

Alfred Russel Wallace notes 6: More on the mailing date of the Ternate essay to Darwin



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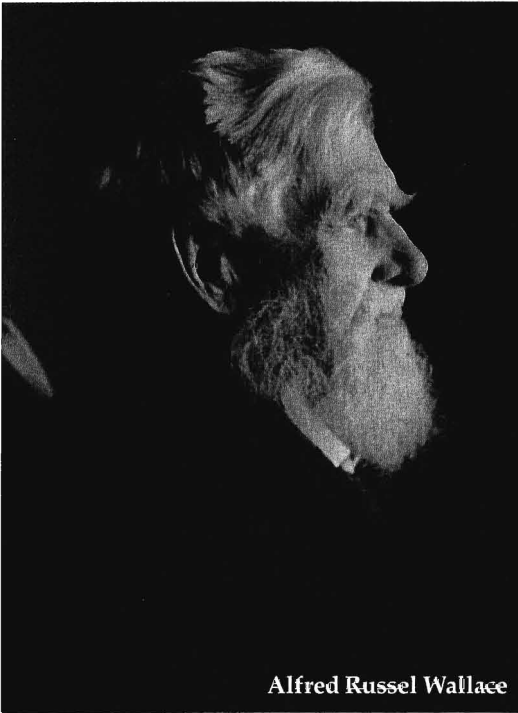
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The debate as to when in 1858 Alfred Russel Wallace sent Charles Darwin his Ternate essay on natural selection, and what happened next, continues. Works by Roy Davies (2008, 2012) project Wallace's materials as being a March 1858 reply to a letter from Darwin dated 22 December 1857, and Darwin's subsequent reception of the materials as taking place in early June 1858; John van Wyhe (van Wyhe and Rookmaaker 2012; van Wyhe 2013) argues for an April mailing and a mid-June reception date. I (Smith 2013, 2014) have suggested an alternative interpretation of the facts. All of this bears on whether Darwin might have had time to hastily "borrow" some of Wallace's ideas before communicating his dilemma to geologist Charles Lyell in a letter (probably) dated 18 June 1858.

The Davies and van Wyhe interpretations are grounded in the understanding that Wallace's mailing was in response to the Darwin letter. No other evidence seems to exist that it was, given my recent debunking (Smith 2014) of the only other connection that has been posed to indicate such: some words Wallace wrote in his 1905 autobiography *My Life* referring to Lyell in a way that might be taken as indicating Wallace was aware of Lyell's interest in his work as of 1858 (but more likely meaning something quite different).

In one of my earlier works (Smith 2013) I listed the five publications in which Wallace related the timing of his mailing to Darwin. These all use wording similar to "sent it by the next post", with one of them reading "...the next post, which would leave in a day or two". I now find that I overlooked a sixth description, albeit a single-sentence one. As part of his acceptance speech on receiving the Linnean Society's first Darwin-Wallace medal in 1908, he wrote: "The idea came to me, as it had come to Darwin, in a sudden flash of insight: it was thought out in a few hours – was written down with such a sketch of its various applications and developments as occurred to me at the moment, – then copied on thin letter-paper and sent off to Darwin – all within



one week” (Wallace 1909, pp 6–7). Because all seem agreed that the essay was very likely written in late February or the beginning of March, these words, featuring an entirely different way of describing the time frame, again support an early March mailing date, rather than an April one.

I surmise that Wallace most probably did deposit his materials for mailing in early March, before he saw the incoming Darwin letter (*ie* he had already left them for posting by the time he received and read the latter). Still, it must yet be conceded that they could have arrived at Down in either early- or mid-June, depending on extenuating circumstances. They might, for example, have been misrouted and temporarily delayed through one of the several sorting operations occurring between Ternate and Down; alternately, perhaps Darwin did receive

the Wallace communication in early June but simply “sat” on his letter to Lyell for a couple of weeks before dating and actually sending it. Van Wyhe and Rookmaaker’s original paper (2012) in this debate produced a widespread (worldwide) reaction that Darwin was now “off the hook”, but it seems to me this conclusion is premature, at least in terms of the evidence currently available.

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