

tant from it, and the banks and shoals of the ocean to appear as islands. It is evident, then, that there is no stability in the relative amount or position of land and water ; the present distribution has resulted from a combination of causes that have acted from the beginning ; and it is constantly changing, though so slowly, that the period of a man's life is in many instances too short to produce an effect sufficiently extensive to be detected by an acute observer. But causes do exist calculated to limit the destruction of rocks, and, more especially, to prevent the casual distribution of the masses formed by the process of recomposition. There is, in fact, reason to believe that, how rapidly soever the decomposition may go on, the position of masses in relation to the globe itself cannot greatly change, though the materials may enter into new combinations, or form parts of masses of smaller or larger dimensions.

We may now proceed to examine, with a little more particularity, the features which distinguish the present distribution of land and water. The greater portion of the land is included in two masses of considerable extent, called continents, and these are separated by basins or valleys containing water, called seas. Here and there, smaller and detached portions of land are found, having a greater or less elevation above the level of the water, and these are denominated islands ; and so, also, small bodies of water are in some places surrounded by land, and these are called lakes. Some geographers have considered Australia as a continent, while others have described it as an island ; if magnitude be the distinction between continents and islands, it is difficult to say whether it ought to be considered as belonging to one or the other ; for it may be esteemed, with equal propriety, the smallest of the continents or the largest of the islands. On account of its evident connexion with the islands by which it is surrounded, it may, we think, be classed with that group which together form an archipelago.

If the outline of the continents and islands were perfectly even, few other terms of distinction would be necessary in physical geography ; but this is not the case ; for the land is everywhere more or less indented, the indentations being either permanently or occasionally occupied by water. When the ocean extends for a considerable distance into the interior of an island or continent, and has, in proportion to other