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[p. 4b]

‘A. R. Wallace’s Miscellanies.’

“Studies, Scientific and Social.” By Alfred Russel Wallace. Two Vols. (London: Macmillan & Co.)

In these two closely-packed volumes the veteran apostle of organic evolution, whose happy intuition gave Darwin the spur to publication of his fuller results, has brought together the scattered fruit of his brain during more than thirty years. Walt Whitman would have called them his “Collect,” and no better definition could be found. These volumes consist mainly of reprints of the more important articles that Dr. Wallace has contributed to magazines and other periodical publications from 1865 to 1899. “I have ventured to call them studies,” says the author, “because the larger part of them deal with problems in which I have been specially interested, and to the comprehension and solution of which I have devoted much time and thought. Many of these problems are connected with the modern theory of evolution, others with important geological and physical theories, others, again, with educational, political, or social questions. They are dealt with either in the way of exposition or criticism, and in several cases they contain novel views or fresh arguments, strengthening the case in favour of some of the disputed theories. In order to make the subjects discussed more interesting to the general reader, I have, wherever possible, introduced copious [p. 4c] illustrations, and this has led me in many cases so to modify and enlarge the original article as to render it a new piece of work.”

It would obviously be impossible within the limits of a review to enter upon any discussion of the numerous subjects with which Dr. Wallace has dealt in these interesting and instructive volumes. He ranges over nearly the whole ground of modern thought, from the defence of Darwinism, which was necessary in the sixties, to the attack on militarism, which is never likely to be out of date; from the defence of spiritualism to the advocacy of land nationalisation, from geology to politics, from zoology to ethics. Nothing that he has seen fit to republish is devoid of interest and value as suggestion, even though some of it may stir up the reader to a passion of denial. In the first volume we would draw special attention to the very interesting essay on “Inaccessible Valleys,” which is an excellent example of that best kind of geological exposition which starts with a familiar subject and deduces from it far-reaching speculations about the formation of the earth. Incidentally we learn that there is no foundation in fact for the description of the Doone Valley in “Lorna Doone.” The only really inaccessible valleys in the world are to be found in the United States and in New South Wales; and in their case, of course, the term is only relative, and means that in their original condition they were exceedingly difficult for man or other animals without wings to enter. At present the Yo Semite, the best known example, is a well frequented haunt of tourists. The chapters on the Ice Age and the work of glaciers are also notable. They bring forward and marshal in order a large body of evidence in favour of Ramsay’s theory that valley-lakes in glaciated regions were eroded by ice, and illustrate it by a charming account of the well-known gorge of the Aar and its neighbourhood. The zoological section contains a long and delightful chapter on monkeys, in which it is pointed out that we are biased in our high estimate of their place among animals by a perverted sense of their relationship to ourselves. But man’s supremacy has been attained in virtue of his difference from rather than of his likeness to the monkey, and it is certainly a mistake to rank this curious tribe at the head of the animal kingdom. “Neither in size nor strength nor beauty would they compare with

many other forms, while in intelligence they would not surpass, even if they equalled, the horse, the elephant, or the beaver.” A brief but striking essay describes the curious disguises which tropical insects assume for the sake of protection from their foes. In the whole of animated nature there is nothing more astonishing than the mimicry by which some insects simulate withered leaves, others sticks, others the dung of birds or the bark of trees. Only those who have seen it can appreciate the force of the resemblance: “so impossible is it to detect them by the eye,” says Dr Wallace, “that I used to make it a practice when walking along in the forests to touch every suspicious bit of dead stick I saw loose on the foliage, as the only means of finding out whether they were real sticks or stick-insects.” Two excellent illustrations are given which bring the force of the likeness home to the reader.

