

Transcription (from *Trove*), July 2014:

*The Register* (Adelaide, Australia) No. 20904 (10 Nov. 1913): 6c-6e (anon.).

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‘Darwin’s Compeer.’

The late Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace was the last personal link between the present generation of scientists and the famous naturalist whose name will always be indissolubly associated with the theory of organic evolution. The venerable philosopher, whose death was recorded in our cable messages on Saturday, retained in extreme old age so much mental vigour and freshness of thought that those who knew him only through the medium of his books experienced difficulty in realizing that the brilliant author of “Man’s Place in the Universe” was a nonagenarian, whose fame in some respects antedated that of Huxley and Tyndall, and whose first literary production was published more than half a century ago. His early work as a scientist, and his valuable contributions to the speculative thought of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, were to a certain extent overshadowed by the phenomenal achievements of his great contemporary and co-worker, Charles Darwin, with whom he shared the honour of having first given expression to the evolutionary hypothesis as it is now commonly understood. In some respects, however, the two men whose lives were so closely united by circumstances and personal friendship were strangely dissimilar. Darwin’s keen and powerful intellect was associated with an instinctive appreciation of the value of evidence, and an infinite capacity for specialization, which the younger savant admitted that he could not equal. “I have felt all my life, and still feel,” he wrote some years ago, “the most sincere satisfaction that it was not left for me to attempt to write the ‘Origin of Species’...I recognise that I do not possess those diverse qualities which in their harmonious combination mark out Mr. Darwin as the man best fitted for the great work he accomplished.” Yet few mortals have been more lavishly endowed with mental ability than the versatile veteran who penned that graceful tribute to his great co-operator. It has been said that a cultured person should know everything of something and something of everything. Assuming that definition to be accurate, it would not be difficult to prove that the late Dr. Wallace was one of the most highly cultured men on the planet. For many years prior to his death he was admittedly the greatest living exponent of the Darwinian theory of evolution; in his essays dealing with that theme are probably the best short statements of the problem in existence. Still he found time to write an elaborate treatise on “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism,” to discuss the social and political problems of the day, and to cross swords with the disciples of Jenner on the subject of vaccination. His masterly philosophical speculations regarding man’s place in the Universe were read with equal avidity by laymen, and astronomers; and some of the most charming Nature studies in English literature are found in his popular descriptive works. His fascinating essay on “The Importance of Dust”—in which he showed how the particles of matter floating in the air are not only essential to life, but are also the cause of some of the most beautiful phenomena in Nature—has been aptly described as one of the fairy tales of science.

It would be difficult to conceive of a more remarkable coincidence than that which occurred in connection with the discovery of the law of natural selection and its application to the problem of the origin of species. The episode, which practically forced Darwin to publish his epoch-making book ten years before he had intended to send it to the press, is one of the most romantic recorded in the annals of

scientific research; and the manner in which both of the great thinkers acted when they ascertained that they had arrived at the same goal almost simultaneously was worthy of the momentous occasion. Their friendship was not ruffled for a moment by petty wrangling concerning their respective claims to priority, although it must have been a crushing blow to Darwin—who had been laboriously collecting evidence for nearly 20 years—when he received through the post Wallace’s rough sketch, which, to use his own words, smashed all his originality. In a letter written to Sir Charles Lyell at the time he remarked:—“I never saw a more striking coincidence; if Wallace had had my MS. sketch, written in 1844, he could not have made a better short abstract. Even his terms now stand at the head of my chapters.” Acting on the advice of his friends, Darwin modified his determination not to reveal his secret to the world until he had completed his investigations, with the result that the first edition of “The Origin of Species” and Dr. Wallace’s essay were published simultaneously. From that time until the end of Darwin’s life the two men did all in their power to assist each other, and long after the fragile body of the older scientist had been laid to rest Dr. Wallace wrote a graceful tribute to his lamented friend, claiming for himself only the position of being the advocate of pure Darwinism. He recognised that the success of the theory of natural selection had been due almost entirely to the marvellous skill with which his great contemporary had collated and presented to the scientific world the mass of data which he had adduced in support of the hypothesis—although in later years Dr. Wallace supplemented and strengthened the original evidence by many new facts. It had always been considered a weakness in Darwin’s work that he based his deductions mainly on the variation in domestic animals and cultivated plants. In 1889 Dr. Wallace published an important reply to criticisms of evolution, in which he endeavoured to “secure a firm foundation for the theory in variation of organisms in a state of Nature.” The last chapter in the book is especially interesting, because it contains an exhaustive statement of the author’s views regarding the materialistic conceptions of the Universe which became prevalent during the latter part of the nineteenth century. He refuted the allegation that this “hopeless and soul-deadening belief” was inseparable from the theory of organic evolution; and declared in unequivocal language that a belief in the spiritual nature of man was not in any way inconsistent with the Darwinian hypothesis. “We who accept the existence of a spiritual world, can look upon the Universe as a grand consistent whole, adapted in all its parts to the development of spiritual beings capable of indefinite life and perfectibility...Beings thus trained and strengthened by their surroundings, and possessing latent faculties capable of such noble development, are surely destined for a higher and more permanent existence.” When those significant phrases were written the great naturalist and philosopher was at the zenith of his mental power, and the views expressed contained the substance of his final scientific deductions from the biological, geological, and psychological investigations of the last century.

The passages quoted are typical of a great deal of the late Dr. Wallace’s recent writing. Mr. Harold Begbie has said that when the venerable scientist denounced in conversation the materialism of the age his auditors were conscious of a kind of heroism, an “order of knight-errantry, rare and wonderful in the intellectual world.” On many occasions he fought strenuously for what he conceived to be the truth, although it would have been better for his reputation and his position in the realm of science if he had remained silent. He never shrank from encountering opposition, and his profound sense of the subordination of the physical to the spiritual gave to his writings a distinctive and lofty tone. Endorsing the view that during the whole process of the rise, growth, and extinction of past forms of life the earth was being prepared for the ultimate man, he promulgated the doctrine that “much of the wealth and luxuriance of living things—the infinite variety of form and structure, the exquisite grace and beauty in

bird and insect, in flower and foliage—may have been mere by-products of the grand mechanism we call Nature—the one and only method of developing humanity.” Man, he declared, is the superlative of Nature; and the object of his book, “Man’s Place in the Universe,” was to show that the supreme purpose of the cosmos was the “production and development of the living soul in the perishable body of man.” His theory was criticised on the ground that if this planet were the only inhabited or habitable world in space, the means employed were altogether disproportionate to the end secured. His reply was—“We ourselves are the sole and sufficient result of the Universe.” Many of his views have been endorsed by some of the leaders of the new school of physicists, of which Sir Oliver Lodge is a conspicuous representative. Dr. Wallace’s popular books did a great deal to counteract the materialistic views of Huxley and Spencer, and those who still cling to the old faith which they ignored owe him a debt of gratitude for his persistent efforts to supply a scientific basis for the belief that there is in man a higher nature, which could not have been evolved solely by the struggle for material existence.

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