

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 14: Background for Wallace's 1845 Kington Essay.

Charles H. Smith, PhD.,^a November 2020

^a Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY. Email: charles.smith@wku.edu

Summary: 'An Essay, On the Best Method of Conducting the Kington Mechanic's Institution' is one of the earliest written works by Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) known to have reached print. The circumstances of its writing are still not clear, though I here review pertinent facts and theories that seem to indicate Wallace actually was the author of the essay, which had been questioned. *Key words:* Kington, mechanics institutes, Alfred Russel Wallace

A several-page essay entitled 'An Essay, On the Best Method of Conducting the Kington Mechanic's Institution' by "Mr. A. Wallace, A Member of the Institute," appears in a slender volume titled *The History of Kington*, edited by Richard Parry, and published in 1845 (though the essay itself was actually written about 1841). The essay was originally written for a competition, and won a prize (see below). I didn't know of this work when I published my *Alfred Russel Wallace: An Anthology of His Shorter Works* in 1991; I first became aware of it through its mention in an article by R. Elwyn Hughes (1989), and when I erected my *Alfred Russel Wallace Page* website in 1998 I included Wallace's work in the updated bibliography of his writings it contained. I also fashioned a transcription of the essay, giving it the Wallace publication code "S1a."

So things stood until early 2016, when historian James Moore contacted me about the essay in connection with a study of Wallace's early life he was undertaking. Professor Moore was concerned that he had been unable to find any mention of the essay by Wallace in later years, either in publications or private correspondence, and was unsure of its attribution to Wallace. I responded that I wasn't aware of any other mentions either, but was not troubled by this as other early Wallace-authored writings had experienced a similar fate. Professor Moore added that he was especially surprised he had not reprinted the work in his autobiography in 1905, to which I replied in a 25 January 2016 email: "I think several [possible reasons] can be [offered] for why he did not include mention of it in *My Life*: (1) he no longer had a copy at hand (2) it would have taken up seven or eight pages in an already overlong treatment (3) it was redundant in some part with the 'advantages' essay, and, perhaps most of all (4) another letter appearing shortly after the notice of the 'prize' indicated that Wallace was the only person who had submitted an essay for it! That must have been a bit embarrassing at the time, and if he remembered the incident all those years later might have wished to avoid a replay!"

Regarding point four above, I had discovered some years earlier that an anonymous letter had been printed in late October 1844 issues of the Hereford *Times* and Hereford *Journal* to the effect: "Kington. Mechanics' Institution. Some time ago a prize was awarded to Mr. A. R. Wallace, one of its members, for an essay on 'the best method of conducting the Kington Mechanics' Institution.' We are informed that it possesses great merit." (Anon.

1844a). Curiously, two weeks later there was an anonymous follow-up letter in the *Times* (Anon. 1844b) agreeing as to the quality of the essay, but specifically noting that it had been the only essay submitted for the prize!

George Beccaloni remarks at his *Alfred Russel Wallace Correspondence Project* website that a manuscript version of the essay dated “Kington December 18th, 1842,” with corrections, had been discovered “fairly recently,” but that the handwriting was apparently not Wallace’s. Obviously, there were still some questions that needed answers.

After the handwriting assessment was made public, I decided to look further into some of the connections involved. One of the first things I noticed was that I had unfortunately made a mistake at my site discussing the subject: I had referred to the Hereford *Times* note as identifying Wallace as “A. Wallace” instead of “A. R. Wallace.” Obviously, this makes some difference here. But, more importantly, I was able to establish a strong connection between Wallace and the Kington Mechanics’ Institution.

During the late 1830s and early 1840s, Wallace was working as a surveyor for his older brother William in western England and South Wales. In 1840-41 they were headquartered in Kington, Herefordshire, right near the Wales border. As it so turns out, the Wallaces’ employers for the years he was at Kington were the Sayce brothers, Morris and William. If *My Life* is accurate in this instance, William Wallace was articulated to “a firm of surveyors” in Kington around the late 1820s, and this may well have been the Sayces. Importantly, according to the *History of Kington*, Morris was the treasurer of the Kington Mechanics Institute, whose reading-room opened in March 1841. ‘Mr. Sayce’ (which one?) was also one of its secretaries. Judging from his words in *My Life*, Wallace liked them, and their business had “a good many” employees – draftsmen and surveyors. In *My Life* Wallace says he and his brother “finally” left Kington late in the autumn of 1841, so the timing is right.

