

Obituary.

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

BORN JANUARY 8TH, 1823; DIED NOVEMBER 7TH, 1913.

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE is dead. What a host of reminiscences this short sentence recalls to mind! The last of that band of great biologists of the last century and the last of the pall-bearers at the funeral of the immortal Charles Darwin is no longer with us. His death brings back to memory the names of his distinguished colleagues of a bygone day, Darwin and Huxley, Lyell, Hooker, Spencer, and Owen. A band of scientific workers of which any country may well be proud, for did they not all play a leading part in the great controversy which centered around the doctrine of evolution?

Born at Usk in Monmouthshire on January 8th, 1823, Wallace had reached the ripe age of almost 91 years when he died on November 7th at the little village of Broadstone in Dorsetshire. Even in the early days of his boyhood certain of the mental characteristics which marked his later years were seen in their inception. Though unable for many years to visualize his parents or any of the persons with whom he was in daily contact, he could readily recall all the natural surroundings of his former home. Then, as throughout life "the perception of form and individuality were but moderately developed, while locality, ideality, colour and comparison are decidedly stronger" as he himself once wrote. At this time, too, he was haunted by an oft-repeated dream of a creature with huge wings coming nearer and nearer to the house and finally clinging to it. Thus early is revealed the type of mind which in later years found expression in spiritualism. His boyhood was passed at Hertford, where he was educated. On leaving school, Wallace was apprenticed in London to a small master-builder. His intercourse with artisans turned his thoughts into the channel of social problems, and he became keenly interested in the activities of the Secularists and Owenites.

In 1837 he commenced his education as a land surveyor under his brother, and this work led him to spend some years in Wales, the natural beauties of which were an abiding source of enjoyment. Here, too, the "land problem" attracted his attention. His sojourn in Wales was interrupted for a brief period by undertaking a post of assistant master at a school in Leicester. During this time he became interested in psychical research, a subject which, as he says, "played an important part in his mental growth."

It was on his return to his former occupation in Wales that Wallace seems to have been more particularly attracted to natural history, and during this period was in constant communication with Bates, chiefly on the subject of insect collecting. Such books as the *Vestiges of Creation* and *Cosmos* led him to speculate, even at this comparatively early age, on the origin of species; but it was the publication of *A Voyage up the Amazon*, by W. H. Edwards, in 1847 which determined him to visit South America. In the following year he set sail in the *Mischief*, a barque of 192 tons, and with his embarkation his life as a naturalist of the first rank may be said to have commenced. During his four years' absence he sent home many communications to scientific societies. On the homeward voyage the ship caught fire; the passengers and crew were forced to abandon her, and, in addition to the hardships and privations they underwent, Wallace had the added disappointment of the loss of much of his collections.

It was at an evening meeting of the Zoological Society, two months after his return, that he first met Huxley. In February, 1854, Wallace sailed in the *Frolic* for his great expedition to the Malayan archipelago, which extended over eight years. It was here that he laid the foundation of the principles of geographical distribution, and which resulted in what has ever since been known as "Wallace's line." His mind always intent on the problem of the origin and immutability of species, he wrote his first communication on the subject at Sarawak. It appeared in the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* in September, 1855. Pondering over these subjects and recalling certain facts which he had read many years before in Malthus's *Principles of Population*, the idea of the principle of

natural selection came to him as by a sudden inspiration. The joint production of a paper by Darwin and Wallace on this subject, which was communicated to the Linnean Society on July 1st, 1858, by Lyell and Hooker, forms one of the most dramatic incidents in the whole history of science, and the lifelong attitude of the two authors towards one another with regard to their respective merits in this discovery one of the most touching examples of magnanimity and of the truly scientific spirit.

With the subsequent history of Wallace's scientific career it is not necessary to dwell. In the later years of his life, while his interest in biological subjects in no sense abated, his thoughts became more and more diverted to social and spiritualistic problems. However much one may disagree with many of the views he latterly expressed, one is deeply impressed by the absolute sincerity of the man.

That Wallace was no believer in the mechanistic theory of life is amply proved in his book *The World of Life*, published three years ago. A life so long, so active, and so varied, cannot be dealt with in a small compass. Simple and unostentatious, he was a great man in the truest sense of the word. The whole scientific world joins with his relatives in mourning his loss; but it is thankful for his life, and finds consolation in the fact that at so great age we could not hope that he would have been with us for long.
