

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 11: Wallace, Darwin, Education, and the Class Question.

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Summary: In a recent paper by John van Wyhe (2020), the issue of class was discussed and whether Wallace came from a “working class” background. As a result of class differences could or should Wallace be considered differently from Darwin, who supposedly came from a higher class? An additional “myth” highlighted was whether Wallace left school, aged 14, due to difficult family financial circumstances. Van Wyhe contends that Darwin and Wallace were both middle class, and Wallace left school at the “normal” school-leaving age. This article shows that both contentions are mistaken. Class in the 19th century was complex and difficult, indeed a developing concept. The idea of a “middle class” was new and within this there was a stratification between the upper and lower middle classes. As for schools and education, there was no set leaving age specified and education was usually determined by class and family finances. *Key words:* social class; 19th century education; Alfred Russel Wallace; Charles Darwin; schooling

Introduction

In a recent paper by John van Wyhe (2020), the often-posed claim that Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace came from different social classes is disputed. Van Wyhe claims that, “Darwin and Wallace were not from opposite ends of the social spectrum, but from different parts of the middle class, and so had more in common than social differences” (pp. 89-90). In one sense he is correct in that they could both be said today to be from the “middle class”, but this ignores the fact that the notion of class in the early to mid-19th century was only beginning to emerge from previous ideas of status and place. The difference between the top end of the emerging middle class (the upper middle class) where Darwin would have resided and the lower middle class, where the Wallace family would have been placed, was quite stark – the differences being much wider than Van Wyhe contends.

The idea of class is not uniquely British but is probably associated more with the British than with any other country. A dictionary (*OED*) definition of class is as “a division or stratum of society consisting of people at the same economic level or having the same social status”. The idea of class and the development of a class system developed in the 19th century. Class became the term that replaced such ideas as “rank” or “order” in society (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2020). Karl Marx developed ideas of class and how they function in society based on the notion of ‘production’; that is, the technology available and how labour is divided between different strata in society. This concept led to a view of class where, “one class controls and directs the process of production while another class is, or other classes are, the direct producers and providers of services to the dominant class.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2020). Such ideas crystallised into the idea of an upper, middle (upper and lower) and lower (working) class in society.

That there was a difference between the education of Wallace and Darwin is not in doubt. One was privately educated in a tuition-demanding, long-standing school (Darwin); the other (Wallace) in a very different kind of school which served a different class of pupil and family, preparing children for work rather than university.

This article briefly explores, compares, and contrasts education and place in the 19th century society of Wallace and Darwin. It argues that while there are errors in the perception of Wallace as being working class, an analysis of their backgrounds does not support the idea that the differences in their class status was small or that they could be regarded as of “similar class” in this regard.

Wallace and Education

In the early to mid-19th century there was no universal provision for schools by the state in England. The schools that did exist were mainly sponsored by the Church and provided a largely religious education. In 1833 the Government of the day awarded the first state grant (£20,000) to societies providing schools that served sections of society beyond the upper classes/elite. There was no official school leaving age as such, but education was predominantly for the children of gentlemen and the landed gentry. Those in the middle classes who could afford to pay would send their children not to the long-established private schools, but to local fee-paying institutions. Mass education for those who could not afford to pay was not in place and that which did exist was provided by various societies such as the Church of England’s National Society. But there were few of these.

Compulsory schooling for children between the ages of 5-10 only was legislated with the 1880 Education Act. The raising of the school-leaving age to 14 did not happen until 1918 (Education Act, 1918). The “normal age” for children leaving school in the 1830s was between the ages of 10 and 12, but children were not compelled to go to school at all.

Wallace leaving school by the age of 14 sometime before 18 March 1837 (Raby, 2002) was, therefore, not him leaving “at the normal age” (Van Wyhe 2020, p. 90) as there was no “normal age”. Continuation of education in the 1830s was dependent on the ability to pay. Additionally, the 1833 factories act prohibited the employment of children under the age of nine and placed restrictions on the working hours of children under 13 (9 hours per day). It is more likely that Wallace left school because he was able to engage fully as a worker without restrictions on time, or had a need to complete education in basic literacy and numeracy during his apprenticeship training.

It is also worth noting that Wallace’s sister went to Lille in France (circa 1834) to attend a school with a view to her becoming a governess, and this must have had an impact on the family’s finances. Wallace notes that around 1835 his mother sustained a financial loss from the bankruptcy of her brother-in-law, who was executor of her father’s will. This meant the loss of property and money (otherwise due to be released to Wallace and his siblings on their coming of age at 21). He notes that, “[Mr Wilson] became bankrupt in this year, and his own wife and large family were at once reduced from a position of comfort and even affluence, to poverty, almost as great as our own” (Wallace 1905, v. 1, p. 72).