With this knowledge, some scenarios to connect the dots can be offered. Perhaps, for example, when Richard Parry decided to (or was commissioned to) create the Kington history, he contacted the Sayces about providing a chapter on the Mechanics Institute, and they thought this would be just the right kind of project for their bright young (eighteen years old) assistant Alfred Wallace.

Following are most of my (and a few others’) emails related to this subject; they document the process of discovery, and provide some additional detail.

To James.Moore, sent 24 January 2016:

I don’t know that Wallace mentions it [the 1845 essay] anywhere, but this [that he mentions them nowhere else] is true of several other short items he published in the 1840s. Hughes (1989) discusses it, and that Wallace was a member of the Mechanics Institute in Kington. Also note the [fourth item] in my ‘Miscellaneous’ list. As it is filled with his early “advantages of varied knowledge” theme and very Wallace-esque, I see no reason to doubt that he wrote it, “A. Wallace” credit notwithstanding. --CHS

To James Moore, sent 25 January 2016:

First, I think the matter of “Wallace’s failing memory” has been much exaggerated by just about everyone. In my latest note on the Ternate submission [Smith 2016] I raise the so-far ignored point (in Wallace discussions) that there is a big difference between “memory of events” and “recall of time and place of event.” There is a big literature in psychology on this, in part regarding the subject of autobiographical memory. There is lots of detail in *My Life* and other places, most of which has not been challenged (at least formally), so I think Wallace’s problem was with the second category, not the first. Of course he cannot be expected to have remembered everything. . .

I think several decently useful suggestions can be made for why he did not include mention of it in *My Life*: (1) he no longer had a copy at hand (2) it would have taken up seven or eight pages in an already overlong treatment (3) it was redundant in some part with the ‘advantages’ essay, and, perhaps most of all (4) another letter appearing shortly after the notice of the ‘prize’ indicated that Wallace was the only person who had submitted an essay! That must have been a bit embarrassing at the time, and if he remembered the incident all those years later might have wished to avoid a replay! --CHS

To James Moore, sent 26 January 2016:

Secord and van Wyhe, among others, have used the ‘bad memory’ card on occasions. Just to be clear, the ‘memory of time and place’ matter has to do only with one’s ability to attach an event to an *exact* date along a timeline; similarly, *where* exactly something took place. Clearly Wallace did have problems with this, but to think on this basis that his memory of, for example, the Ternate essay as having been written and sent all within a few days . . . is this kind of problem, as van Wyhe especially has suggested [, is not fitting].

Your point about Darwin [having made many errors in his own biographical writings] is well-taken, along with the fact that in earlier days it often would have been very difficult for just about anyone to verify particular facts before presenting them. By the time of *My Life*, practically all of Wallace’s early acquaintances and relatives were dead, so he may have only had the odd letter to jog his memory. --CHS

George Beccaloni to James Costa et al., sent 11 May 2018:

Dear Jim, I have compared the handwriting of the original 1845 Kington essay to that of some of his early letters e.g. WCP336, and believe it to be the same. So if the 1845 essay was written by him, the ‘Advantages’ probably was too. . . Best wishes, George.

George Beccaloni to James Moore, James Costa & Charles Smith, sent 15 May 2018:

Dear All, This interesting notebook may be of interest to our discussions about the Kington essay: <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/scientific-resources/collections/library-collections/wallace-letters-online/6282/7267/S/details.html#S62>

I think the earliest dated entry in it is 1846 – so it is another good sample of ARW’s early writing. It also seems to show the amazing depth of his reading on a wide variety of subjects. ‘Don’t know at the moment whether these are notes from lectures he attended in Neath, or whether they were notes he made to GIVE lectures. Anyway – I think you may find the notebook interesting and I’m not sure Sims [Wallace’s brother-in-law] had anything to do with it! Best wishes, George.

