

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 9: The South Asian Connection. ¹

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Summary: Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) is best known for his natural history explorations and theoretical biology, but he was also a potent social critic on subjects ranging from land tenure and colonial policy to antivaccinationism and poverty. Here, one of his emphases in the latter domain is spotlighted: his interest in South Asian affairs. This extended to a variety of subjects in the areas of politics, economics, health, literature, sociology, etc., and to a degree that may have had some influence on the development of thought of some major South Asian figures, including Mahatma Gandhi and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. *Key words:* South Asia, India, Sri Lanka, social criticism, colonial policy

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) is well known to historians for his fundamental contributions to the studies of evolution and biogeography; beyond these he was an important purveyor of theory in several other sciences. Moreover, as one of the most thorough and perceptive of nineteenth-century naturalist-collectors, his exploits in the Amazon and the Malay Archipelago brought him fame as a geographer, ethnographer and explorer. Lesser known today was his role as one of the most potent social critics of the late Victorian age, though from time to time treatments are seen of his immersion in a variety of period issues such as land ownership, antivaccinationism, colonial policy, and the plight of the poor. In this short communication meant to introduce the subject, another of his interests of the latter type is discussed, seemingly for the first time: his connections to the South Asian cultural and political independence movements.

Context

Although it is known that Wallace's interest in social issues extended all the way back to his teen years,² the depth of his involvement did not become public until the appearance of *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869.³ Readers of this classic work were surprised to find that it ended with several paragraphs of damning social criticism. A few years later Wallace began publishing original ideas on a variety of social issues, and in 1880 developed a focus on land tenure problems leading to his Presidency of the new Land Nationalisation Society in 1881, and book *Land Nationalisation* ⁴ in 1882. Over his final thirty years his commitment to social and political issues was fully equal to his scientific efforts.

Before about 1880 Wallace's notices of South Asian subjects were limited largely to biological and ethnographic questions, often in the context of exemplifying some general pattern, or point. His turn toward social issues around that date (the year of publication of *Island Life*,⁵ his last major work on biogeography) led him to read more in those directions. One of the publications he encountered was the short-lived *The Statesman*, edited by Robert

Knight (1825–1892), an expatriate Englishman best known for founding and leading what became known as *The Times of India*.⁶ Knight was a critic of English rule in South Asia, and of those local figures who endorsed it. *The Statesman*, Indian edition, first appeared in 1875 (and is still running there), but the London edition lasted little more than a year, in 1880–81. In his autobiography *My Life* Wallace writes:

...like myself, [Grant Allen 1848–1899, a prominent literary figure who was one of Wallace's favorite writers]...was more than a land nationalizer, and my first knowledge of his political and social views was derived from an article he wrote on the condition of India somewhere about 1880. Through my friend, the late Sir David Wedderburn, I had become aware of the terrible defects of our government of that country owing to the ever-increasing influence of European planters, manufacturers, and capitalists; and I was also a reader of *The Statesman*, a paper brought out by a gentleman who had been for many years editor of one of the most advanced Calcutta newspapers, and who established it for the purpose of letting Englishmen know the real facts as to the government of India. All the statements in this paper were founded upon Government Reports or other official documents, referred to in detail. I knew, therefore, that Grant Allen's views as stated in this paper were correct, and therefore wrote to tell him how pleased I was to find that he was not *only* interested in physical science, as was so often the case with my scientific friends.⁷

From this beginning Wallace demonstrated a continuing, if sporadic, interest in Indian affairs, usually with a political focus, but sometimes involving cultural or literary subjects. In 1898, as part of a lengthy footnote on pages 339–341 of his *The Wonderful Century*, he writes “The Parliamentary Papers recently issued on the Plague in India reveal ... such an utter disregard for the well-being of the Indian peoples, while taxing them to the verge of starvation, as to be nothing less than criminal.”⁸ In 1901, during a meeting with the poet and traveler Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840–1922), he “expressed strong views on the pauperization of India.”⁹ Some months later he signed a memorial prepared by the Indian Famine Union and submitted to the Secretary of State for India in January 1902.¹⁰ In 1904 he sent a letter of support for a planned magazine focusing on Ceylon (Anon. 1904).¹¹ In 1908 he was interviewed by John Page Hopps for Calcutta's *Modern Review*. Apparently his opinions on English colonial rule in India had not much changed, as he quipped:

I must say I am surprised and rather disgusted at the weakness and cowardice of John Morley of whom I had such hopes. One naturally expected from him something akin to sympathy with national aspirations, something at least more liberal than his reference to such aspirations as crying for the moon. The true way to redeem India is to begin at the bottom, to restore the village communities as self-governing bodies, under the supervision of thoroughly seasoned and sympathetic English or Native inspectors; to restore to the people their land and to make it inalienable, with all that is upon it. That will make an end of the money-lender and the lawyer.

