

FICHMAN, M. *An elusive Victorian: the evolution of Alfred Russel Wallace*. University of Chicago Press, Illinois: 2004. Pp x, 382. Price \$ 40. ISBN 0-226-24613-2 (hardback).

As compared with just a generation ago, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) has moved out of the shadows and somewhere close to the limelight, but there is still much work to be done. A study in contrasts, Wallace was both an evolutionist and a spiritualist, a socialist and a libertarian, a scientist and a humanist, and a good deal more. But the more we look into his personal history and writings, the more that rational themes emerge that logically link all these sides of his personality together. Martin Fichman's book represents

a new high point in such efforts, as it chooses to study the man in terms of unifying factors instead of dwelling on what many have termed his idiosyncracies, or even eccentricities.

Wallace's story is starting to become familiar: the offspring of a poor but respectable English couple who became involved in surveying activities that brought him close to nature, and who then travelled to the Amazon and the Far East as a professional collector of natural history objects. In the latter area, especially, he succeeded beyond his wildest expectations, not only ending up history's pre-eminent tropical regions naturalist, but perhaps its greatest field biologist overall. Meanwhile, he initiated studies that would make him the father of the field of zoogeography, and independently of Charles Darwin came up with the theory of natural selection in 1858. On his return to England four years later he found himself fashioned a "Darwin supporter," but, given the fact that his own train of thought had been eclipsed by his contact with the already better known man, it has never been clear to what extent this was true, or how this may have obscured the many thoughts he already had percolating in his mind.

Wallace of course wholeheartedly supported Darwinian natural selection at first, but pretty much as soon as he returned to England he began to show signs that he could think for himself. In 1866 he publicly advocated the study of spiritualism and became a full believer shortly thereafter; most observers have assumed that his conversion contradicted in one fashion or another his natural selection model, but this writer has presented evidence for an interpretation that better fits the facts as evident through his own writings. This "no change of mind" model is too complicated to go into here, but significantly Fichman has endorsed this understanding, and in his new book uses it to help illuminate his main theme: the inherent logic of Wallace's social issues involvements.

What emerges is a contextualist exercise that both reviews the most significant elements of Wallace's biography, and diverges from time to time to treat some of its implications for social and science history. He discusses, for example, links between the American philosophers William James and Charles Peirce and Wallace (and the philosophy of pragmatism), Wallace's connections with Henry George, his application of sexual selection theory to the special instance of human societal evolution, and the biological basis of Wallace's socialism and how his late endorsement of it was related to his spiritualistic beliefs.

Fichman's emphasis on Wallace's social science involvements should not be considered a move toward obscurantism, or neglect of the history of science *per se*. Indeed, Wallace's earliest intellectual stirrings appear to have been due to a barely teenage involvement with utopian Owenism, and from that point on the plight of people was never out of his mind. In his own time he was known both as a great scientist and as a great humanist. Fichman has gone a long way toward helping us understand why this was so, and why the study of Wallace, though a challenge, has considerable relevance to our own time.

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