Helen Watt to George Beccaloni & Charlotte Robinson, sent 16 May 2018:

Hello George, I heard back from my palaeography tutor in Aberystwyth, Dr Susan Davies, and this is what she said:

I have looked at the documents which are accessible via the web link/page which queries the handwriting, and my immediate response at this stage is that the handwriting in the essay is not the same as that in the other documents. While it is obviously the same overall style, namely Italic or 'Copper Plate,' which you would expect at this date, there are basic differences in some letter shapes, which is the best way to identify different hands.

In particular, the writing in the essay is very squashed / squeezed laterally, in contrast to the more rounded writing in the correspondence. That will always affect the handwriting to some extent, but some capital letter forms are noticeably different, which is more significant. For example, capital P in ARW's correspondence is a rather curly, rounded letter (see Penny Post in the first example), which is not the case in the essay (see Philosophical). Capital 'S' is also significantly narrower in the essay. In addition, I noted that lower case 'f' is differently formed in the essay and does not have the regular lower loop that is obvious in the correspondence.

So that's interesting! She did say she could look further if necessary. Best wishes, Helen.

To George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, James Costa, Emma Bashforth & Paula Lucas, sent 16 May 2018:

Do we have any info on just when the draft was made? Are there *any* differences between it and what actually appeared in print? If not, perhaps someone made a transcription of the printed version for him. --CHS

George Beccaloni to Charles Smith, sent 16 May 2018:

Hi Charles,

Please see <http://wallaceletters.info/content/whos-handwriting>

Sorry – I may have forgotten to send this link to you.

We need to know whether ARW was a member of the Kington Mechanic's Institute [he was, per above] – and whether or not there was another "A. Wallace" who was a member. I have tried searching for this info in Google Books to no avail.

So even though the ms. essay is probably not in ARW's hand – was it still composed by him, or by another "A. Wallace"? Best wishes, George.

To George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, James Costa, Emma Bashforth & Paula Lucas, sent 16 May 2018:

I note a couple of things immediately: the ms essay is pretty close to the print version, though some punctuation isn't the same. More importantly, the ms. essay contains double-s words spelled with the old 'long-s' form, which Wallace doesn't use in his other letters from this period. Do we have any samples of the writing of Wallace's father, who was still alive at this time? --CHS

To George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, James Costa, Emma Bashforth, Paula Lucas & James.Moore, sent 16 May 2018:

An important connection: Wallace's employers for the years he was at Kington were the Sayce brothers, Morris and William. According to the *Kington History*, Morris was the treasurer of the Kington Mechanics Institute, whose reading-room opened in March 1841. "Mr. Sayce" (which one?) was also one of its secretaries. 'Smoking gun! Judging from *My Life*, Wallace liked them, and their business had a "good many" employees – draftsmen and surveyors. In *My Life* Wallace says he and his brother "finally" left Kington late in the autumn of 1841, so the timing is right. --CHS

George Beccaloni to Charles Smith, sent 17 May 2018:

Hi Charles, Very interesting! Are we sure Wallace left Kington in 1841? The essay is dated December 1842, so I wonder if Wallace got the year of his move from Kington wrong. Cheers, George.

To George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, James Costa, Emma Bashforth, Paula Lucas & James.Moore, sent 17 May 2018:

I don't think it matters much when Wallace left the Kington area, as long as it was not before the Institute opened, or at least was planned to exist. This seems to be so. Any number of things, unfortunately, could explain the copy of the written ms. not being in his hand. It could be a copy of an earlier draft, edited by Parry or someone else, coming back to Wallace for his approval, or just to let him know what was going to be put in the book when published. The date could be the date of an original draft, that draft, or an after-the-fact copy. Here's something: have a close handwriting analysis done specifically on the *corrections* that are penned in, to see whether these are in the same handwriting as the main part of the text. If this is so, we can conclude at least that a draft was making some rounds. I think it is too much of a coincidence that the Sayces were Wallace's bosses that they are not involved somehow, and centrally. If you believe *My Life*, William Wallace was articulated to "a firm of surveyors" in Kington around the late 1820s, and this may well have been the Sayce group.

I can envision a number of possible scenarios that, regardless of who penned that exact ms. copy, still lead to Wallace. For example, if the Sayces knew about the History project, and knew Parry (a good bet, both), somehow or other the submission of the chapter was "rigged" (the contest and all) to get "that bright young surveyor's aide" a publication. Perhaps one of the Sayces asked Wallace to write it up, or provided him with a draft or notes to work up. Perhaps he never knew it was published (or was embarrassed it had appeared under his name)!

