

Transcription (from hardcopy), July 2014:

Daily News & Leader (London & Manchester) no. 21113 (8 Nov. 1913): 1a-1b, 2a (anon.).

[p. 1]

‘Dr. Wallace & His Work.—Death of the Great Scientist.—Evolution.—From Laboratory to the World of Affairs.’

Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., last of the intellectual giants of the Victorian era, passed peacefully away at his residence at Broadstone, Dorset, just before ten o’clock yesterday morning. He was in his 91st year.

The great scientist was only ill four days. On Thursday night it was known that he could not recover, and his wife, son, and daughter were present at the end. Death was due to old age.

A MIGHTY MIND.—Enthusiasm for Humanity of a Modest Genius.

By the death of Alfred Russel Wallace this country loses not only a great scientist, but the last of the men who made the early part of the Victorian era so memorable. To the end he preserved the spacious tradition of that time. His interests were as wide as human life, his modesty as remarkable as his genius, and his enthusiasm for humanity as sensitive as his vision was wide. Although it is nearly 70 years since he took that voyage up the Amazon which was the occasion of so much fruitful observation, and nearly 60 years since, independently of Darwin, he evolved the law governing the origin of species, he was still hard at work, his faculties still vigorous, his mind acute, his affection for his fellows unexhausted and inexhaustible. Though natural science constitutes his title to immortality his later life was more and more concerned with the problems of sociology, economics, labour, and what may be called the humane sciences generally. Just as Ruskin passed from the criticism of art to the criticism of life, so Wallace passed from the laboratory to the world of affairs. The range of his mind was always widening and age never imposed any limits upon his emotions or his vision. As new ideas developed he was always the first to welcome them and if they were sound to throw himself whole-heartedly into their advocacy. He brought the disinterested passion of the scientist into the realm of politics, and adopted the cause of labour and the poor with the same energy with which seventy years ago he began the study of natural science. His death came, as he would have desired, swiftly and mercifully, with his faculties undimmed but his long task done.

Alfred Russel Wallace was born at Usk, in Monmouthshire, on Jan. 8, 1823. He was one of nine children of parents in straitened circumstances. In 1828 the family moved to Hertford, where Alfred was sent to the Grammar School. His father was at this time librarian to a fairly good proprietary town library, and in this way young Wallace obtained ready access to all the standard authors.

Trained as a Land Surveyor.

In 1836 Alfred Wallace left school and went up to London to live with his brother John, who was apprenticed to a small master builder. He only remained with him a few months, however, and then joined another brother, William, in Bedfordshire, where he commenced his education as a land surveyor. He worked with his brother for a time, and then, as no more surveying work was in view, went to Leighton

Buzzard to learn the watch and clock making trade. His employer, however, was given the opportunity of a partnership in a London firm, and young Wallace once more went back to his surveying. The next few years were spent in various parts of the country in this occupation, but beyond the fact that he now made his first tentative efforts at writing, they have small interest.

Teacher and Student.

In 1844, as the surveying work had again become slack, Alfred Wallace once more had to look out for an occupation, and this time he went to a school at Leicester as an assistant master. It was here that he met Henry Walter Bates, and the two immediately became close friends. The year spent at Leicester was the most important in Wallace's early life. From Bates he derived a taste for the wonders of insect life, while another "and equally important circumstance was my reading Malthus, without which work I should probably not have hit upon the theory of natural selection and obtained full credit for its independent discovery."

In 1848 Wallace and Bates, stirred by W. H. Edwards's "A Voyage up the Amazon," decided to go out there themselves. Dr. Wallace's experiences and adventures were given in his book "A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro." As he looked back over his four years' wanderings in the Amazon Valley he was struck by three great features, the vast virgin forest, the wonderful variety and exquisite beauty of the birds and butterflies, and the "absolute uncontaminated savages" who lived on the Uaupés river.

The return voyage was marked by disaster. His vessel was caught in a severe storm,¹ which destroyed much of his property. "What I had hitherto sent home," he wrote to a friend, "had little more than paid my expenses, and what I had with me in the Helen I estimated would have realised about £500. But even all this might have gone with little regret had not by far the richest part of my own private collection gone also."

On his return to England Dr. Wallace spent a great deal of time at the British Museum, working upon subjects of natural history, and then, in 1854, he obtained a free passage out to Singapore. In the course of his travels round the Malay Archipelago Dr. Wallace again got together a splendid collection. Writing to his friend Bates he related that whereas there was an "excessive poverty of the Diurnal Lepidoptera," he found tremendous quantities of beetles.

Survival of the Fittest.

