

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 15. Wallace's Many "Hats": What Should We Call Him?

Charles H. Smith, PhD.,^a January 2021

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

Summary: Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) has been referred to by name through the aid of a variety of labels – some thirty or more, in fact – that link him to his emphases of attention. How many of these labels are/were justifiable? The assessment here is that he is probably best remembered as a 'naturalist,' 'geographer,' 'evolutionist,' and 'social critic.' *Key words:* professions, Alfred Russel Wallace, characterizations, skills

Introduction

For the past ten years or so a rather large literature on Wallace has emerged from the pen of Professor John van Wyhe, a historian at the National University of Singapore. This body of work, though based on a generally solid historical research technique, is yet typified by sensationalist conclusions resulting from a 'lawyerly' approach in which contradictory evidence is willfully ignored, and his detractors vilified as Wallace 'groupies,' or worse. Van Wyhe's motives for this behavior can only be guessed at, but it is another characteristic of his writings on Wallace that they are almost always accompanied by conclusions that, if rigidly true, would serve to reduce the group perception of Wallace's importance to both the past, and the present.

One of Van Wyhe's pet peeves seems to be the application of terms and characterizations of professionalism that do not belong to the era of the subject. He is not alone in such leanings, and indeed I mostly can go along with him on this. Wallace is a particularly problematic figure in this regard, as his work extended in so many directions that present-day readers may find it difficult to believe his studies could be perceived as deserving him status among that many '-ologies.' For this reason I would like to take a brief look at his subjects of attention, and perhaps help clarify his level of association with them.

There are a few preliminaries, of course. First, there is the matter of what we feel should constitute a 'professional' attribution, as opposed to a mere personal or avocational association. Wallace was an avid gardener, and he also loved playing chess. But he had no professional aspirations regarding either, and we should not expect to see him referred to as 'chess player Alfred Wallace,' which would imply something a good deal more than actually was the case. Similarly, there are characterizations of Wallace that may or may not be entirely apt, but do not imply a professional or avocational affinity: for example, 'humanitarian Wallace,' 'theist Wallace,' 'visionary Wallace,' etc.

More to the point, it is arguably important to avoid characterizing him in terms of bodies of knowledge that did not exist as such in his own time. This is not to say that in several instances he did not anticipate such studies, but it is not really helpful to refer to him as, for example, 'cybernetician Alfred Wallace,' 'field biologist Wallace,' or 'astrobiologist Wallace,' despite thoughts/actions of his that could be interpreted as importantly anticipatory in those directions.

On the other hand, we should also remember that we continue to invent terms that are specifically meant to characterize schools or bodies of thought in past times. After all, there was no ‘Renaissance Period,’ so-called, in those years, but we feel perfectly comfortable now in creating the label of, for example, ‘Renaissance composer.’

There is also the simple question of just how much training or experience qualifies one for mention as an ‘-ologist,’ regardless of any given level of accomplishment. Should we automatically call someone a ‘biologist’ if he or she achieves a PhD. in that field, and then does practically no work related to it? Conversely, many so-called ‘amateurs’ have made important contributions to knowledge, regardless of their level of academic training. Wallace himself did not even finish secondary school, but that didn’t seem to slow him down very much.

These matters out of the way, we can turn to a list of labels that might be, and/or *have been*, used to characterize Wallace as a professional (or at least as an important spokesperson) – remembering, of course, that in none of these areas did he have any formal academic training. These will be entertained in alphabetical order.

The ‘Hats’

Anthropologist: Anthropology as so-named was an existing professional field by the turn of the nineteenth century, though it took some years for it to expand its more biological/anatomical origins into the realm of cultural studies. In his own time Wallace was frequently referred to as an anthropologist, and sometimes still is, and indeed his consuming interest in the various aspects of human biological and social evolution seem wholly to justify this.

Anti-vaccinationist: Small-pox vaccination as a preventive mechanism was pioneered by Edward Jenner in the late 1700s. Outspoken opposition to the practice escalated in Britain in the 1860s and 1870s, and Wallace became one of its strongest public critics. He carried out no research on the medical side of the question, but did do innovative work examining the historical statistics of smallpox infection. Thus he was both a notable ‘voice’ in the movement, and an influential interpreter of the record of incidence.

Biogeographer: No one will object to Wallace’s being labelled a ‘biogeographer’: although the term ‘biogeography’ was only in infrequent use in the early and mid-nineteenth century – and apparently was never used, even once, by Wallace himself – he did so much to establish the foundations of the modern approach to the study that the connection is unavoidable.

