



## Biography as a two-edged sword

Patrick Armstrong: Alfred Russel Wallace. London: Reaktion Books, 2019, 208 pp, US\$19.00 PB

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Patrick Armstrong's Wallace biography is part of the "Critical Lives" series that treats in brief (about 40,000 words of text here, by my estimate) major figures in history, and as such must in part be judged for what it cannot do: provide extended insight. On the whole, however, the biography does deliver a slickly written, reasonably comprehensive, and well-balanced account of Wallace's life, no small achievement for such a complex subject. With the aid of a large number of judiciously chosen illustrations and quotations, Armstrong presents a story that the average layperson or undergraduate student can easily appreciate, and to that extent it can be recommended for such a readership.

For those with a more consuming interest in Wallace, however, the work is more problematic. The devil here is not so much in the details as it is in its appreciation of the broader picture.

Still, some details as given are in fact in error, and these mistakes, though mostly small ones, are symptomatic. A few: (1) As a significant matter of chronology, Wallace's older brother died in 1845, not in 1846 as Armstrong states twice. (2) During his North American tour, Wallace did not visit Canada on his way back to England only; indeed, the lectures he gave there were part of a special side-trip he made while staying in Washington D.C. before venturing westward. (3) Wallace was not, with Huxley, the last of the early evolutionists remaining when Darwin died (Joseph Hooker was also still alive). (4) *The Malay Archipelago* has probably never been out of print (notwithstanding the remarks of Van Wyhe (2015), who confuses the date of an imprint with its extended state of availability, and ignores the existence of several Chinese and Japanese imprints from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s). (5) Wallace did not publish his first writing on spiritualism "a few months" after attending his first séance, but over a year later. (6) Wallace could not have turned to spiritualism because of any depression over the death of his mother or being jilted by his fiancée, as his mother died nearly 3 years after the time of his first séance, and he had

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already been seeing his wife-to-be Annie for several months by that date. Nothing earth-shaking here, but nothing to instil confidence either.

Of more concern are Armstrong's attempts to provide perspectives on Wallace's character in the limited space he has been given. This results in both suppression of relevant information, and misguided pronouncements. For example, he states unequivocally that there is "not the slightest evidence" that, as some have suggested, Wallace may have resented the way he was treated by Darwin, Lyell, and Hooker in the 1858 Linnean Society presentation. There is, in fact, such evidence (why else would these suspicions exist?), though of course Wallace was too much of a gentleman to complain overtly: for example, he instead deliberately noted in print, *five times*—not just the one time Armstrong mentions—how he had not had an opportunity to review proofs of the paper before it was made public (nor could he have been very happy that the introductory words to the essay written by Lyell and Hooker included the comment that Wallace had "unreservedly placed [his] paper in our hands," when in fact he hadn't done so).

Then again, Armstrong fails to distinguish between teleological propensities—which he several times accuses Wallace of holding—and notions of final causation. The former idea is suggestive of the influence of first causes, a kind of causality Wallace certainly never supported at any period of his life. This leads him to avoid discussing Wallace's role in anticipating the anthropic principle, which in its various versions is much more closely related to a potentially scientific role for final causes than it is an oversimplistic teleology.

Armstrong also makes light of Wallace's interest in spiritualism, ignoring this reviewer's oft-stated arguments concerning the probable reasons for his adopting the belief. These latter include my observation that there is no evidence, from the essay itself or in any later writings, that Wallace believed his 1858 theory of natural selection accounted for the origin of humankind's higher mental faculties. As a result, the more parsimonious explanation for Wallace's 1866 adoption of spiritualism is that he simply added it on to his earlier understanding; i.e., that the change in his position amounted to an add-on, rather than a reversal.

I further object to Armstrong's frequent observation that Wallace's life was filled with misfortune, bad luck, and painful experiences. This "poor Wallace" portrayal has often been steered toward attempted vilifications of Darwin, though this does not seem to be the author's purpose here (and Armstrong is best known as a Darwin historian). In any case, it seems to me that Wallace was anything but the victim of his life's story, considering his generally happy marriage and home life, fortuitous personal connections, record of discoveries, and celebration by his nation. As his biologist friend Edward Poulton remarked of him in an obituary: "How can I best speak of the long, happy, hard-working, many-sided life that has just come to a close?" Wallace himself stated in his autobiography that his several reversals only served to make his life more vital. It is both inaccurate and disrespectful to think of him in terms of a "victim."

Armstrong is also somewhat unkind in his treatment of the matter of Wallace's sometimes faulty memory, failing to fully distinguish between the two kinds of remembrance well known to be exhibited in self-biography. Actually, many (including Armstrong himself) have pointed to his excellent memory concerning

descriptive details of places, events, or specimens; where Wallace falls down is in that other aspect of biographical memory, the one that aids people in identifying when and where events occurred along a dimension of time or space.

This matter of examining Wallace's memory appears to have an ulterior motive, as does his preposterous appraisal that Wallace possibly "lacked empathy." Although by all accounts shy and not always socially adroit, Wallace is perhaps one of history's most shining examples of compassionate empathy; certainly, 12 years of relatively seamless association with a variety of native peoples, and hundreds of published letters and essays directly related to defending the downtrodden, attest to this. So why does Armstrong make this play?

One can only conclude that it is designed, along with the memory discussions, to bolster the one explorative point that Armstrong makes: that Wallace may have suffered from Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder. Armstrong is not the first to suggest this (see for example Blom 2003; Berry 2008), and in truth, it might help us to understand Wallace's penchant for fact-ordering, numbers, and classification (characteristics Armstrong touches on just a little too often throughout the work). But how does this observation help us understand his *process*: that is, the priorities he enlisted while on his way to creating order out of chaos?

In my opinion, when it comes to Wallace, many commonly held views are a long way from satisfactorily connecting all the dots. Biographies such as this one end up being two-edged swords: they serve to help make the public aware that a great man once existed, but they don't always aid in exposing, or clarifying, the deeper elements of that greatness.

## Reference

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