The sections on the distribution of animals and plants, though of a somewhat technical interest in themselves, naturally lead up to a discussion of the evolutionary theory, which explains that distribution is a “natural and inevitable result of the process of animal development.” We then find five essays on the theory of evolution, which were written at various times from 1880 to 1896. We may quote the characteristic passage with which they begin:—

“The meaning of the term—now become a household word in science—‘the origin of species’ is often entirely misapprehended. It is very generally thought to mean the origin of life and of living things, and people are surprised and almost incredulous when told that Mr Darwin himself, in the latest editions of his celebrated work, still refers that origin to divine agency. Such, however, is undoubtedly the case, as shown by the following passage which concludes the volume:—‘There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, while this planet as gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.’ In a letter to Sir Joseph Hooker in 1863, Darwin explains that in using the term ‘Creator’ he really meant ‘appeared by some wholly unknown process,’ adding—‘It is mere rubbish thinking at present of the origin of life; one might as well think of the origin of matter.’”

The author sets himself in the most important of his essays on evolution to combat Mr. Spencer’s view of the inadequacy of natural selection to perform all that Darwin and Dr Wallace have claimed for it, and to show the absence of any proof that characteristics acquired or improved by use are ever inherited. He passes on to consider certain aspects of Polynesian races and their origin. His first volume is closed with two very interesting essays on “The Problem of Instinct” and “Human Selection.” In the former he criticises Professor Lloyd Morgan’s well-known book on “Habit and Instinct,” and points out the importance of bringing scientific method to bear on a subject that has been largely left to the purveyors of anecdote, often romancing, and always unchecked. In the latter he discusses the dream of those who believe that the solution of the problem of humanity’s future is to be attained by some way of exercising the same supervision over the breeding of men and women as is exercised by the breeders of horses and shorthorns.

“In one of my latest conversations with Darwin,” says Dr. Wallace, “he expressed himself very gloomily on the future of humanity, on the ground that in our modern civilisation natural selection had no play, and the fittest did not survive. Those who succeed in the race for wealth are by no means the best or the most intelligent, and it is notorious that our population is more largely renewed in each generation from the lower than from the middle and upper classes.”

It is very interesting to compare Dr Wallace's answer to this pessimist view with that given by Huxley in his "Evolution and Ethics." Dr Wallace then disposes of all the suggestions that have been made for the improvement of human breeding on a fundamental ground which affords the basis of much of his second volume.

"How can it be possible," he asks, "to determine and settle the relations of women to men which shall be best alike for individuals and for the race in a society in which a very large proportion of women are obliged to work long hours daily for the barest subsistence, while another large proportion are forced into more or less uncongenial marriages as the only means of securing some amount of personal independence or physical well-being? Let anyone consider, on the one hand, the lives of the wealthy as portrayed in the society newspapers, and even in the advertisements of such papers as 'The Field' and 'The Queen,' with their endless round of pleasure and luxury, their almost inconceivable wastefulness and extravagance, indicated by the cost of female dress and such facts as the expenditure of a thousand pounds on the flowers for a single entertainment; and, on the other hand, the terrible condition of millions of workers—men, women, and children—as detailed in the 'Report of the Lords' Commission on Sweating,' on absolutely incontestable evidence, and the still more awful condition of those who seek work of any kind in vain, and, seeing their children slowly dying of starvation, are driven in utter helplessness and despair to murder and suicide. Can any thoughtful person admit for a moment that in a society so constituted that these overwhelming contrasts of luxury and privation are looked upon as necessities, and are treated by the Legislature as matters with which it has practically nothing to do, there is the smallest probability that we can deal successfully with such tremendous social problems as those which involve the marriage tie and the family relation as a means of promoting the physical and moral advancement of the race?"

We have no space left to deal at any length with Dr Wallace's second volume, which is largely characterised by the generous indignation marked in the preceding passage. For his desire to see a better state of things one can only have admiration. For his practical suggestions we cannot feel much sympathy, as we believe that many of them are mistaken, and would prove impracticable if—which is not very likely—they were ever tried in this country. But we can only praise the enthusiasm and the compassion for human suffering that prompt them, and we can recommend these essays as highly suggestive and interesting even to those who are quite unable to follow their reasoning or to accept their conclusions.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2017.