Biologist: I feel that it is somewhat problematic to apply the word ‘biologist’ to Alfred Russel Wallace. Both ‘biology’ and ‘biologist’ were in use by 1850, but there are almost no referrals to ‘biologist Wallace’ (or its variations) until the first decade of the twentieth century in major databases (this, despite hundreds of referrals to ‘naturalist Wallace’ and its variations). The reason for this is not at all obvious; perhaps it has something to do with his near immediate eclipse by Darwin, and the perception that ‘Darwinism’ is a biological theory. Note, however, that Wallace’s attention to ‘natural selection’ is problematic as a biological matter, since natural selection is in reality an epiphenomenon better described as an ecological state space: that is, as portraying the ultimate implications of a particular class of interactions among both the living and non-living components of the earth’s surface environment.

Botanist: 'Botanist Alfred Wallace' is sometimes seen in the literature, both of today and of his time. Although botany was for him of strictly secondary professional interest, in absolute terms he nevertheless did write quite frequently on plants, especially on related biogeographical, ecological, and cultural subjects.

Collector: Wallace is renowned as one of history's greatest collectors or, more specifically, 'natural history specimen' collectors. He was, in fact, for many years a 'professional' collector, and both the size and importance of his collections were strictly front-rank.

Conservationist: There are mixed opinions as to whether Wallace deserves to be described in present day terms as a conservationist (e.g., see Knapp 2008, Harley 2018), but my evaluation is that the range and passion of his efforts in that direction supports this (see also Lomolino 2019). For a discussion of some of his efforts, see the feature 'Wallace on Conservation' at my *Alfred Russel Wallace Page* website: <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/wallace/wallcon.htm> .

Ecologist: The term 'ecology' was not even coined until after Wallace returned from the field in 1862; still, he is not infrequently referred to as 'ecologist ARW.' Yet in the fifty years that followed, as the study came together, various strands of his significant influence can be seen in that evolution, so again the association doesn't seem unreasonable.

Economist: It will surprise many readers that some references to Wallace as an economist can be found in the literature of his time, and the association is not without reason. In point of fact, dozens of his writings from after about 1873 are largely or wholly on economic subjects, and within these are introduced a lot of ingenious and novel ideas (see Collard 2019). His main emphasis in this direction was on land economics, but he treated other particulars as well. Still, a present-day referral to 'economist Wallace' would, for obvious reasons, be more confusing than helpful.

Entomologist: Entomology was one of Wallace's two main zoological concerns (the other being ornithology), and in his time he was frequently referred to as an entomologist. Even today there is the odd reference to him as an entomologist, and considering his collections, hundreds of systematic descriptions, Presidency of the Entomological Society of London in 1871 and 1872, and the applications of this subject matter to his biogeography and evolution theorizing, this seems fully acceptable.

Ethnographer/Ethnologist: Wallace was a member of the Ethnological Society of London in the 1860s, and both terms were in use by the time he left for his tropical collecting activities in the 1840s and 50s. His writings on both subjects are fairly extensive, and significant, so characterizing him as one or the other does not seem out of line.

Evolutionist: This association is, of course, a natural. His co-invention of the natural selection concept alone would make this a reasonable connection, but his consideration of evolutionary subjects goes well beyond that idea alone.

Explorer: Wallace probably doesn't deserve recognition alongside the likes of Columbus or Amundsen, but he was one of the first Westerners to visit and work in the Upper Rio Negro in South America (and map it) and the island of New Guinea, and some have seen fit to refer to him by this term.

Field Naturalist: Among the most apt 'hats' that Wallace wears is that of field naturalist.

It well describes his overall status and mission in the 1840s, 50s, and early 60s. The word 'field' separates him from the many stay-at-home naturalists of the period involved in more sedentary pursuits such as astronomy.

Geographer: This is another of the most apt descriptors that can be applied to Wallace. The vast majority of his natural and social science pursuits had a strongly spatial bearing, and this is the central theme of geographic science. Moreover, Wallace's output features an emphasis on interactions (perhaps a legacy of his adoption of Humboldtian doctrines), another characteristic of geographic investigation. I once described him as a "geographer with a somewhat abiding interest in evolution" (Smith 2010, p. 397).

Linguist: Despite claiming to have limited language skills, Wallace learned a fair amount of French early, then picked up some Portuguese, Dutch, and Malay during his travel years. Each of his two travel books feature native vocabularies he collected in the field, and it was these activities that inspired his support of the still-relevant 'mouth-gesture' theory of the origin of language. But to call him, specifically, a 'linguist'...?

Mathematician/Statistician: Wallace was certainly no mathematician, but he was an able descriptive statistician, productively applying quantitative techniques to a number of his studies in efforts to provide factual bases for his positions. But again, to call him a 'statistician'?