¹²

Lord Morley was at that point Secretary of State of India; Wallace is probably referring to his 1907 move to take repressive measures against what the British viewed as sedition in India. This was all the more shocking to Wallace because it seemed to go against Morley's earlier liberalism. Wallace would not have been at all happy with Morley's apparent acceptance of the British “divide and conquer” strategy of calling for separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims. Several months later the same magazine carried a follow-up letter of his, complaining that Morley should have sent

...out to India, Englishmen whom he could trust, to bring him *true* information as to the actual condition of the workers of India, and the aspirations of the educated classes. He should also have given *hope* to the people of India. He should have declared his determination to *initiate*, and carry out *continuously*, even if *slowly*, the long-promised grant of Self-Government in India; beginning, not at the top, which is absolutely worthless – a mere sop to officialdom – but at the *bottom*, in the restoration of the village communities, each with an educated native, *of the same race*, as representative of the *protecting* – not the oppressing – power of the English rule.¹³

It is apparent that Wallace's interest in the subject was fueled both by general concerns, and by connections to individuals. A few of the latter should next be mentioned.

Personal Connections

I have already noted above how Wallace was first alerted to conditions in India by two of his contemporaries, Sir David Wedderburn and Grant Allen, but there are some additional connections to note. Perhaps the most important was his apparent friendship with the celebrated art historian, philosopher and social critic Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947).

How Wallace first came to know the latter is a bit of a mystery. Coomaraswamy was a Hindu Tamil (his father, Muthu Coomaraswamy, 1834–1879, the first South Asian knighted, had come to Ceylon from Tamil Nadu), but had grown up from an early age with his English mother in West England. There he attended Wycliffe College from 1889 to 1895, eventually returning to Ceylon for a period but then taking a degree in geology and botany from the University of London in 1900. Central to our story is Coomaraswamy's apparent infatuation with Wallace during his Wycliffe years (likely fueled by his Housemaster there, Dr. F. Arthur Sibly [1859–1928], who had interests in a number of Wallace staples: physical geography/glaciology, science education, psychical research, and anti-vaccinationism¹⁴). Since 1882 the College has published a magazine called *The Star*,¹⁵ and issues for the years 1890 through 1897 contain frequent mentions of Coomaraswamy's activities, particularly as a member/officer of the school's Literary Society, and Field Club. From this source we learn that Coomaraswamy: won Honours in geology in the Cambridge Local Examinations (Issue No. 26, 1890); gained a prize for his butterfly collection (No. 27, 1890); gave separate talks on snakes and fossils as Field Club Curator, and was Distinguished in French and Drawing (No. 29, 1892); introduced a motion favoring vegetarianism (No. 30, 1892); gave a talk on hawk moths and received a prize for his collection of fossils (No. 33, 1892); introduced a motion to the Literary Society that "Darwin's theory of evolution is not a fallacy" (No. 34, 1892); debated a motion against Irish Home Rule introduced to the Literary Society, and read a paper on ants to the Field Club (No. 35, 1893); introduced a motion to the Literary Society that "the Parliamentary Franchise ought to be extended to women" (No. 36, 1894); published a paper on the regional geology of the Cotwolds, and read a paper on spiritualism to the Literary Society (No. 37, 1895); gave a lecture on flint implements to the Field Club (No. 42, 1896), argued against corporal punishment and government monopolies, and for free trade and equal rights for women, to the Literary Society, at one point even bringing up Wallace's favorite motto, *Fiat Justitia ruat coelum* (!) (No. 43, 1897); and in a parting speech to the Society deplored England's war activities and treatment of Ireland and India. All of these subjects (including the remarkable hawk moth connection) were near and dear to Wallace's heart. It is thus not surprising to find they ended up corresponding with one another. A 15

