WALLACE'S MALAY ARCHIPELAGO.*

Though nominally a book of travel, Mr. Wallace's crowded chapters are arranged with reference to a scientific thesis, viz., that in the East Indian Archipelago there meet, and have only recently begun to mingle, two quite distinct races of men—the Malays and the Papuans—and that these islands are really the fragments of two continental systems, between which it is possible to draw accurately the dividing line. The author's observations, therefore, on the fauna and inhabitants of each island which he visited are directly used as an argument in establishing first its relation to the mainland, and then to its sister islands; the probable order of its dismemberment, through volcanic activity producing subsidence of the adjoining parts; and some of the vicissitudes of elevation it may have undergone in reaching its present state. He attempts, as he says, to bring zoology to the rescue of the geologists, who are thrown off the scent when they come to water; and, by means of "an accurate knowledge of the distribution of birds and insects, to map out lands and continents which disappeared beneath the ocean long before the earliest traditions of the human race." For this purpose, his plan is probably the best that could have been adopted. He disregards chronological sequence, and skips now backwards now forwards in the eight years of his tropical wanderings, but observes a geographical succession, and finishes as he goes along, although he may have visited a given island a number of times. Each of the five groups which he distinguishes has a separate chapter discussing its natural history, and the support it lends to the thesis first-mentioned. The reader, thus escaping the monotony of unbroken narration, readily consents to do at intervals a little necessary thinking, and is more easily persuaded by the argument taken in detail.

This method is different from Prof. Bickmore's, who has chosen the commoner form of the diary, and who had no theory to maintain. We have re-read his work in comparison with Mr. Wallace's, and have been gratified to find them complementary of each other in an eminent degree. For instance, the latter is chiefly a zoologist, the former a geologist and conchologist. Hence the general outline and prominent physical characteristics of each island, as seen on approach to it, are carefully noted by Bickmore; while, with one or two exceptions, Wallace makes no account of his voyages, but begins his descriptions on terra firma. Then, their explorations were not coextensive, and when they coincided the one has much to tell which the other overlooks, and generally they do not seem to have been entertained by the same persons. Thus they often saw nature and society very differently, as was remarkably the case with the island of Bouru, which formed the subject of one of Bickmore's pleasantest chapters—he visiting it in the dry season—and one of Wallace's least agreeable, since he found everything wet and miserable. There is, however, too much of the guide-book in Bickmore, and he may without shame yield in attractiveness of style and in extent of knowledge to his senior. The search after shells, too, competes at a disadvantage with the hunting and taming of orang-utans and the discovery of birds of paradise—two specialties which alone would render the English naturalist's work more interesting; and that Mr. Wallace can tell a story very well merely for the sake of telling it is evident from Chapter XII.—a delightful episode, in which the Rajah of Lombock figures as a census-taker.

It is difficult to choose from the wealth of observations collected by Mr. Wallace such as shall best represent him. As a disciple of Darwin, to whom he dedicates his book, he offers fresh evidence to confirm his views of the origin of species. Sharing the scepticism as to final causes which distinguishes modern science, he writes thus of the durion, which has much to tell which the other overlooks, and generally they do not seem to have been entertained by the same persons. Thus they often saw nature and society very differently, as was remarkably the case with the island of Bouru, which formed the subject of one of Bickmore's pleasantest chapters—he visiting it in the dry season—and one of Wallace's least agreeable, since he found everything wet and miserable. There is, however, too much of the guide-book in Bickmore, and he may without shame yield in attractiveness of style and in extent of knowledge to his senior. The search after shells, too, competes at a disadvantage with the hunting and taming of orang-utans and the discovery of birds of paradise—two specialties which alone would render the English naturalist's work more interesting; and that Mr. Wallace can tell a story very well merely for the sake of telling it is evident from Chapter XII.—a delightful episode, in which the Rajah of Lombock figures as a census-taker.

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"Poets and moralists, judging from our English trees and fruits, have thought that small fruits always grow on lofty trees, so that their fall should be harmless to man, while the large ones trailed on the ground. Two of the largest and heaviest fruits known, however, the Brazil-nut fruit and durian, grow on lofty forest trees, from which they fall as soon as they are ripe, and often wound or kill the native inhabitants. From this we may learn two things: first, not to draw general conclusions from a very partial view of nature; and secondly, that trees and fruits, no less than the varied productions of the animal kingdom, do not appear to be organised with exclusive reference to the use and convenience of man."

In the same spirit, he remarks of the birds of paradise:

"It seems sad that on the one hand such exquisite creatures should live out their lives and exhibit their charms only in these wild inhospitable regions, doomed for ages yet to come to hopeless barbarism; while, on the other hand, such fruits as the durian are perfectly harmless to man, and yet nature had condescendingly bestowed upon them all the grace and beauty of which they are capable."

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Mr. Wallace, however, regrets to have learned that “since leaving the country, this monopoly [of the nutmeg trade] has been partially or wholly discontinued, a proceeding which appears exceedingly injurious and quite unnecessary.” He rather naively remarks, as a reason, that “a small country like Holland cannot afford to keep distant and expensive colonies at a loss”—and he seems actually to suppose that the monopoly might have been abandoned while it still paid, and because of a mistaken sentiment against it! It is notorious that the monopoly had practically ceased to exist, and that the revenues of the Spice Islands had long been falling short of their expenses, owing to competition that could not be overcome, when the Government decided to abolish the monopoly inherited from the East India Company.

While we fail to share our author’s views of a monopoly began in violence and confirmed by despotism, and ending appropriately in bankruptcy, neither can we wholly accept his reasoning in favor of the Dutch cede, however admirable its workings and however adapted to the genius of the Malays. He says that the latter are merely undergoing one of the stages which every civilized people has passed through, though not always under such favorable auspices. Ten years ago, however, the same thing could have been said as truly in defence of slavery, not only the mild sort tolerated in the Archipelago, but the infinitely brutal and cruel slavery (of a less vindictive race) of the Trans-Vaal and Guiana. We think, therefore, that Mr. Wallace would have done better to put aside d priori arguments, in favor of those drawn from experience of the latter days of the Dutch rule—such, for example, as those already referred to, furnished by the astonishing improvements in Java and the Minahassas. These he should have sought in the history of the Dutch Colonies during the past fifty years—the period of such great administrators as Van der Capellen, Van den Bosch, and Ruchhous, who respectively invented the existing official subordination, substituted the cede for direct taxes, and finally abolished the monopoly and established in its stead a commercial company in her East Indian domain. Over the period occupied by the East India Company, it is most convenient to draw a veil, and worse than useless to make it seem respectable by proving England’s Indian history even more despicable and tyrannical. Let the dead past bury its dead, and let us start afresh, with only one datum: The Dutch are here. The superior is in contact, as master, with the inferior. For such a state of things is liberty or a modified despotism, protection or free trade, the wiser and humaner policy? Is political economy the science of mixed, or only of co-ordinate, civilizations? Here the author is upon solid ground, and his conclusions we believe to be in the main correct. We shall not dwell upon this topic,
but shall simply remark that it is worth all the attention which his readers can give it.