Naturalist: Hardly anyone could deny Wallace the title of 'naturalist,' either in his own time, or today. He has also been referred to as a 'philosophical naturalist,' and while this seems apt as well, it perhaps shades people away from appreciating his outstanding contributions to natural science. So, why not 'scientific naturalist' as well?

Ornithologist: Although most of Wallace's collections of birds were made in the field by his assistants, that was only one of several steps in the process of presenting them to science (Beccaloni 2020). Not only did he himself publish about two dozen works of systematic revision of his avian collections, but he used these data to support his evolution, ecology and biogeography theories. He has been referred to in both his own time and recently as an ornithologist, and this should trouble no one.

Philosopher: Thoughts of Wallace perhaps do not automatically arise when the term 'philosopher' comes up – we like our Aristotles, Spinozas, and Kants – yet major philosophy encyclopedias (e.g. Beddall 1998, Smith 2002) have entries for Wallace, especially as natural selection represented an important philosophical advance in thought. Wallace is more frequently identified as a 'natural philosopher,' which seems more properly descriptive.

Physical Geographer: Not that many people are aware of Wallace's status as a significant physical geographer, yet he published more than a hundred writings on physical geography subjects, many in connection with glaciology. His involvement extended to studies of climate, oceanography, geomorphology, and extraterrestrial planetary surface conditions.

Reformer: Although 'reformer' is perhaps not a professional title, it does describe a range of workers who have taken seriously their efforts to effect social change. Wallace was certainly one of these. Thus 'reformer Alfred Wallace' rings true, especially as his efforts have sometimes been identified as a precursor to the 'Liberal Agenda' of the twentieth century. Many progressives from the turn of the century, for example Lester

Ward, Richard T. Ely, Irving Fisher, Theodore Roosevelt, William James, Upton Sinclair, and Henry George, were influenced by him.

Scientist: The term 'scientist' first appeared in the early 1800s, but by no means had been fully adopted even into that century's final decade (Wallace 1894). Wallace was in favor of use of the word, though it is not clear as to whether he felt it described himself. It depends, I suppose, on whether one looks at the occupation as attuned to hypothesis and test, or takes as more fundamental its conceptual place; i.e., as a 'Doctor of Philosophy.'

Social Critic: Wallace was certainly a potent and very well-known social critic, and calling him such should not be thought to do damage to the memory of his studies in the natural sciences.

Socialist: By 1890 (Wallace 1889, 1890) Wallace had declared himself a socialist, and in his later years was frequently identified as such. His interest in socialistic agenda extended all the way back to his teen years and exposure to Owenism, but he remained something of an outsider to the movement until, several decades later, he became convinced of its practical application.

Sociologist: Wallace is not now ever referred to as a sociologist, but this was not the case in his later years. Sociology was a well-established discipline by that time, and much of Wallace's social criticism fell in line with that of well known sociologists of the time.

Spiritualist: Wallace adopted spiritualism as a guiding philosophy in late 1866 and never renounced his belief in it, so by default he was a spiritualist for about half his life. More than merely *being* a spiritualist, however, he also became one of its leading voices.

Zoogeographer: Wallace's interest in biogeography fell more on its historical/evolutionary elements, and as an adult he worked much more on animals than on plants. The term 'zoogeography' itself only came into use in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and Wallace apparently never employed it. He instead favored the twin concepts of 'zoological geography' and 'geographical zoology,' the one describing faunal dynamics, and the other the geographical history of particular taxa.

Zoologist: Wallace's taxonomic emphases on insects and birds, groups from which he developed most of his most important ideas on biogeography and the evolutionary process, more than qualify him to be labeled a 'zoologist.'

Conclusion

Considering the above, the terms that best describe Wallace overall appear to me to be 'naturalist,' 'geographer,' 'evolutionist,' and 'social critic.' The other candidates are less optimal for one reason or another, mostly related to time period associations, or to specificities incapable of relaying a full picture of the man.

These are not startling revelations, but they do at least produce one cumulative point. This is, that Wallace was celebrated for a good number of things in his own time that we have largely forgotten about. Arguably, this catholicity of attention led him to consider, with authority, particulars within the larger fabric of nature and society: certainly, his willingness to tackle subjects as complex as organic evolution, the causes of the Ice Age, the possibilities of life on other planets, and international trade, show that he had mastered the essentials of a good many fields of knowledge. With a more thorough examination of

the interrelation of all these ‘hats’ we should feel confident of making more discoveries as to what objectives he actually had in mind.

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