

# Alfred Russel Wallace notes 5: Just how well known *was* Wallace in his own time?



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Over the past years I have several times expressed the conclusion that the celebrated naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) was, in his later years, one of most famous scientists in the world (eg Smith 1998; 2004). As these statements have recently been challenged (see p 30), it seems they now must be more substantively defended. I will attempt to do this here in three ways: (1) by providing period quotations to this effect (2) by giving the results of a short content analysis, and (3) by allusion to Wallace’s record of success in publishing.

Good evidence of his esteem—and fame—is, simply, what people of his time were saying about him. Following is a list of quotations, taken first from Wallace obituaries, and then from other printed sources.

## *From Obituaries:*

‘...one of the most fruitful and richly freighted lives ever devoted to the twin causes of Truth and Humanity.’ (*The Daily Chronicle* (London), 8 November 1913, p 1); ‘He was one of the greatest and clearest thinkers of his age.’ (*The Daily Citizen* (London), 8 November 1913, p 1); ‘...the greatest of all modern scientists...’ (*The Daily Mirror* (London), 8 November 1913, p 4); ‘...he was a great man in the truest sense of the word.’ (*British Medical Journal*, 15 November 1913, p 1338); ‘...one of the world’s greatest scientists...’ (*Forest and Stream*, 15 November 1913, p 627); ‘The doyen of English scientists...’ (*The Dial*, 16 November 1913, p 416); ‘We should not know where to look among the world’s greatest men for a figure more worthy to be called unique.’ (*The Independent* (New York), 20 November 1913, p 329); ‘...a great and significant career has just been closed, but its full measure will probably never be known to any single man.’ (*Science*, 19 December 1913, p 871); ‘...the last survivor of the illustrious band of pre-eminent English naturalists of the nineteenth century...’ (*The Entomologist’s Monthly Magazine*, December 1913, p 276); ‘...one of the greatest naturalists of the nineteenth century’ (*School World*, December

1913, p 451); ‘...standing in the highest rank among ornithologists, entomologists and botanists...’ (*The Auk*, January 1914, p 138); ‘Only a great ruler could have been accorded by the press of the world any such elaborate obituary recognition as was evoked by the death of Alfred Russel Wallace...’ (*Current Opinion*, January 1914, p 32); ‘...was the acknowledged dean of the world’s scientists...’ (*ibid.*, p 33); ‘...the last of the giants of English nineteenth-century science...’ (*Journal of Botany*, January 1914, p 15); ‘...ranks far above all his scientific contemporaries as a pioneer of social progress.’ (*Socialist Review*, January 1914, p 15); ‘...a scientific worker of the highest eminence...’ (*The Theosophical Path*, January 1914, p 59); ‘...un des hommes les plus éminents de notre temps...’ (*Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris* 11, n.s. (1914–19), p 253).

### From Other Sources:

‘...England’s most eminent living naturalist...’ (*The Literary World* (Boston), 13 November 1886, p 392); ‘...the world’s greatest living naturalist...’ (*The Daily Whig* (Kingston, Ontario), 7 March 1887, p 8); ‘...the most eminent of living naturalists...’ (*The Weekly University Courier* (Lawrence, Kansas), 6 May 1887, p 2); ‘...the most

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—English Illustrated Magazine, 1904