It was when out there that Dr. Wallace made, independently of Darwin, his discovery of the survival of the fittest, which solved the problem of the origin of species. He had already—in 1855—sent home an article "On the Law which has regulated the Introduction of New Species," in which that law was briefly stated thus:

Every species has come into existence coincident both in space and time with a pre-existing closely-allied species.

This passage pointed to some kind of evolution. It suggested the when and where of its occurrence, but did not disclose the how. The article attracted very little attention at the time, but Huxley later referred to

this “powerful essay,” and said that “On reading it afresh, I have been astonished to recollect how small was the impression it made.”

The Darwin Coincidence.

Three years later Dr. Wallace hit upon the great discovery. One day, as he was lying down, recovering from an attack of fever, Dr. Wallace began to think over Malthus’ “Principles of Population.” In a sudden flash the true solution of the problem over which he had so often pondered burst upon him. A day or two afterwards he dispatched to Darwin a letter in which he enclosed a paper upon the subject, and said that he hoped that the idea would be as new to Darwin as it was to himself.

The arrival of this letter threw Darwin into the greatest consternation. He had already made the identical discovery for himself, and was about to publish it in a book. In his difficulty he consulted his friends, Sir Charles Lyell and Sir Joseph Hooker, who persuaded Darwin to submit a paper of his own together with Wallace’s memoir, to the Linnæan Society. This was accordingly done on July 1, 1858, and Darwin’s claim to priority was established. “I am glad it was so,” said Wallace magnanimously; and how completely he has waived all claims may be seen from his constant use of the term “Darwinism.”

An 18-Year-Old Bride.

On returning to England, Wallace was fully occupied for some time in arranging and disposing of his collections, writing numerous articles, and in compiling his “Malay Archipelago,” published in 1869. In 1866 he married Miss Mitten, the 18-year-old² daughter of the man who was then the greatest English authority on mosses, and during these years he made the acquaintance of such men as Sir Charles Lyell, Mr. Lecky, Sir Charles Wheatstone, Professor Tyndall, Sir Charles Bunbury, and T. H. Huxley. Of the latter Dr. Wallace has left behind a striking account:

Although Huxley was as kind and genial a friend and companion as Darwin himself, and though I was quite at ease with him in the family circle, or in after-dinner talk with a few of his intimates (and although he was two years younger than myself) yet I never got over a feeling of awe and inferiority when discussing any problem in evolution or allied subjects—an inferiority which I did not feel either with Darwin or Sir Charles Lyell. This was due, I think, to the fact that the enormous amount of Huxley’s knowledge was of a kind of which I possessed only an irreducible minimum, and of which I often felt the want.

In 1870 Dr. Wallace moved out of London, living first in Essex and subsequently in Surrey. He was busily engaged for the next ten years or so in literature. He was a contributor to the “Encyclopædia Britannica,” wrote “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism,” a volume on the physical geography, natural history, and geology of Australia, and many other miscellaneous writings.

As a Land Reformer.

During this period of his life, too, Dr. Wallace began to become prominent as a land reformer. He had long been interested in the subject of the nationalisation of the land, and when the “Land Nationalisation Society” was formed Wallace was chosen President. In order to prepare a handbook on the great question Wallace made extensive studies, and in 1882 he published “Land Nationalisation; Its Necessity and Its Aims,” which had a great sale. A few sentences from an article written in 1884 may not be inappropriate:

The land being nationalised, and the use of some portion of it obtainable by all, the minimum of wages will rise far above the starvation point which now prevails, and every village or other community, however small, will consist of small capitalists, who will be ever ready to unite for the safe development of their capital. Then will arise a variety of industries on a scale adapted to the size and wealth of the district, and calculated to utilise the surplus labour and spare time of the surrounding population, and these small industries will compete successfully with the establishments of individual capitalists, because they will have an ample and cheap supply of labour, and because most of the labourers, or their relations, will be shareholders, and will thus be working for themselves.

In connection with this work Dr. Wallace came into association with John Stuart Mill, Mr. Swinton, Henry George, Charles Mackay, and Professor J. Stuart Blackie.

Socialism.

From nationalisation of land Dr. Wallace advanced beyond the tenets of Mill and Spencer, and adopted Socialism. He went over to the Socialists in 1889 as the result of reading Bellamy's "Looking Backwards." He read the book through three times in one year, and in 1890 avowed himself a Socialist with an article in the "Fortnightly Review" on "Human Selection," in which he showed how such a state as socialism postulates would "result in the solution of two great problems (1) that of gradually reducing the rate of increase of the population through a later period of marriage, and (2) by setting up a process of sexual selection

[p. 2]

which would steadily eliminate the physically imperfect and the socially and morally unfit."