I just checked the British Newspaper Archive again for anything connecting "Wallace" to the Kington Mechanics Institution. For some reason, it would not let me sign up for complete text, but I notice that the two communications about Wallace getting the award for the "best" essay appear in both the *Hereford Times* and (at least one in) the *Hereford Journal*. The plaintext that was shown as a sample refers to "Mr. A. R. Wallace" in the *Times* (19 Oct. & 2 Nov. 1844) and "Mr. A. Wallace" in the *Journal* (23 Oct. 1844). Someone else who has full access might want to confirm this in the actual images. --CHS

To George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, James Costa, Emma Bashforth, Paula Lucas & James.Moore, sent 17 May 2018:

I regret to say that, after finding a paper copy of my investigation into this several years ago, the *Times* letters in fact refer to Wallace as “Mr. A. R. Wallace,” and only the single *Journal* letter (the same as the first *Times* one) as “Mr. A. Wallace.” This was incorrectly stated in my “Miscellaneous Facts” page at my site, which I’ve now changed. I submit that this matter is now closed – i.e., it is extremely likely the essay in question refers to him, and not some other unknown person. Of course, this does not clarify how the non-Wallace-drafted ms. was created (i.e., by someone else but attributed to him at the time, or by himself though not this particular copy of it).

I’m inclined to think he was the author, mostly on the basis of the particular books that are suggested for the library. Of these, more than half – by Loudon, Lyell, Lindley, Combe and Humboldt – are works he elsewhere referred to as instrumental in his development, while two or three others he later referred to in a way that suggests he had known about them for a long time. Moreover, there is a decided emphasis in his list on natural history, as opposed to more technical subjects that one would expect to see at least some of in a *mechanics* institute. Lastly, he is still on his kick about the advantages of varied knowledge, and the need to include scientific works. Plus, he is anti-newspaper: a leaning of his present and stated his entire life [e.g., see Wallace 1908]. --CHS

James Costa to Charles Smith et al., sent 20 May 2018:

Hi all. . . It does seem, from all the available evidence, that the article refers to ARW as author though is not in his hand. Charles, I see that the published version of the essay (S1a on your ARW website) is in a volume edited by Richard Parry. Could the essay be in Parry's hand?

Written at the top of the first page of the ms. is the statement “Mechanics Institute a continuation of page 427.” I suppose this refers to a minute book, and if so perhaps Wallace read the essay or spoke to it at a meeting of the Institute, after which the essay was perhaps copied out as an addendum or appendix but later became separated from the minute book itself? If one of the Sayce brothers was secretary of the Mechanics' Institute in 1841/1842, he would be the best candidate for writing this essay out. Might it be possible to find examples of both Sayce brothers' handwriting from letters or other documents from this time, to compare with this ms.? All best, Jim.

To James Costa, George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, Emma Bashforth, Paula Lucas & James.Moore, sent 20 May 2018:

I agree that for the moment the most likely candidates as the renderers of that draft are Parry or one of the Sayces. I don't know anything about Parry, but the Sayces were fairly well known and there is even some perfunctory biography of them on the free Web. Perhaps it wouldn't be that hard to find handwriting samples. Remember, however, that the written-out ms. has corrections that actually appeared in the printed version. It would be useful, as I noted, to compare the annotations/corrections that appeared over the original write-out with the handwriting of the latter. Remember the long-s's, suggesting an older person. The only Richard Parry from anywhere near the right time and place I find on a quick web search is one with dates c1767-1855, who was born in nearby Wales (where, I've been told, the long-s persisted longer). I find there is a follow-up history titled

something like “The further recordings of Richard Parry, the Kington historian,” for sale from UK Amazon (as some kind of reprint, I assume) for 8 pounds.

It turns out there is a big pile of records by Morris Sayce, mostly maps, in COPAC. William S. is also connected with these. Now if it was William who was one of the ‘Secretary’s, and Morris the Treasurer, we would more likely expect William (who ARW apparently got along with better, as well) to be the transcriber if your theory that Wallace read the essay at a meeting is correct. If so, the annotations on the ms. copy could still be by anyone, as long as they were put on before the essay reached print. In looking at it again, the corrections don’t look to me as being from the same hand as the original text, but I’m no expert. Also, there is at least one correction – adding ‘disseminate’ in the final paragraph – that employs a long-s, so perhaps one brother transcribed and the other corrected. I don’t recall that Wallace ever used the long-s. . . --CHS.