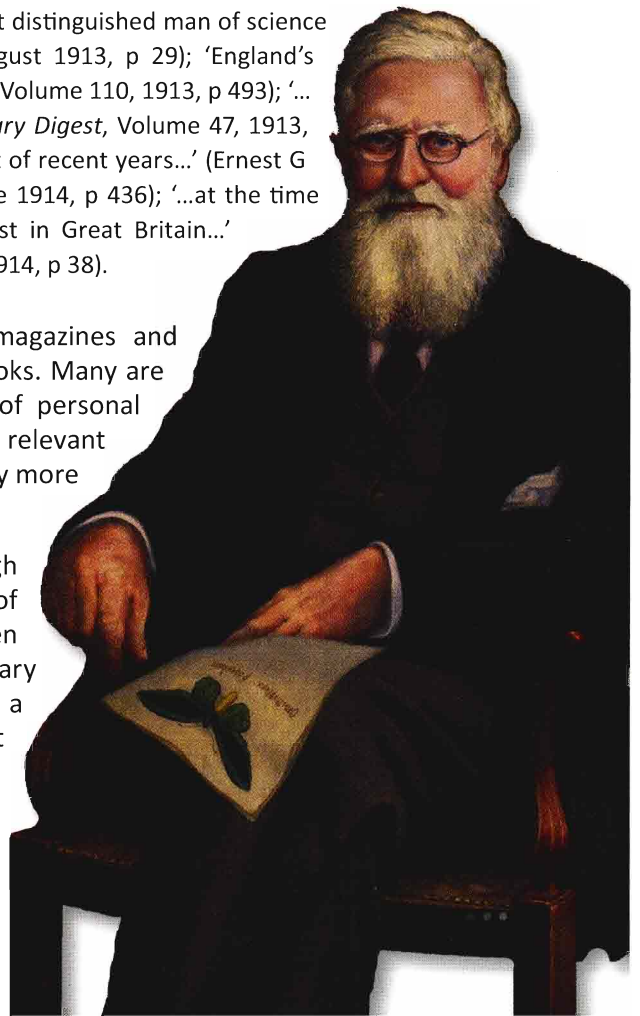
eminent living naturalist in the world.’ (*Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), 19 May 1887, p 1); ‘...the greatest living naturalist in Britain...’ (*York Herald*, 8 November 1889, p 3); ‘...the greatest living authority in his department...’ (Andrew Dickson White, *Popular Science Monthly*, July 1890, p 299); ‘...the greatest living working naturalist...’ (*The Arena*, December 1892, p xix); ‘Of scientific writers still living [one of the three] most prominent in literature...’ (James Logie Robertson, *A History of English Literature for Secondary Schools*, 1894, p 360); ‘...undoubtedly the foremost naturalist in the English-speaking world...’ (*Our Day*, November 1895, p 237); ‘...England’s greatest living naturalist...’ (*Human Nature*, August 1896, p 53); ‘...perhaps the

most eminent man of science now living’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1898, p 4); ‘The greatest living English scientist...’ (Charles Brodie Patterson, *Mind*, September 1898, p 331); ‘...the greatest living writer on natural history...’ (*The Book Buyer*, November 1898, p 318); ‘...probably the greatest living naturalist...’ (*The Coming Age*, April 1899, p 467); ‘...foremost naturalist of the age.’ (*South Australian Register*, 29 August 1899, p 4); ‘...the most famous scientific man living on earth to-day.’ (Minot Judson Savage, *Life Beyond Death*, 1901, p 279); ‘...its [evolution] greatest living exponent...’ (George Croly, *Tarry Thou Till I Come*, 1902, p xiv); ‘...the greatest living evolutionist...’ (*The World To-Day*, July 1 1903, p 802); ‘...the greatest living evolutionist...’ (Robert J Thompson, *Wilshire’s Magazine*, October 1903, p 19);

