much of its content directly from Blavatsky, rather than from the mystical sources alleged. His Lemurians possessed considerable memories and controlled a life-force which could even propel aircraft. Similarly they could lift enormous weights by will-power alone. Lemurian man was also permitted to enjoy intercourse with those beings who 'are ever building this world'. Man at this time was also bi-sexual.

Later (1930-) writers on Lemuria

In a very real sense the spate of writings, re-writings and pseudo-revelations has not ceased since Steiner. Other 'standard' accounts include:

Wishar S. Cervé, *Lemuria, the Lost Continent of the Pacific*, 1931;

Paul Hambruch, *Ponape*, 3 vols. 1932-3;

Lewis Spence, *The Problem of Lemuria*, 1932;

L. Sprague de Camp, *Lost Continents, (The Atlantis Theme in History, Science and Literature)*, 1954;

Thomas Barthel, 'The Talking Boards of Easter Island', *Scientific American*, June 1958, pp.61-68;

Robert C. Suggs, *The Island Civilizations of Polynesia*, 1960;

John H. Brandt, 'Nan Matol: Ancient Venice of Micronesia', *Archaeology*, XV, 2 June 1962, pp.97-107;

M.S. Pierce, *Understanding the Lost Continents*, 1969.

etc. etc.

Continental drift theories have been related to this 'traditional' knowledge in more popular journals since the 1950s.

The meaning of the legends

The Southern seas have no Plato-derived ancient myth on which to build. Despite the various speculations of Pacific navigators over the previous two and a half centuries or so, the Lemurian

legend has assumed formidable proportions, created many variants and given rise to a complex 'religious' or at least occult world-picture all in the space of 140 years or so. While many of the versions speculate about Australian survivals of Lemurians, New Zealand bulks larger in the tale—because of its sharp mountains, continuing volcanic activity, alleged Moriori archaeological remains and the influential time of the ingenious composite theories of MacMillan Brown.

The 1968 *Encyclopedia Britannica* is dismissive of the legends of the 'mythical continent', observing somewhat tartly:

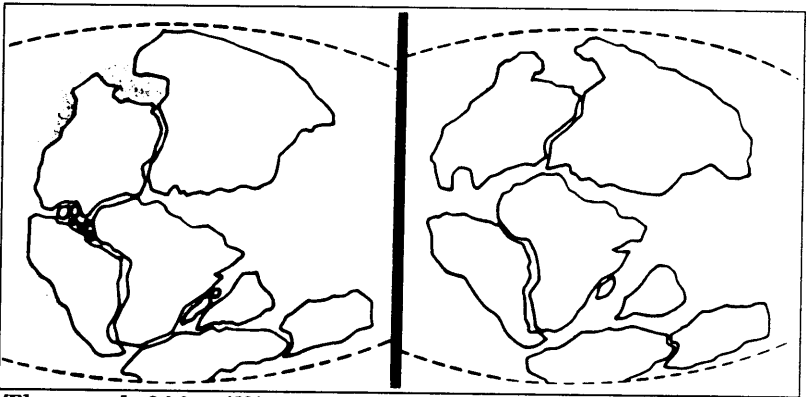
Polynesian legends, language, domestic plants and a host of other material...point to very early and long-continued voyaging across the Pacific. (Vol.13, p.936c)

Such a categorical statement makes no mention of continental drift theories, tectonics, or the vast geological literature summed up in the name, Gondwanaland, and concerned with the existence of fossils of similar fauna and flora on continents thousands of miles apart. Regrettably, however, the relative vast depths of several of the ocean areas postulated for old Lemuria might seem to rule out that theory for scientists, if not for writers of fantasy.

