

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
ALFRED RUSSELL WALLACE ***

A REVIEW.

WE must congratulate the representatives of Mr. Wallace's English and American publishers on having induced Mr. Wallace to publish his autobiography. A generation has grown up in its love and regard for the great writer, whose work in natural science has not obscured his love of his own kind in whose welfare he has taken an abiding and keen interest. His pen and his brains were as much at the call of social problems, as in the work which has assured him a high place in the general fame-roll of science.

Alfred Russell Wallace was born on the 8th January, 1823; was educated at the Hertford Grammar School, and in 1837 was sent to London to live with his elder brother, a land surveyor and architect. After a period of seven years' surveying with his brother in Bedford, Radnor, Brecknock, Glamorgan and Shropshire, he obtained a situation as a school master in the collegiate School, Leicester, where he remained till the death of his elder brother in 1846. It was during this period that he came across Henry Walter Bates, the enthusiastic entomologist. Both were interested in natural history and even after separation they kept up a continuous correspondence on the subject. The letters are interesting as showing that, at that early period, Wallace was speculating on the origin of species. Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, Lawrence's Lectures on Man, Pritchard's Physical History of Man, Darwin's Journal and Humboldt's Personal Narrative, were among the books that interested and influenced Wallace at this period. But the book, which seems to have influenced Wallace to

* *My Life, a Record of Events and Opinions.* by Alfred Russell Wallace. 2 vols. George Bell & Sons.

go to Para and the Amazon, was Mr. Edward's "A Voyage up the Amazon". For some time before this he had been feeling rather dissatisfied with a mere local collection (of beetles and butterflies) and that little was to be learnt by it. "I should like to take some one family to study thoroughly, principally with a view to the origin of species". Mr. Edward's book, published in 1847, decided the place which Bates and Wallace were to explore. After four years' wanderings in the Amazon Valley, he came back to London and published his "Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro". From his constant attendance at the meetings of the Zoological and Entomological Societies and his visits to the Insect and Bird Departments of the British Museum, he found that the very finest field for an exploring and collecting naturalist was the Malayan Archipelago, and through the influence of Sir Roderick Murchison, a passage to the place was promised by Government. In 1854 he left for Singapore and spent eight years, studying the fauna from Sumatra to New Guinea. The chapters of the autobiography dealing with his travels form very interesting reading; descriptions of the places visited and of the manners of the people, with shrewd bits of observation thrown in, make them instructive as well. Here, for instance, is one such bit occurring in a letter to Mr. George Silk, dated Sumatra, December 22nd 1861, whose concluding sentence expresses the theoretical basis of European rule over Asiatics.

I hope you have read Mr. Money's Book on Java. It is well worth while and you will see that I had come to the same conclusion as to Dutch Colonial Government from what I saw in Menado. Nothing is worse and more absurd than the sneering, prejudiced tone in which almost all English writers speak of the Dutch Government in the East. It never has been worse than ours has been, and it is now very much better; and what is greatly to their credit, and not generally known, they take nearly the same pains to establish order and good government in those islands and possessions which are an annual loss to them, as in those which yield them a revenue. I am convinced that their system is *right* in principle and ours *wrong*, though, of course, in their practical working there may and must be defects; and among the Dutch themselves, both in Europe and the

Indies, there is a strong party against the present system, but that party consists mostly of merchants and planters, who want to get the trade and commerce of the country made free, which, in my opinion, would be an act of suicidal madness, and would, moreover, seriously injure instead of benefiting the natives.

Personally, I do not much like the Dutch out here, or the Dutch officials; but I cannot help bearing witness to the excellence of their government over native races, gentle yet firm, respecting their manners, customs and prejudices, yet introducing everywhere European law, order and industry.

Wallace came back to England in 1862 and during the next five years wrote several papers on birds, physical and zoological geography, questions of anthropology and on special applications of the theory of natural selection. In 1869 appeared the Malay Archipelago summarising his experiences and his work in admirable form. 1876 saw his "geographical distribution of animals"—a monument of patience and industry. In 1881 an association was formed for the nationalisation of land, of which he was elected President, and in 1882 appeared his volume entitled "Land Nationalisation, its Necessity and its Aims". Towards the close of 1885 he received an invitation from the Lowell Institute of Boston to deliver a course of lectures in the autumn and winter of 1886. After a successful American tour, he returned to England in 1887. "He still works quietly in his country home near Dorset, "a veteran—the Nestor—among biologists, a naturalist in the old and truest sense, rich in a world-wide experience of animal life, at once a specialist and a generaliser, a humanist thinker and a social striver".

The American lectures formed the basis of his work on "Darwinism" (1889) which, with the earlier work on the theory of natural selection (1871), forms his most important contributions to the evolutionist faith. "My whole work tends to illustrate the overwhelming importance of natural selection over all other agencies in the production of new species". He rejects as unproved, that phase of sexual selection which depends on female choice, and supports the view that acquired characters are not transmitted

“ But the exceptional feature of Wallace’s scientific philosophy is his argument that some of the great steps in evolution, such as the origin of the higher characteristics in man, are due to a special evolution hardly distinguishable from creation. He finds their only interpretation in the hypothesis of a spiritual essence or nature capable of progressive development under favourable conditions. There are at least three stages in the development of the organic world when some new cause or power must necessarily have come into action—the beginning of life, the introduction of consciousness and the origin of man’s higher, mental and intellectual faculties. At these several stages of progress a change in essential nature took place, due probably, to causes of a higher order than those of the material universe. This seems another way of saying that an adequate scientific interpretation of the great steps in question has not been as yet worked out, but there is also implied Wallace’s conviction that an interpretation in terms of generally accepted scientific formulæ is impossible.