Advancing years only strengthened his enthusiasm for a radical reform of the social structure. The sacred rights of property had no terrors for him. On the eve of his ninetieth birthday he told a "Daily News and Leader" representative that there should be no inherent right of inheritance of property. The vast accumulation of wealth as it existed in the present day was not only wrong; it was criminal. "If you pass an Act that the unborn should have no rights in property the problem would be solved," he said. "The State would then be the inheritor; the State would make ample provision for the heir, and the vast flow of accumulated wealth that would then be unloosed would serve to endow the nation with a sufficiency for all, from universal education onward."

Dr. Wallace saw nothing but ground for hope in the labour unrest at the beginning of the twentieth century. "Nothing has pleased me so much," he said, "as the great strikes which began last year with the railway strike. For the first time they showed the upper classes how utterly dependent they are for everything upon the workers."

An Anti-Vaccinationist.

When he first heard of the anti-vaccination movement, in the late seventies, Dr. Wallace could not rest till he had looked into the question. The result of his inquiry was to convince him that vaccination was not only inefficacious, but even dangerous, and he wrote more than one pamphlet calling attention to many startling facts which he had got together.

The following message from Dr. Wallace was read at the annual meeting of the National Anti-Vaccination League held in March last:—

Statistics prove that not only is vaccination absolutely useless, but a serious danger. Vaccination increases small-pox and causes death, and is therefore a crime. We should demand not only the abolition of compulsion, but the total abolition of official recognition of vaccination.

Two other questions may be mentioned in which Dr. Wallace was deeply interested—spiritualism and mesmerism, and phrenology. In his autobiography, Dr. Wallace devoted a great deal of attention to these topics.

Points of Difference.

One or two points in Dr. Wallace's theories ought perhaps to be explained. Although in the main in agreement with Darwin, Dr. Wallace differed from him on one or two questions. With regard to the part played by sexual selection in the origin of species Darwin held a theory involved in the combats of the males for the possession of the female, and that the females chose the more ornamental or musical males. Wallace agreed with the former, but declared that "the statement that ornaments have been developed by the female's choice of the most beautiful male, because he is the most beautiful, is an inference supported by singularly little evidence."

Again, on the origin of man as an intellectual and moral being, they differed widely. According to Darwin, man's whole nature was developed from the lower creatures by means of the same laws of variation and survival; consequently there was no difference in kind, but only of degree, between the nature of man and of an animal. Wallace, on the other hand, maintained that there was a difference, intellectually and morally; and that while man's body was developed by the continual modification of some ancestral animal form, his higher intellectual and spiritual nature had been evolved by a different agency, analogous to that which first produced organic life and originated consciousness. These views, showing the essentially religious trend of Dr. Wallace's mind, marked him off from many other scientists.

"Man's Place in the Universe."

In his 81st year came what may be considered one of Dr. Wallace's most remarkable works—"Man's Place in the Universe." Briefly, Dr. Wallace's theory was that the earth is practically at the hub of the stellar universe, and that it alone, amongst all the heavenly bodies, is inhabited by beings at all analogous to man. Man, he argued, only came into existence upon this globe by the merest chance, and the probability of the combination of circumstances requisite to produce and maintain the miracle of life obtaining upon another planet is so remote as practically to be non-existent.

Dr. Wallace, on the other hand, was far from suggesting that the earth alone in the whole universe is the abode of life. He maintained, first, that our solar system seems to be in, or near, the centre of the visible universe; and secondly, that all the available testimony supports the idea of the extreme improbability of there existing any being analogous to man on any planet revealed by the telescope. He found it "difficult to imagine that there can be in the universe, under one supreme Head, a great number of quite differently formed, but equally intelligent, beings."

Declining Years.

Dr. Wallace spent the last years of his life in Dorsetshire, first at Parkstone, and then at Broadstone, where, in 1902, he built himself a beautiful house overlooking Poole Harbour.

A tall, powerfully-made man, he spent his time between writing books, articles, and letters, gardening, and reading modern fiction. His preference was for romantic and stirring stories, and when he found one especially interesting he endeavoured to make it last a long time.

Dr. Wallace had two children, a daughter, and a son who became an electrical engineer.³

¹[Editor's note: There was no storm; the ship perished in a fire caused by spontaneous combustion.]

²[Editor's note: She was actually twenty.]

³[Editor's note: He also had another son, who died as a small child.]

[\[Return\]](#)

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