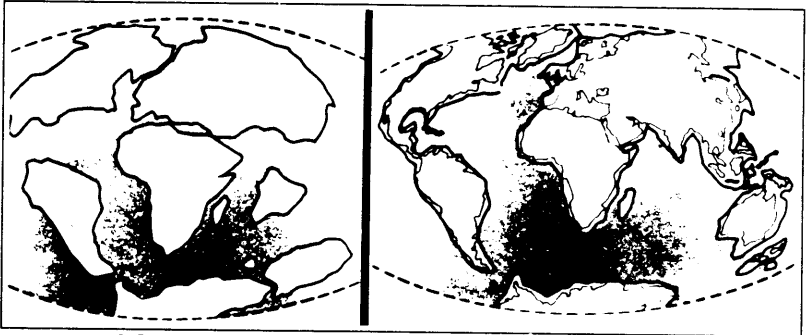
The core of the legends, however much they may seem to have been fabricated since the time of Darwin, would appear to have come from popular recollections of ancient maps of the world showing the great *Terra Australis Incognita*. When this proved to be non-existent, a substitute land-mass was found below the waves. Yet others would argue that Lemuria was (re-?) remembered because of a collective human memory of the place or region where humanity evolved and a modern secular desire for the freedom from having to locate it in Biblical lands.

And the Australian Aborigine?

In the above account only minimal reference has been made to the Aborigine, yet the recent history of Australian archaeology has, perhaps, served to underscore his vast period of domicile on this land mass. While that time is considerable, no one would put that beginning back at the (geological) time when the earth's crust was far from stable, as is necessary for Lemurian inundation and subsequent evacuation to safer ground.



The earth 200 million years ago and 165 million years ago



The earth 65 million years ago and today

A Tentative Conclusion

The most complete accounts of the alleged events—those of Churchward, Le Plongeon and Madame Blavatsky—have a basis in wild guess work and/or occult revelation, areas of thought and speculation which cannot be accepted seriously. But scientists have been both more cautious and more plausible. Thus the great evolutionist, Thomas Huxley, admitted his belief in the existence of a Miocene continent in the Indian Ocean, while Alfred Russell Wallace thought the Lemuria of Sclater to be ‘undoubtedly a legitimate and highly probable supposition’. Haeckel’s notion of the continent as the likely cradle of the human race was an example of speculation in anthropology much as has occurred many times since. The Theosophical Society’s incorporation of such opinion in esoteric occultism is more than dubious and highly fictional, even if it has considerable myth-making potential.

While Australia does not feature as prominently in these fabrications as do Easter Island and Ponape, this is not to deny that its pre-history *might* have been influenced by various volcanic cataclysms elsewhere in the Pacific basin, or by the more distant projected examples of continental drift in the Southern Hemisphere. What is more promising is the perhaps fortuitous parallel to Aboriginal race-memory of flood, of land-bridges and of a possible Dreamtime concomitant with the emergence of human life on this planet.

NOTES

1. One, 33 feet high, weighs c.80 tons.
2. Compare the (apparent) rise and fall of such southern Pacific outcrops as Middleton or Minerva Reefs.
3. Thus Mu and Lemuria are not synonymous, those using the former term being concerned with the south east Pacific and ancient links with the Americas, etc.
4. Where he held several chairs at once at Canterbury University College. He was familiar with the theories of such regional geologists as von Haast, Ulrich, etc. Brown's grandson was the poet, James K. Baxter.
5. As the coral insect cannot build lower than 150 feet under the surface of tropical water, limestone atolls of say, 1000 feet deep, as on Funafuti in the Ellice group, indicate continuing subsidence.
6. Various single ideas like this have been taken up by Polynesian scholars in recent decades.
7. Compare the 1950s work of (Sir) Thomas Davis rebutting the then recent theories (1941) and expedition (*Kon-Tiki*, of 1947) of Thor Heyerdahl. Davis sailed from Polynesia to South America, using a traditional craft.
8. The same figure as given by Le Plongeon (*V. Supra*).
9. Whether from a cartographic need for 'balance' or a persistent legend of such a continent, it is shown on numerous maps of the Age of Exploration.
10. His experiences there (1826-37) are published in *The Life of James F. O'Connell, the Pacific Adventurer* (1853).

11. She referred to P.L. Sclater; A.R. Wallace; Haeckel; and other theorists about the ancient continents.
12. Used by E. Rice Burroughs in his novels *A Princess of Mars* (1917), etc., treating of Lemurians on that planet.