'...one of the greatest of living Englishmen.' (*The Garden*, 26 December 1903, p 440); '...the foremost living European naturalist...' (Nellie Beighle, *Book of Knowledge*, 1903, p 138); '...[If I were asked] what great man would be regarded as the most important and significant figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I should hesitate between Walt Whitman and Alfred Russel Wallace.' (GK Chesterton, *English Illustrated Magazine*, January 1904, p 420); '...the foremost living European naturalist.' (*West Gippsland Gazette*, 5 December 1905, p 7); '...our most eminent Socialist...' (*Review of Reviews* (London), November 1906, p 499); '...the greatest living evolutionary philosopher...' (*Watson's Jeffersonian Magazine*, January 1907, p 150); '...the most eminent living evolutionary philosopher...' (*The Arena*, December 1907, p 752); '...the veteran leader of living scientists...' (*The Western Australian* (Perth), 27 February 1908, p 4); '...one of the greatest thinkers...' (*Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, New South Wales), 26 February 1909, p 2); '...the greatest scientist of the age...' (*The Register* (Adelaide), 2 April 1909, p 6); '...the greatest living representative of many famous men...' (*The Register* (Adelaide), 10 December 1910, p 12); '...the most distinguished of all our living scientists...' (James Ramsay MacDonald, *The Socialist Movement*, 1911, p 88); '...every Socialist of note, beginning with the peer of them all...Wallace...' (*Railway Carmen's Journal*, March 1912, p 146); 'Of the master minds of the last century... Wallace...stands out in its field preeminent.' (*The Bridgemen's Magazine*, February 1913, p 107); 'Perhaps the most distinguished man of science alive to-day...' (*Harper's Weekly*, 16 August 1913, p 29); 'England's greatest living scientist...' (*The Spectator*, Volume 110, 1913, p 493); '...our greatest living scientist...' (*The Literary Digest*, Volume 47, 1913, p 454); 'The most distinguished scientist of recent years...' (Ernest G Steven, *American Law Review*, May-June 1914, p 436); '...at the time of his death...the greatest living scientist in Great Britain...' (Charles Edward Locke, *A Man's Reach*, 1914, p 38).

These remarks run the gamut, from magazines and scientific journals, to newspapers and books. Many are editorial comments; thus, the absence of personal attributions. Searches through other relevant databases would doubtlessly turn up many more such statements.

The matter can also be approached through content analysis. An online search of 60 of the best-known scientists active between 1900-14, via the HathiTrust Digital Library ([www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org), which includes a major portion of the total literature of that period, excluding newspapers), revealed that only two then-living individuals, Lord Kelvin and Max Planck, resulted in substantially more hits than Wallace.



Wallace hits came to over 8,000—equal to, or a little ahead of, Robert Koch, Albert Einstein, Walter Reed and David Starr Jordan. Charles Darwin’s name results in over 16,000 hits, but the rest of his circle result in fewer than 5,000 each. Surprisingly, a parallel search on naturalists alone, restricted to the years 1870 through 1895, produced similar results, with Darwin significantly ahead at 19,000+, Wallace at 9,000+, and Lyell, Huxley and Richard Owen trailing, in that order.

These data adequately substantiate my earlier remarks. Yet historian John van Wyhe has recently written ‘... he never approached anything like the level of fame or respect attributed to Lyell, Richard Owen, William Whewell, Louis Agassiz, T. H. Huxley, Hooker, or Darwin’ (Van Wyhe 2013a, p 172). Van Wyhe has continued to make such assertions in various public contexts (eg Van Wyhe 2013b, 2013c), and it seems some exception should be taken.

Clearly, the evidence suggests that, Van Wyhe’s statements notwithstanding, Wallace *was* among the pre-eminent names in science in his later years. ‘Fame’ and ‘eminence’ are one thing, and ‘influence’, another. Certainly there were many colleagues of his time who looked upon his varied interests with disdain, but there seems to be little indication that this treatment had any effect on shutting down his literary production, or its overall reception. Using Google’s Ngram Viewer, Beccaloni (2013) has traced citations of Wallace’s works since his time, and while in the earlier years of Wallace’s career, Charles Lyell’s (and of course Darwin’s) works were much more highly cited, in his later years he had passed Hooker, Huxley and Owen, and was about even with Lyell.

Lastly, there is little if any evidence that any of Wallace’s scientific writings encountered resistance to getting into print, from any of those who might have disapproved of his spiritualism or socialism. One should therefore seriously question whether such disapproval had much of an effect on his literary career—and the general level of esteem held for him—at all.

## REFERENCES

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