December 1898 letter from Wallace to his son William contains a reference to “Ananda,” commenting that “...Ananda sent some nice photos from Ceylon of plants, there was no letter so we don’t know how they are getting on! I hope he will come back alive” (WCP160). Wallace’s collection *Studies Scientific and Social*, moreover, credits one of the photographs appearing in that book to Coomaraswamy, and there are others in that work that may be from him (see, for example, Figs. 82 and 83 in Volume 1). Other contacts between the two include two in 1908.¹⁶

Wallace had connections with other South Asian figures as well, and none of these has been investigated in any detail:

Then-London-based Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848–1909) and Wallace corresponded in 1899 and 1900 (WCP 3175, 5019, 5020, and 5021), but probably never met. Dutt was a civil servant, economic historian, and literary scholar and was president of the Indian National Congress in 1899. His known contacts with Wallace concerned (1) his translation of the epic Sanskrit poem the *Mahabharata*; he probably sent proofs of the work to Wallace for comment (WCP 5019, 5020, and 5021).¹⁷ (2) his book *Famines in India* (WCP 3175).¹⁸ Wallace was extremely impressed with the poem, later commenting on it in some detail in his book *Social Environment and Moral Progress*.¹⁹

Geologist Pramatha Nath Bose (1855–1934) contacted Wallace in 1913 (WCP1337): “I am taking the liberty of sending you two copies of my ‘Epochs of Civilization.’ For some of the views in it I am indebted to you, as you will see from the quotations I have made from your work.” Bose was married to Kamala, daughter of R. C. Dutt.

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) was a local MP in London and a founder of the Indian National Congress who contacted Wallace on the latter’s “Vaccination a Delusion”²⁰ in 1898 (WCP3062). Naoroji, like Wallace, had a strong interest in poverty, and was critical of foreign intervention in India.

Ramananda Chatterjee (1865–1943) was editor of *Modern Review*, which contains a fair number of mentions of Wallace.²¹

Another important South Asia-related connection was with Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), a Scottish biologist and urban planner who spent most of the years 1914 to 1924 in India. Geddes had been influenced by Wallace early on in his career; his books *The Evolution of Sex* (1889) and *Sex* (1914)²² contain many respectful referrals to Wallace’s works, and some correspondence has survived (WCP1763, from 1887, and five letters from Wallace to Geddes in the Patrick Geddes Papers collection at the University of Strathclyde). In 1888 Wallace wrote a letter of reference for Geddes,²³ and they met in person at least once or twice (at the Industrial Remuneration Conference in 1885 and/or the Claims of Labour Conference in 1886). More importantly, and despite Geddes’ Neo-Lamarckian biology sympathies, he seems to have shared many of Wallace’s ideals within the arena of planning, for example support of open space diversification (of the “Garden City” variety), a respect for personal customs and living space, and (in harmony with Wallace’s anti-vaccination arguments) an emphasis on sanitation improvement as a primary means of fighting disease. All of these connections informed Geddes’ efforts during his years in India as a town planner.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), a literary figure and opponent of British imperialism,

was a close friend of Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), one of Wallace’s socialist sympathizers (though Tagore himself was not a socialist), and also knew R. C. Dutt and Patrick Geddes.

Perspective

The Indian national movement was extraordinary in its range and diversity of interests. Viewed anthropologically one often sensed that overthrowing the British was an incidental goal of the movement. Another sign of the plurality of the movement came from the Englishmen/women who participated in it. The roll call included not only Allan Octavian Hume...a great ornithologist, but Annie Besant, C F. Andrews and even Alfred Wallace, the theorist of evolutionary diversity...²⁴

Although Wallace’s interest in British colonial India is well enough documented, his own impact on events there is less obvious, though it may be greater than initially meets the eye.

To begin with, Wallace was senior to just about all of the characters involved, and by the 1870s and 1880s had expressed in print almost all of his basic philosophy of social and cultural evolution. This included his recognition of the basic equality of indigenes with Westerners insofar as intelligence and innate moral compass, and correspondingly their abilities at creative invention. In books such as his *Narrative of Travels on the Amazon* (1853), *Palm Trees of the Amazon* (1853), *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) and *Australasia* (1879) there are dozens of examples of his positive appraisals of native creativity, extending to architecture, ship-building, arts, and crafts. In other efforts ²⁵ he extends his admiration to various historical productions from around the world, including the Egyptian pyramids and temples and other structures found in Indonesia, Central America, and Southeast Asia. These writings must in sum have produced a powerful impression on an increasingly Euro-centric population, causing them to reassess.

