



Photo Elliott & Fry.

A. R. Wallace.

MY LIFE: A RECORD OF EVENTS AND OPINIONS.*

Since the days of Pepys scarcely any man has so ingeniously lifted the veil from his inner and outer life and displayed them to the public as Mr. Wallace has done in this book. With most men there is a salutary consciousness that the details of personal history are seldom of sufficient interest to be confided to the general reader. But Mr. Wallace is no ordinary personality. He has been before the curtain for many years in many parts, naturalist, traveller and explorer, philosopher, political and socialist reformer, spiritualist, anti-Christian and anti-vaccinator. He was the independent and contemporaneous formulator, with Darwin, of the hypothesis of the origin of species by natural selection; and his three great works, "The Malay Archipelago," "The Geographical Distribution of Animals," and the "Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection," are standard books of reference.

The personal revelation he has given us in this story of his life is a curious psychological study. His earlier years were spent in genteel poverty, as he was son of a thriftless Micawber-like father, who "passed the last few years of his life in comparative freedom from worry about money matters because these had reached such a pitch that nothing worse was to be expected." His schooling was interrupted and not very profitable, as his family moved from place to place; and his youth from fourteen to twenty-one was chiefly spent in wandering over the South and West of England with his brother, who was by profession a land surveyor. He had a short experience afterwards as watchmaker's assistant, as usher in a small school, and as railway surveyor, before he discovered the occupation for which he was best fitted, that of explorer and collector of natural history specimens. From 1848 to 1862 he was engaged in travel and research of this nature in South America and in the Malay Archipelago. Since his return he has been unremittingly active in literary work, which has not been confined to subjects relating to the record of his work as naturalist, but he has also, with considerable versatility, published essays on popular science and on speculative themes of various sorts.

The parts of this work which deal with his early life, and indeed much of the matter relating to his later literary life, abound in details which Iago would certainly have characterised as chronicles of "small beer," and, doubtless, had he submitted his MS. to any judicious friend, the pruning scissors would probably have been freely used. Most of us have, when boys, made bread seals, and many have seen, or even felt, the inconveniences of a sudden suspension of the supply of tobacco. The four pages of epitaphs and riddles from his father's note-book might also have been omitted without loss, and it would have been in better taste had the account of the unfortunate love story in Ch. XXIV. been left unwritten. Some of the digressions (which are many) are important, as showing the manner in which he formed his opinions; others might have been abridged with advantage.

The chapters which deal with his travels in S. America and the Malay Archipelago are graphic and interesting, as are those that record the events of his lecturing tour in America in 1886-7. The notes show a keen appreciation of the poetry of Nature, a faculty of which there are very few traces in the writings of Darwin; indeed the best parts of the whole work are some of the descriptions of scenery, especially those of Wales and N. America. He has devoted five chapters to the account of his intercourse with the great naturalists of his acquaintance, Darwin, Huxley, Lyell, etc. Mr. Wallace has been very fortunate in his friends, and he has set forth here not only the points of mutual agreement, but also those on which they differed.

It was his misfortune that, owing to his adverse early circumstances, he had not the advantage of a laboratory training in comparative anatomy, which is now considered to be one of the essential parts of the equipment of a field naturalist. This branch of science does not seem to have attracted him, for he tells us that he has never seen a dissection nor has he had ever any inclination to practise the art.

It has been also unfortunate that training in practical

* "My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions." By Alfred Russel Wallace. 2 vols. 25s. net. (Chapman and Hall.)

physiology should have been equally lacking in his education, for although he states that he never had an hour's instruction on the subject, never saw a physiological experiment, and had a profound distaste for all such, yet he is a believer in the ancient phrenology of Gull and Spurzheim, of the truth of which he was "satisfied" on the slender evidence of two very commonplace stock characters given by two itinerant lecturers on the subject, which rendered it "certain that the position of all the mental organs had been very precisely determined."

A mind of the type of Mr. Wallace's often proves an easy prey to the impostor, and in his naïve record of his money matters he tells us how he has suffered from the familiar "confidence tricks" of the Stock Exchange, whereby he lost most of the hardly earned results of his expeditions. His misfortunes in this respect have, however, not impaired his confidence in his own judgment on other matters, such as anti-vaccination and spiritualism, of which subjects he is an aggressive partisan.

Our author is a man of strong opinions on many subjects. Politically he is a Socialist, having been converted to that creed by Bellamy's "Looking Backward." He regards it to be the duty of the British nation "to evacuate Gibraltar, dismantle the fortress and give it over to Spain. Crete and Cyprus should be free to join Greece. Malta in like manner would be given the choice of absolute self-government under the protection of Britain or union with Italy." We should also give "absolute internal self-government to Ireland, with protection from attack by any foreign Power; and the same to the Transvaal and Orange Free State; and this last we should do in sackcloth and ashes, with full acknowledgment of our heinous offences against liberty and our plighted word."

The other reforms he proposes as remedies for the defects in our social system are land nationalisation, abolition of the Limited Liability Act, the getting rid of Government funds, preference shares, etc., the nationalisation of the railways. In this way he would abolish the class who live on the unearned increment of capital, as he would leave no safe investment except agriculture, manufacture, or commerce. The evil of large estates he would remedy by their distribution in freeholds of four or five acres to each labourer. His Socialism is not exactly of the pattern of Marx or Lassale, but is a sort of eclectic synthesis of Owenism, Saint Simonism, and the financial schemes of Schulze-Delitsch.

Mr. Wallace's religious position is that of a believer in a spirit world and a future state. He is repelled from Christianity by the character and inconsistencies of those that profess it, and, as far as can be gathered from his works, he is otherwise still an agnostic.

Although he has reached the patriarchal age of eighty-two, Mr. Wallace is still mentally vigorous. That he may long continue so is the earnest wish of all those who have known him either personally or through his writings.

ALEX. MACALISTER.