Contrary to Van Wyhe's contention that Wallace's employment as a teacher was due to him completing his education, any employment as a teacher in the 1840s would have been completely unrelated to the age at which an applicant left school. Teachers at that time were often appointed by the clergy, who ran most schools. There was no minimum qualification or training necessary to become a teacher. Indeed, the first public examinations in schools did not occur until December 1858, and these were reserved for boys aged either 16 or 18 who wanted to enter university. School certificates for leavers were not formally established until 1918, and these were usually taken at age 16. That being the case, there were no formal qualifications for Wallace to take to show a potential employer.

In Wallace's autobiography he recounts two interviews for posts as a teacher. In both instances, his interview was conducted by clergymen. The first he failed to secure because his grasp of Latin and quadratic equations was not good enough; with the second – at Leicester Collegiate School – he did secure the position on the strength of his mapping skills and the fact that the post was for teaching junior boys only (Wallace 1905, v. 1, pp. 229-230). Teacher training was not formalised until the 1840s where it began with an apprenticeship model of pupil-teachers. In sum, Wallace's (and indeed anyone's) chances of becoming a teacher during that period were decided not on formal qualifications but purely by interview.

Darwin and Education

A distinctive feature of modern elite society in the UK today is the notion of private education and boarding school. Currently, approximately 7% of British children are educated privately in the UK. Despite this, privately educated children go on to dominate the professions of law, politics and medicine (Henderson *et al.* 2020). Charles Darwin was, in the early 19th century, such a child. The elite (a minority) attended private schools to gain access to higher education and admission to the elite professions. At the age of nine Charles Darwin was sent to board at Shrewsbury School despite the fact he could easily have walked (and indeed, often did) as the school was merely a mile or so from the family home, The Mount. It was the norm for the children of the elite in society to attend a fee-paying boarding school from a relatively young age. As Browne (1995, p. 23) describes it, "Shrewsbury School catered for the sons of local gentlemen, both Whig and Tory, and trained them up for entrance to Oxford or Cambridge University, usually the latter, after which they usually joined one of the established professions."

Darwin did not enjoy school life, but his destiny as a child was to be decided not by what he necessarily wished to pursue, but instead by what his father and family dictated was the right path and profession for a person of his status.

Class and the Darwin Family

The notion of class in British culture has a long and rather complicated history. Van Wyhe's claim that Wallace and Darwin were not necessarily from "different classes" requires some clarification. There were many ways in which class was defined from pre-Victorian, through Victorian, and into the early 20th century in Great Britain. In Victorian times, the idea of a three-class system was in place: the Upper Class, the Middle Class and the Lower Class. In pre-Victorian times, as the three-class system developed, there

were a number of class divisions in society that depended on various factors such as family pedigree, education, wealth etc.

Darwin's father, for example, would have been classed as one of the "landed gentry", that is, having enough to live on without having to work; a man who had wealth and land. As important as wealth and property was for determining class, family pedigree also played a large part in society. Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) was born at Elston Hall, Nottinghamshire, into a class well above any of Wallace's immediate predecessors. This family pedigree would have been handed down in the form of education (as previously noted, in fee-paying private schools), entry to professions such as medicine, law etc., and in land and property ownership.

Darwin's father Robert Waring Darwin (1766–1848) benefitted from his own father's social standing and was privately educated and supported to become a physician, gaining his MD status at Leiden University in the Netherlands. When he set up his own medical practice in Shrewsbury, he was gifted £20 by his father and the same sum by one of his uncles. That would be the equivalent of £6,324¹ in 2020, but of course the buying power of such a sum of money was considerably more in the late 18th century than it would be today. The pay for a domestic servant, for example, was in the order of £2 per annum (equivalent to about £318 in 2020). The sum of £40 would have been enough for a man to keep a family for a year². At this point, however, Robert Darwin was barely twenty years of age.

Darwin's father would have inherited from his own father's estate, who had during his working life built a list of paying clientele for his services as a physician. In addition, he also invested in property and became a wealthy man. He was from a group known as the "landed class" (Allen 2019). That wealth would have put Darwin's father – and, in turn, Charles Darwin – at the top end of the emerging middle class as it developed during Victorian times. Darwin's father could afford land, a large house, and the funds to send his children to private, fee-paying schools. As Browne (1995, p. 7) describes Charles's father, "he was one of the first capitalists of the modern era".