In this regard the career of Coomaraswamy deserves particular notice. Shortly after collecting his university degree in 1900 he became the first director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon, a position that made his scientific reputation. Over the next few years he did some important geological work there, (eventually leading to his doctorate in 1906), but his attention soon drifted away from natural science to cultural conservation. He became a leader in the so-called “Swadeshi movement,” one object of which was “to check the drain on Indian capital involved in the purchase of imported goods, by manufacturing the said goods locally; replacing the removal of money from Indian shores by a circulation of money within the limits of India itself.” ²⁶ But this was only part of the formula. Drawing inspiration from the likes of John Ruskin and William Morris, he began to lobby for the intrinsic worth of South Asian art, crafts, and architecture. This would become a lifelong emphasis in his work. In this connection it would be well to consider Wallace’s role in this process, both in general and specifically with respect to Coomaraswamy.

It can be suggested, for example, that Wallace might also have had a previous, and considerable, influence on the so-called “Arts and Crafts” movement Morris led that was taken up by Coomaraswamy and others. Morris, for one, considerably accelerated his political involvements after reading Wallace’s *Land Nationalisation*, and he must have been aware of at least some of Wallace’s many social reform essays.

Finally, there is every indication that Wallace was highly regarded by Mahatma Gandhi.
²⁷ Wallace’s conclusion that scientific advances had in no way improved people’s moral

sense appears in a number of contexts in writings by Gandhi, as found in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vols. 12, 13, 18, 35, 37, and 39 (covering his publications and correspondence over the years 1916 through 1929). Gandhi appears to have been especially taken with Wallace's book *Social Environment and Moral Progress*. In Vol. 37, in a 1928 essay called 'What do children understand?' Gandhi notes:

The ... correspondent does not advise putting abstract truth before children but explain that we should exhibit before them immoral virtues like truth and prove to them that they, too, have them. In brief, formation of character should have priority over knowledge of the alphabet. If this order is reversed, the attempt would be like putting the cart before the horse and making it push the cart with its nose, and would meet with the same success as the latter course. It is because he realized the truth of this that Darwin's contemporary, the scientist Wallace, said at the age of ninety that in basic moral standards he saw in the so-called educated and reformed nations no progress over the Negroes who are regarded as uncivilized. If we were not under the spell of the various external temptations that exist today, we would realize the truth of Wallace's statement and plan and frame our educational curriculum in a different manner.²⁸

Conclusion

These threads are noted here in an effort to introduce scholars to a generally overlooked element of Wallace's influence. Several possible follow-ups are immediately apparent. Certainly the connections between Wallace and Coomaraswamy are very suggestive, and it would be interesting to try to determine in more detail how and when Gandhi was first introduced to Wallace's writings, and where this led. (For example, Vinoba Bhave [Vinayak Narahari Bhave, 1895–1982], a prominent land and environmental reformer, was a disciple of Gandhi, and a philosophical connection is not improbable.) A further look at the Swadeshi movement itself could be revealing in this context. Work in other directions might also be contemplated; along these lines a recent chapter by Visvanathan²⁹ on sanitation questions in Victorian India is one admirable start.

Notes

1. References in the text made to archival materials from the Wallace Correspondence Project are indicated by their registry number there; e.g.: "WCP160."
2. Alfred Russel Wallace, *My Life*, 2 vols (Chapman & Hall, London, 1905).
3. Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 2 vols (Macmillan, London, 1869).
4. Alfred Russel Wallace, *Land Nationalisation* (Trübner, London, 1882).
5. Alfred Russel Wallace, *Island Life* (Macmillan, London, 1880).
6. Edwin Hirschmann, *Robert Knight: Reforming Editor in Victorian India*. (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008).
7. *Op. cit.* vol. 2 (note 2), pp. 262–263. See also Anonymous, 'The autobiography of Alfred Russell Wallace', *Indian Review* (Madras) **8**, 13–16 (January 1907).
8. Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Wonderful Century* (Dodd, Mead, New York, 1898), on pp. 339–341.
9. Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries; Being a Personal Narrative of Events 1888–1914. Part Two*

