

Alfred Russel Wallace notes 3: two early publications

I have recently come across two early publications by Alfred Russel Wallace that merit brief notice. They are from the period 1846 to 1848 when Wallace was residing in Neath, Glamorganshire, prior to his departure for South America. At present they represent the second and fourth oldest known Wallace publications, and help provide contexts for his activities both then, and later.

The earlier of the two items (Rowland *et al.* 1846) is a petition to the House of Commons printed in *Appendix to the reports of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Public Petitions, Session 1846*. A bill was under consideration to repeal parts of an old statute that imposed penalties on organizations whose members gathered together in lecture halls and reading rooms for seditious purposes; this was no longer considered a problem, but the statute could also be interpreted as applying to more general settings such as libraries. Rowland was president of the Neath Public Library, and it is implied in the communication that Llewellyn and Wallace were members of the Library. The petition supported the statute's removal so that "societies established for the advancement of knowledge and the progressive improvement of mankind" would no longer fear its threat.

Wallace's allegiances in the late 1830s and early- and mid-1840s are still not fully established, and this communication serves two purposes in that regard. First, it further showcases the "advancement of knowledge" theme that was central to his thinking early on (see Wallace 1845; 1905: 1: 201–204). About 1837, shortly after arriving in London as an apprentice, Wallace had fallen in with some Owenist groups that espoused similar goals; this experience may well have underlain his concern that the free development of institutions furthering such advancement was endangered by statutes of the kind under consideration for repeal, and led him to lend his name to the petition to the House of Commons.

The communication also provides evidence of Wallace's formal connection to the Neath Public Library. Hughes (1989) mentioned Wallace's curatorship at the Neath Philosophical and Literary Institution Museum and his association with the Neath Mechanics Institute, but only implied that he must have found the Public Library's collection "pleasing". Given his co-authorship of the petition, he must have been viewed as one of the institution's leading supporters.

The second item (Wallace 1848), printed in early January 1848 (or possibly late December 1847), is from a weekly attachment to *The people's journal*, a London magazine. Wallace's letter (and an attached enclosure) appeared under the title "Emigration", and consisted of the suggestion that English labourers consider emigrating to the American South because the region had "plenty of food and land" and a healthy climate. He also offered the naive argument that "The example of free labour, and what it can do, before their eyes, would do more for the abolition of slavery, by appealing to the pockets of the planters, than can all the writings of the abolitionists".

The letter was signed "Alfred P. Wallace, Neath, Glamorganshire". The "P." was a printing error, however, as can be ascertained by the fact that *Hunt's directory* for Neath for

1848 listed only one Alfred Wallace residing in the town, and at the same residence as Wallace's older brother John (known to have been there at that time). Moreover, the immediate reason for Wallace's communication was intelligence received from his sister Frances (Fanny), who had just returned from a teaching stint in Alabama and Georgia (Wallace 1905: 1: 256). Wallace (1848) referred to her as "a relation of mine", and to these places, in the letter.

Though in some respects a minor item, the letter is suggestive in two potentially significant directions, both connected to Wallace's sister. This is, apparently, the first indication of his nearly lifelong interest in the notion that the tropics were essentially healthy, and that Europeans need not worry about acclimatizing to the climate.¹ Less obviously, the letter gives evidence of a more important general influence on his life by his sister than has heretofore been acknowledged.

Wallace's several other sisters were considerably older than him and died young, so Fanny (1812–1893) was the only one he knew in his teens and adulthood. It is apparent from letters, photos, and his few mentions of her in published sources that they were very close. Later, she would influence his life in at least two important ways: first, through her marriage to the photographer Thomas Sims², and second, when in 1865 she suggested to him that he investigate spiritualism. Fanny was more than ten years older than Alfred, and before her return to England in September 1847 she had studied in France, run a small school in England, and taken on employment as an instructor both locally and, finally, in the United States. Her native intelligence, independence, and travel experience may well have been an inspiration to him as he grew up, and this letter provides some early evidence for that surmise.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Wallace (1878: 1–26; 1898; 1907).

² Wallace met Sims when they lodged together in Neath, and most likely first introduced him to his sister; Sims and Fanny married after Wallace left for the Amazon. When Wallace returned from the Amazon in 1852 and the Far East in 1862, he, Fanny, and his brother-in-law lodged together, and they kept in close touch thereafter. Wallace took an interest in photography beginning in the early 1840s (Smith 2006), and his brother-in-law's being one of the first professional photographers in England likely continued to fuel that interest. Most notably, Wallace would later write on spirit photography and astronomical photography.

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