To James Costa, George Beccaloni, Helen Watt, Charlotte Robinson, Emma Bashforth, Paula Lucas & James.Moore, sent 20 May 2018:

Concerning JM’s original concerns about this essay. . . As I’ve said, I am more convinced now that the authorship of the essay was “originally credited” to our ARW (and not some other Wallace), but there are still some ‘somewhat troubling’ things about it. I agree with Jim [Moore] that the language in it (not the subjects treated) sounds a bit more polished than we might expect, even from a budding genius. Perhaps Wallace was invited to give the talk, and Parry and/or the Sayces “dressed it up a bit” (or more than a bit. . .) when it was written down. But I am a little more concerned about those two letters that later appeared in the newspapers. What was that about?

Did they wait to tell Wallace that the essay was going to be published until it was too late for him to have input? Did he possibly express some concern that it had been heavily edited/re-written? Or did he know at all? The first letter draws attention to the more-than-two-year-old essay for, it seems, no particular reason. The second one, appearing only two issues (two weeks) later sounds rather defensive in turn, revealing the essay was the only one submitted for the ‘prize.’ What was the ‘prize’ about, too?: “best essay delivered to the M.I. at the inaugural meeting, etc.,” perhaps, or “best essay submitted for the anticipated Kington history”? Considering Jim Costa’s theory, more likely the former it seems. –CHS.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to George Beccaloni and James Costa for examining the original draft of this work, and their permission to use the emails they sent me in 2018.

References

Anonymous, 1844a. n.t. [note concerning a Wallace essay]. *Hereford Times*, 19 October 1844.

Anonymous, 1844b. n.t. [note concerning a Wallace essay]. *Hereford Times*, 2 November 1844.

Hughes, R. Elwyn, Dec. 1989. Alfred Russel Wallace; some notes on the Welsh connection. *British Journal for the History of Science* 22(4): 401-418.

Parry, Richard, ed., 1845. *The History of Kington*. Kington, U.K.

Smith, Charles H., ed., 1991, *Alfred Russel Wallace: An Anthology of His Shorter Writings*. New York & Tokyo: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Charles H., 2016. Did Wallace's Ternate essay and letter on natural selection come as a reply to Darwin's letter of 22 December 1857? A brief review. *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society* 118(2): 421-425.

Wallace, Alfred Russel, 1845. An essay, on the best method of conducting the Kington Mechanic's Institution. In *The History of Kington*, edited by Richard Parry (Kington, U.K.): 66-70.

Wallace, Alfred Russel, 1905. *My Life; A Record of Events and Opinions*. 2 Volumes. London: Chapman & Hall.

Wallace, Alfred Russel, 20 August 1908. Is the newspaper a waste of time? *The Northern Whig* (Belfast) No. 31215: 10.

Earlier Titles in This Series*

Note 13. "Wallace on Prayer" (November 2020).

Note 12. "How Good Was Wallace's Memory?" (November 2020).

Note 11. "Wallace, Darwin, Education, and the Class Question" (October 2020).

Note 10. "The Impact of A. R. Wallace's Sarawak Law Paper Resurrected" (April 2020).

Note 9. "The South Asian Connection" (2019).

Note 8. "Wallace's Earliest Exposures to the Writings of Alexander von Humboldt" (October 2018).

Note 7. "Wallace, Bates, and John Plant: The Leicester Connection" (October 2017).

Note 6. "More on the Mailing Date of the Ternate Essay to Darwin" (April 2015).

Note 5. "Just How Well Known Was Wallace in His Own Time?" (April 2014).

Note 4. "Contributions to The Garden, 1875-1912" (October 2011).

Note 3. "Two Early Publications" (October 2011).

Note 2. "The Spelling 'Russel', and Wallace's Date of Birth" (October 2010).

Note 1. "Authorship of Two Early Works" (April 2010).

* Available through *ResearchGate*, or on request from Charles H. Smith.