- [1900–1914]. (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1921). On page 10, Blunt describes his 27 July 1901 visit with Wallace and their discussions on animal domestication, ethnology, imperialism and Indian politics.
10. 'Enquiry into the economic condition of India' [originally a memorial prepared by the Indian Famine Union submitted to the Secretary of State for India in January 1902; signed by numerous noteworthies, including Wallace]. In Romesh C. Dutt, *Speeches and Papers on Indian Questions, 1891 and 1902* (Elm Press, Calcutta, 1902), pp. 150–156.
 11. Anonymous, [n.t.], *Sanderesa* (Colombo) No. 29, English Supplement (8 December 1904), p. 4.
 12. John Page Hopps, 'Alfred Russel Wallace on the Indian crisis', *Modern Review* 3, 93 (February 1908).
 13. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Professor Wallace on the Failure of Lord Morley', *Modern Review* 4, 77–78 (July 1908), at p. 78. Features excerpts from a letter from Wallace to Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy.
 14. Wycliffe College, 'Dr. Arthur'. In *Wycliffe and the War: A School Record* (John Bellows, Gloucester, 1923), pp. 371–377.
 15. *The* (Wycliffe) *Star*. <http://wycliffearchives.co.uk/Authenticated/browse.aspx?SectionID=301> (accessed 2 December 2018).
 16. *Op. cit.* (note 13).
 17. Mentioned in James Marchant (ed.), *Alfred Russel Wallace; Letters and Reminiscences* (Harper, New York, 1916), at p. 360.
 18. Wallace, Alfred Russel, Letter dated 1 August 1900 to Romesh Chunder Dutt, on Dutt's book *Famines in India*. In Janendra N. Gupta, *Life and Work of Romesh Chunder Dutt C.I.E.* (Dent, London, and Dutton, New York, 1911), at p. 287.
 19. Alfred Russel Wallace, *Social Environment and Moral Progress* (Cassell, New York, 1913) on pp. 14–17.
 20. Alfred Russel Wallace, *Vaccination a Delusion* (Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1898).
 21. For example, a reprint of the 1908 John Page Hopps interview (see note 12) in *Towards Home Rule* "edited and mostly written by" Ramananda Chatterjee (Modern Review Office, Calcutta, 1917), pp. 102–103; Pramatha Nath Bose, 'The ethical tendencies of Western Civilisation. II.' (*Modern Review* 10, 382–386 (1911)), including a long quote from Wallace's *Wonderful Century* on poverty; Bose's untitled notice of the biography of R. C. Dutt mentioned in note 18 (*Modern Review* 11, 207–211 (1912)), including a quote from Wallace; the four Wallace letters to Dutt mentioned in the text; and the letter on John Morley forwarded by Coomaraswamy (see note 13).
 22. Patrick Geddes and Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (W. Scott, London, 1889); Patrick Geddes and Arthur Thomson, *Sex* (Williams and Norgate, London, 1914).
 23. Philip Boardman, *The Worlds of Patrick Geddes* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978), at p. 104.
 24. Shiv Visvanathan, 'Rethinking waste: time, obsolescence, diversity and democracy', in *Arts and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World* (ed. Raminder Kaur and Parul Dave-Mukherji), pp. 99–118 (Bloomsbury, London, 2015), at p. 104.
 25. E.g., 'Rise and progress of modern views as to the antiquity and origin of man', *Report of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* 46, 100–119 (John Murray, London, 1877); and 'Affinities and origin of the Australian and Polynesian races', *Studies Scientific and Social*, vol. 1 (Macmillan, London, 1900), pp. 461–496.

26. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Swadeshi', *The Indian Review* **8**, 4–7 (January 1907), on p. 4.
27. Shambhu Prasad, 'Towards an understanding of Gandhi's views on science'. In *Mahatma Gandhi's Writings, Philosophy, Audio, Video & Photograph*. http://www.mkgandhi.org/views_on_sci.htm (accessed 2 December 2018).
28. Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 37 (Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1970), p. 248.
29. *Op. cit.* (note 24).

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