His position as an experimentally convinced spiritualist will be found in “*Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*” (1874) and, like Huxley and Spencer, he has written much on social questions—“*Bad Times*” (1885), “*The Wonderful Century*” (1898), and “*Studies, Scientific and Social*” (1900).

We have hardly the space to mention in detail his views on social questions, but this passage, we trust, does not incorrectly represent his views of what the future ought to be :— “ The first thing for them (the workers) to do is, to strengthen themselves by unity of action, and then to weaken and ultimately abolish militarism. The second aim should be to limit the bureaucracy, and make it the people’s servant instead of its master. The third, to reorganise and simplify the entire legal profession, and the whole system of law, criminal and civil : to

make justice free for all, to abolish all legal recovery of debts, and all advocacy paid by the parties concerned. The fourth, and greatest of all, will be to organise labour, to abolish inheritance and thus give equality of opportunity to every one alike ”. He had a fervid hatred of militarism, and, in the *Clarion* in 1904, appeared a long letter on the subject in answer to an article by Mr. Robert Blatchford in the July *Nineteenth Century* on “ Our Pitiable Military Situation ”. The letter goes much further than most people are willing to concede even in academic discussions, and the following paragraphs appear with regard to India.

Now we come to India, which our friend Blatchford seems to consider the test case. And so it is ; for if ever there was an example of a just punishment for evil deeds, it is in the fact that, after a century of absolute power, we are still no nearer peace and plenty and rational self-government in India than we were half a century ago, when we took over the government from the “ Company ” with the promise to introduce home rule as soon as possible. And now we have a country in which plague and famine are chronic—a country which we rule and plunder for the benefit of our aristocracy and wealthy classes, and which we are, therefore, in continual dread of losing to Russia.

If we had honestly kept our word, if we had ruled India with the one purpose of benefiting its people, had introduced home rule throughout its numerous provinces, states, and nations, settling disputes between them and guarding them from all foreign attack, we should by now have won the hearts of its teeming populations and no foreign Powers would have ventured to invade a group of nations so united and so protected. Such a position as we might have now held in India—that of adviser, the reconciler and the powerful protector of a federation of self-governing Native States—would be a position of dignity and true glory very far above anything we can claim to-day.

The “ government ” of India seems to have been a sore point with him and in a later part of the book, when referring to Grant Allen, the well-known novelist, he says :—“ Like myself he was more than a land nationaliser, and my first know-

ledge of his political and social views was derived from an article he wrote on the condition of India somewhere about 1880. Through my friend, the late Sir David Wedderburn, I had become aware of the terrible defects of our government of that country owing to the ever increasing influence of European planters, manufacturers and capitalists; and I was also a reader of the *Statesman*, a paper brought out by a gentleman who had been for many years editor of one of the most advanced Calcutta newspapers, and who established it for the purpose of letting Englishmen know the real facts as to the government of India. All the statements in this paper were founded upon Government reports or other official documents, referred to in detail. I knew, therefore, that Grant Allen's views, as stated in this paper, were correct, and, therefore, wrote to tell him how pleased I was to find that he was not *only* interested in physical science, as was so often the case with my scientific friends. His reply is so interesting that I will give the more important parts of it:—

“As to your remarks about the wrong actually perpetrated by us in India, I know only too much about that question. For three years, I was employed by W. W. Hunter, Director-General of Statistics for India, in collecting and working up the district accounts in his possession. Not to put too fine a point upon it, Dr. Hunter is the *literary whitewasher of the Indian Government*. In working up the abundant reports and documents submitted to me, I had plenty of opportunities for realising what English rule really meant. In the ruin brought by our land settlements especially, I collected a large number of facts and statistics; and I offered John Morley to work them into a paper on “The Indian Cultivator and His Wrongs”; but Morley did not care for the subject. The fact is, nobody in England wishes to move in the matter. I sent Knowles a paper two years ago about the same subject,

dealing especially with the Ganges canal—a vast blunder, bolstered up by cunningly contrived balance sheets, in which deficits are concealed as fresh investments; but he would not take it. I only got the article into the *Contemporary* by leaving out India, and looking at the question from a purely English point of view. I am afraid the fact can't be blinked that most Englishmen don't mind oppression as long as the oppressed people are only blacks. A startling outrage, like the Zulu War, wakes them up for a moment; but chronic and old-standing sores, like India or Barbadoes, do not affect them”. This is hardly the place for examining these views so forcibly expressed. We, indeed, note with satisfaction that, in these days when the divorce between political responsibility and intellectual responsibility is rapidly growing more complete and universal, when men, aware of the existence of great speculative subjects and of their importance, are afraid of the conclusions to which free inquiry might bring them and dread nothing so much as making up their mind, we find in Wallace, a robust thinker, who not merely takes the trouble to acquire views on great questions, but who also does not suppress his conclusions for the sake of keeping spurious peace on earth and superficial goodwill among men.

Space prevents us from discussing his views on Land Nationalisation and Spiritualism. And even while we have to express our disapproval with many of his ‘faiths’, we are bound to see that he quickly grasps his fact as with an insight that is almost instinctive, and that he is not afraid of facing even extreme conclusions. His style is clear and vivid, bold and independent, earnest and enthusiastic. We now regretfully take leave of these very interesting volumes, that, in addition to giving a clear and charming account of an intrepid, adventurous and fascinating personality, suggest many ideas and trains of thought that are well worthy of the deepest attention and study.