

Literature

The Autobiography of Alfred Russel Wallace*

This autobiography naturally reminds one of that of Herbert Spencer, both because the two names are associated on account of their connection with the theory of evolution, and because the two books are remarkably alike in length, style and *naïveté*. It can no longer be said that autobiographies fail to give a true picture of their subjects, on account of the inevitable tendency of a man to put his best foot forward. At least this does not apply to scientists. Both Wallace and Spencer have exposed with astonishing frankness, not the bad side of their characters, because they had no bad side, but the weak side of their greatness. They are portraits "with the wart on," such as Cromwell wanted of himself. If they were not autobiographies, their friends might be as indignant against the authors as Carlyle's friends were against Froude.

An English literary man who had read Spencer's "Autobiography," but never a page of his "Synthetic Philosophy," recently published his opinion that Spencer was not a great man. One might easily be led to a similarly erroneous judgment on Mr. Wallace, for his really good work as a naturalist is contained in his scientific papers and such books as "The Malay Archipelago" and "The Geographical Distribution of Animals," while in the volumes in hand, more space is given to what must be called his hobbies, such as spiritualism, phrenology, anti-vaccination, land nationalization and the anthropocentric theory of the universe. But this is of considerable interest, because it shows how he happened to become enamored of these theories. For example, his interest in psychical research and phrenology was excited by the experiences of his boyhood, when he found that he could mesmerize his playmates, and when a traveling "Professor of Phrenology" examined his head and gave an analysis of his character and

capabilities. Fortunately he gives this complete, and most readers will find that its vague terms apply about as closely to themselves as they do to Mr. Wallace.

An amusing chapter is that devoted to his attempt to prove that the earth is round to the satisfaction of Mr. Hampton, a flat-earth crank, who had offered to give \$2,500 to any one who could show the convexity of a lake. Since, so far as Mr. Wallace could see, this required nothing more than sighting a level across a lake, he accepted the wager. He won the money, but had to pay it back later because the law does not recognize a wager, and, besides, he was involved in two lawsuits and had to bring four prosecutions for libel against Mr. Hampton, who persecuted him with malicious slanders for fifteen years. After this experience Mr. Wallace naturally felt himself justified in ignoring challenges of the anti-Newtonian philosophers. Yet he is very indignant because Romanes, Tyndall and other scientific friends of his took a similar attitude in regard to spiritualism, and refused to investigate his mediums, or, having investigated, came to a different conclusion than himself. It is one of the mysteries of human nature that a man of Mr. Wallace's ability should quote as an instance of a remarkable prediction the words of "Sunshine," the Indian girl who was the "control" of a London medium: "The third chapter of your life, and your book, is to come. It can be expressed as Satisfaction, Retrospection and Work." THE INDEPENDENT was, as he points out, the unconscious agent in fulfilling this prediction by asking him to write what he regards as this prophesied "third chapter," the article on "Man's Place in the Universe," which created such a sensation and was afterward expanded into a book.

It is apparent that Mr. Wallace's championship of so many unpopular causes is really due to his strong sense of justice. When he thinks any subject is being intentionally ignored or unwarrantably neglected by scientific men, he hastens to its rescue with all the warmth of his unselfish nature. The best evi-

* MY LIFE. A Record of Events and Observations. By Alfred Russel Wallace. 2 vols. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$6.00.

dence of his greatness is found, not so much in the fact that he discovered the law of natural selection simultaneously with Darwin, but that he never manifested the slightest jealousy toward one whom a meaner man would have deemed a rival. Altho he differed decidedly from Darwin as to the extent and methods of evolution, he recognized fully the superior thoroughness and completeness of Darwin's work, and gave to his own book the title of "Darwinism." It is unfortunate that this instance of "in honor preferring one another" is so rare as to be conspicuous in the scientific world.

That Mr. Wallace is a stickler for justice is shown by his devoting several pages to telling how the British Museum cheated him out of sixpence in 1867. We all of us know how a petty imposition of this kind rankles in one's heart for years, and this touch of nature, like a hundred others in the book, draws the reader to the author with almost a personal affection. In fact, after reading these two volumes one knows more of his life and character than he does of any but the most intimate of his friends. This autobiography is as self-revealing as Pepys's or Rousseau's, and as Mr. Wallace is a more estimable character, it is much more profitable to know him intimately. Besides this personal interest, the book is of value from its detailed accounts of life in Wales in the early part of the last century, of Mr. Wallace's travels in America and Asia, of how he wrote his books, of his numerous friends, and of the varied interests of his life of eighty-four years.