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‘Island Life.’

Mr. Alfred Russell Wallace occupies a position in science only a little less conspicuous than that of Mr. Darwin. The publication of the latter’s work on the “Origin of Species,” which created such a stir twenty years ago, was hastened by the conclusions to which Mr. Wallace had been led by independent studies in the Asiatic islands. He is a resolute believer in natural selection, and has added important facts to what evolutionists regard as proofs of their theory. He is a true naturalist, patient and tireless in his researches, a keen observer, an eager and successful collector of information, as well as an able reasoner. His writings are so rich in knowledge that they amply repay perusal, whether his theories are accepted or not; and the theories are presented as so many keys with which the reader may try to unlock the well-guarded secrets of the universe. *Island Life*, Mr. Wallace’s latest work, just published here by the Messrs. Harper, gives the final result of the studies which have extended over most of a life-time. The title gives a very inadequate idea of its contents. He treats of the general subject of the distribution of organic life with great breadth of view and completeness. He holds that islands present many of the most interesting facts in the distribution and affinities of organic forms, and the latter can be more successfully studied there than elsewhere. He thinks the importance of the animal and vegetable life found upon islands, in their connection with the history of the globe, has not yet been fully appreciated. It must be remembered that every part of our continents has probably many times been insulated, through submergence and elevation, by water; and that most of the islands of the globe are portions of continents passing through some of the various changes to which they are subject. An island, therefore, affords a sectional view of the autobiography of the earth, and he studies it to learn what it can teach of the life of the globe. Mr. Wallace favors the reader at the outset with the preliminary dissertations on the methods of the distribution, variation, modification, and dispersal of species and groups. He tells how geological changes have affected islands and continents, and what effects climactic changes have produced. And thus he leads up by easy stages to the main body of the work, a satisfactory account of which it would be difficult to give in any abstract we can make room for. Mr. Wallace is an interesting writer, and very largely because he is master of his subject and in love with it. And though many readers will hesitate to adopt his conclusions, there is nothing in his book to shock the religious feelings or disturb the foundations of Christian faith. He makes the reader feel that, after all, the physical globe is the volume of the works of God, and a volume not yet fully understood. And he shows quite conclusively that science is still in its infancy, and what have been regarded as fixed conclusions are by no means certain. In fact, scientists agree with each other no better than theologians. Many of the facts given in his crowded volume are full of interest. For instance, of the twenty-two land birds found in the Azores, more than half are fruit-eaters, and may have introduced many varieties of fruit into the islands. There is an absence there of all indigenous land amphibia and mammalia; there are no snakes, lizards, frogs, or freshwater fish. Yet the climate and other conditions are favorable to their existence. But birds and insects are abundant, though there are but few butterflies, and those are of the European varieties. But the Bermudas possess no indigenous land mammalia, frogs, or snakes, and insects are rare. There are nineteen species of beetles, eleven of bees and wasps, twenty-six of butterflies and moths, and nine of flies. It is curious that Madagascar, which is close

to Africa, has a totally different type of organic life. Africa is remarkable for monkeys, apes, and baboons, lions and leopards. It has the hyena, the elephant, the zebra, the giraffe, the buffalo, the rhinoceros, and the antelope. But Madagascar has none of these animals, nor any like them. It has thirty-six species of lemurs, a low organized creature of great antiquity. It has peculiar birds, remarkable insects, and a very rich and strange flora. How is such a difference to be accounted for? Mr. Wallace says the animals now found in Africa but not in Madagascar, once existed in Europe, and many of them in North America. But before that period Madagascar had become an island; and when the large mammalia from the northern continent overran Africa, they were prevented from reaching Madagascar by the water; and thus the latter was enabled to develop its singular forms of low type mammalia, its gigantic æpyornis, its isolated birds, and its characteristic flora. The volume is specially attractive on account of its excellent maps and illustrations.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.