

Transcription (from *Trove*), July 2014:

Zeehan and Dundas Herald (Tasmania) 24(242) (25 July 1913): 4 (anon.).

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‘Social Environment and Moral Progress.’

A singular personal interest attaches to this work by Professor Alfred Russell Wallace, for it is in all probability the last utterance of one of the greatest scientists and political economists of the past century. Professor Wallace was born in 1823, and his latest work was published this year almost simultaneously with his ninetieth birthday. It is practically a summing up of a ripe experience of life spent in patient, scientific research study of some of life's deepest problems. During the eight years, 1854-1862, the author was engaged in biological research work in the Malay Archipelago. During this period he compiled his famous theory of natural selection, quite unaware that Darwin was working on the same lines, and had come practically to the same conclusion. Darwin and Wallace were personal friends. Both were too great for anything like petty jealousy. The only rivalry between these two pioneers of scientific thought was the generous desire of each that the other should obtain full credit for his work. Like every other real scientist, Professor Wallace was always a seeker after truth, and, therefore, never even in his old age relapsed into conservatism. In this work there is abundant evidence that age has not dimmed his intellectual powers. It is in reality a message from a mountain peak of thought in a high region, far removed from the obscuring mists of caste bias or class and creedal prejudices. The author takes up the position that a desire for moral truth is the most permanent fact in human history. That it is “The central and essential portion of human nature which ever remains ready to respond to every favorable opportunity that arrives, to grasp and hold firm every fragment of high thought and noble action which comes within its notice.” The divine spark “Which cannot be lost and cannot be permanently deteriorated by conditions however adverse, by training however senseless and bad.” This is optimism of a very high order, but it is not the offspring of ignorance of existing evil. It is rather the optimism of a great soul serenely conscious of the ultimate triumph of good. The author traces the persistence and permanence of a desire for moral truth back through the ages to the earliest records of the human race, and shows that moral light was never totally extinguished at any period. Trenchant as are his criticisms of modern commercialism, which he declares to be in many respects the most immoral thing in history, he still declares that even this evil influence has not destroyed, and cannot destroy, the inherent goodness of human nature, and emphasises “the wonder that any fragment of morality or humanity of love of truth and justice still remains among us.” Of the Victorian era, he says: “This rapid growth of wealth and the increase of man's power over nature put too great a strain upon our crude civilisation and our superficial christianity, and, therefore, industrial progress has been accompanied by various forms of social immorality as amazing as they are unprecedented.” He follows up this sweeping condemnation with a detailed indictment of modern commercialism that, for accuracy of historical and statistical detail and remorseless logic, perhaps has never been excelled, yet still he concludes his terrible indictment with a triumphant optimistic note: “Nevertheless, the omens for the future are good; the great body of intelligent workers are determined to have justice. They insist on the abolition of monopolies over the forces of nature, and the gradual admission of all to equal opportunities for labor by free access to their native soil. Thus may be inaugurated the birth of a new era of peaceful reform and moral advancement.” In summing up the root causes of the factors which produce the moral obliquity of modern commercialism, he points out that this system is based upon “the monopoly

by a few of the means of existence necessary to all,” and its social results are “That we live in an atmosphere of economic antagonism as enemies, instead of economic brotherhood as friends.”

The whole work is so condensed and so full of weighty matter that further condensation is almost impossible, and in the brief space of a review, justice cannot be done to such a noble contribution to the world’s enlightenment. It should form a text book of reference to every public speaker and writer who is interested in the work of social reform, and no Labor man or woman specially should miss studying it. On the woman question, Professor Wallace is abreast of the most advanced of all modern writers, including even Olive Schreiner and Mrs. Gillman. He looks forward with confidence to the absolute industrial and political equality of woman as the most necessary factor in moral progress, and contends that when marriage ceases to be a means of obtaining a livelihood, natural selection will exert its beneficent sway with a resultant physical and moral uplift to the human race.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2014.