

INTRODUCTION

ONCE UPON A TIME, some one hundred years ago, the British polymath Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) was just about the most famous scientist in the world. He had earned this place – he was often referred to late in life as the ‘Grand Old Man of Science’ – through a career that had stretched into eight decades and touched on matters as diverse as evolutionary biology and spiritualism, glacial theory and land planning, and biogeography and monetary policy. To all these subjects and several more he made notable contributions, but he is now most remembered for his independent discovery of the principle of natural selection in 1858 and the way that discovery prompted Charles Darwin to get going and write *The Origin of Species*. Darwin ended up receiving most of the credit for the idea, however, and despite Wallace’s many period crusades he was quickly forgotten to all but a few specialists when he died in November 1913, just before the start of World War I.

There was nearly total silence on the subject of Wallace for forty-five years, but the 1958 centennial celebration of the first presentation of the natural selection concept reawakened interest in him. Slowly but surely the attention level has been increasing, including the recent publication of a slew of excellent biographies. But the story as it has been presented to date is far from complete. Fundamental questions still exist both as to the ultimate value of his ideas, and how he came to them.

The basic chronology of events of Wallace’s life is reasonably well known. He was born at Llanbadoc, near Usk near the boundary of Wales and England to poor middle-class English parents in 1823, but at the age of five he and his family moved to Hertford, where he was eventually forced to leave school at age thirteen to take up a trade. For a number of years he toiled for an older brother as a surveyor and builder in the West of England and the South of Wales, but then was let go during a work slowdown. In early 1844 he picked up a position as a master at a school in Leicester, where by chance he met another young man, Henry Walter Bates, who was interested in beetle

collecting. Wallace had already undertaken some amateurish natural history studies, both in England and in Wales, but now his enthusiasm for field work grew. When his older brother died suddenly in early 1845 he returned to Wales to take over his surveying business there, but it was only a matter of time before he suggested to Bates that they turn professional as collectors. In early 1848 the two set off for the Amazon.

By this time Wallace had already become a convert to the idea of organic evolution. It was quickly apparent to him, however, that no one seemed to have a workable idea as to what mechanism might be underlying the process. Wallace and Bates made it their business in the Amazon to find out, but after four years an answer had eluded them. Bates remained in South America until 1859, but in 1852 Wallace, weak from various illnesses, left and returned to English soil to ponder his next move.

Within eighteen months he was on the go again, this time to the Indonesia region, then referred to as the 'Malay Archipelago'. There he met with great success, not only as a collector and observer of natural history and native peoples, but also as a theorist. In 1855 he published a paper that neatly summarized the patterns of correlation in time and space between extinct and living forms; this all but founded outright the modern approach to the field of biogeography, which examines "what animals and plants live where, and why". Shortly thereafter his efforts brought to attention a sharp discontinuity between the biotas of western and central Indonesia and those lands to the east, a boundary which is now known as 'Wallace's Line'. And, in 1858, there came the crowning discovery: natural selection – the 'survival of the fittest', thought out while he was resting during a malarial fit. When Wallace wrote up a short essay describing his idea and sent it off to Charles Darwin and another naturalist, geologist Charles Lyell, "for comment", he guaranteed his admission to the highest ranks of scientific company on his return. This took place four years later in 1862; by then the 1859 publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* had stirred up a firestorm of discussion, and Wallace soon found himself at the very center of it.

But in being styled a 'Darwinist' it seems that Wallace had been somewhat incompletely understood. While in fact agreeing with Darwin on most matters, he was not ready to go so far as

extending his support to the full reaches of Darwinian thinking. There is no indication, especially, that Wallace ever believed the higher attributes of human nature had emerged through natural selection. Eventually this schism led him to adopt Spiritualism in 1866, and from that point onward he would also differ from Darwin on a number of other matters in evolutionary theory ranging from the effectiveness of sexual selection (that is, as to whether female choice at the animal level was a significant selecting force) to certain biogeographic questions.

For some fifteen years Wallace gave most of his time to a range of scientific questions, but in the late 1870s he began to expand his focus to matters of social concern. He became a leading advocate of land reform, co-founding the Land Nationalisation Society in 1880 and becoming its first President (he remained in the office through to his death in 1913). He also wrote extensively on subjects as varied as the disposition of wills and trusts, women's suffrage, trade barriers, monetary standards, war spending, the treatment of labor, vaccination practices, socialism, reform of the House of Lords, philosophical questions of 'might vs. right', rural depopulation, poverty, adulteration of manufactured goods, foreign loans, and social duty. These interventions did not exactly endear him to most of the power brokers of the period, but the rank and file increasingly came to feel – rightly – that he was on their side.

It is this combined career trajectory that makes Wallace one of the most fascinating and inspiring figures in intellectual history. In a 1901 review of his *Studies Scientific and Social* the great American philosopher Charles Peirce referred to him thusly:

Not quite a typical man of science is Wallace; not a man who observes and studies only because he is eager to learn, because he is conscious that his actual conceptions and theories are inadequate, and he feels a need of being set right; nor yet one of those men who are so dominated by a sense of the tremendous importance of a truth in their possession that they are borne on to propagate it by all means that God and nature have put into their hands no matter what, so long as it be effective. He is rather a man conscious of superior powers of sound and solid reasoning, which enable him to find paths to great truths that other men could not, and also to put the truth before his fellows with a demonstrative evidence that another man could not bring out; and along with this there is a moral sense, child-like in its candor, manly in its vigor, which will not allow him to

approve anything illogical or wrong, though it be upon his own side of a question which stirs the depths of his moral nature.

A good indication of the depth of Wallace's concern for his fellow man can be drawn from the stirring final words of an essay he composed in 1906 – at the age of eighty-three – regarding “the Native Problem”:

For nearly twelve years I travelled and lived mostly among uncivilised or completely savage races, and I became convinced that they all possessed good qualities, some of them in a very remarkable degree, and that in all the great characteristics of humanity they are wonderfully like ourselves. Some, indeed, among the brown Polynesians especially, are declared by numerous independent and unprejudiced observers, to be both physically, morally, and intellectually our equals, if not our superiors; and it has always seemed to me one of the disgraces of our civilisation that these fine people have not in a single case been protected from contamination by the vices and follies of our more degraded classes, and allowed to develop their own social and political organism under the advice of some of our best and wisest men and the protection of our world wide power. That would have been indeed a worthy trophy of our civilisation. What we have actually done, and left undone, resulting in the degradation and lingering extermination of so fine a people, is one of the most pathetic of its tragedies.

I have been a close student of Wallace's work and life for some thirty years, and never cease to be amazed at the breadth and solidity of his vision, whether it lead the student in scientific or social/moral directions. I believe I can fully understand Ms. Cluysenaar's desire to express the effect of his inspiration in poetical form; certainly the events of his life provide the poet with ample opportunities for engagement. Wallace himself enjoyed (and actually wrote some) poetry, moreover, and I'm sure he would be quite pleased to be remembered in this fashion.

Charles H. Smith