Class and the Wallace Family

Wallace's father, listed as a "gentleman" on Wallace's birth certificate, would have self-identified as such. He would likely have reasoned that his position as a lawyer, his property and engaging servants afforded him such status. Whether other "gentlemen" of the time agreed is of course unknown. But it is known that social climbing by those in the professions was rife; the industrial revolution had sparked a large expansion of the "middle classes", and the difference between the top and bottom end of the class was stark.

In the early 19th century the professional classes – which included lawyers, barristers, merchants and businessmen – occupied various levels from high to low professional classes depending on their wealth, property and social importance. Allen (2019) refers to

¹ "£40 in 1787 → 2020 | UK Inflation Calculator." Official Inflation Data, Alioth Finance, 16 Sept. 2020, <https://www.officialdata.org/uk/inflation/1787?amount=40>.

² Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "London History - Currency, Coinage and the Cost of Living", Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 16 Sept. 2020)

such professions as belonging to the Bourgeoisie. It is the case, however, that Wallace's father did not practice law, and invested in often failing ventures. As such, he would more likely have been considered as "lower middle class". As Allen (2019, p. 97) defines it, the Lower Class "...expanded over time... it consisted of shopkeepers and tradesmen plus those in science and the arts. The latter might have been assigned to the bourgeoisie but were put in the lower middle class in view of their income... the definition of lower middle class was expanded to include the newly distinguished occupations of school teachers, theatre, lunatics, clerks, publicans, peddlers, tailors, and engineers."

Wallace's father would, therefore, have been placed within the category of lower middle class, on grounds of income, and the failure of his speculative ventures, unlike Darwin's father.

Charles Darwin was most certainly within the upper middle class due to the family pedigree, his father's status and the intimate links between the Darwin family and the Wedgewood family. The fact Darwin attended Shrewsbury School, a private fee-paying school founded in 1552, also set him well apart from Wallace socially. As Musgrove (1959, p. 100) stated, "Social status was determined by family background, type of education and occupation, as well as by level of salary".

Alfred Russel Wallace and Class

An interesting aspect of Wallace's autobiography is a description of his family extending back through his mother's and father's side. He makes claims for a modest family pedigree, hinting at a link to the renowned Scottish knight Sir William Wallace, though playing down any relationship as it could not be substantiated. Wallace, in my view, was fully aware of the class system and the need to set out a pedigree, though his dismissal and cursory description of his family background possibly indicates that he was less concerned with family pedigree and class. He became a hero of the working classes but was not himself working class. That said, he would not have been accorded the same status as Darwin in class-ridden Victorian Society, and neither would his father have qualified as upper middle class. The difference in life between the lower and upper middle class could be as stark as the difference between the upper middle class and the upper (Royal) class.

Conclusion

Van Wyhe produces a flawed analysis of the situation relating to class and education as related to Darwin and Wallace. In seeking to dispel myths about Wallace, his problematic approach to the issue of class in the 19th century and the school system as it existed during Darwin's and Wallace's early days, instead creates further myths that produce a view of the life of Wallace that cannot be supported by the evidence.

Darwin's education was deliberately calculated for him: to attend a boarding school (from age nine) and thence maintain his place at school until the age of 16. He was destined to attend university (first as a failed medical student at Edinburgh, and then to Cambridge to read theology and take his place as a man of the cloth – a respected profession for a man from his family background and position).

Wallace, on the other hand, could not stay in education to the age of 16 and left to become an apprentice, never attending university. While his education was paid for, it was not the sort of education that could prepare its students for Oxford, Cambridge or, indeed, Edinburgh.

Wallace would have been viewed by gentleman naturalists such as Darwin, Lyell, Hooker etc. as a “fly catcher” who earned a living collecting new and novel species. Darwin and Wallace maintained a relationship throughout their professional careers. While they differed on some aspects of evolution (e.g. sexual selection and the colouration of male and female birds), their friendship was based not on rivalry, but mutual respect. Darwin acted as an advocate for Wallace, helping secure a civil pension for him; Darwin, of course, was in no need of financial help, as his inheritance secured his financial future.

Darwin’s and Wallace’s lives took very separate paths and started in very different circumstances. Yet they maintained a friendship for over 20 years. Wallace dedicated his book *The Malay Archipelago* to Darwin and named his own book on evolution *Darwinism*, out of respect for his friend. As Browne (2013) says, “No two authors thrown together in such a fashion tried harder than Darwin and Wallace to treat each other fairly.” In our modern-day accounts of their lives, we must also strive to do the same.

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