

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 17: More on the South Asian Connection.

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Summary: During his school years the arts and cultural historian and metaphysician Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) was clearly influenced by Alfred Russel Wallace, and is known later to have corresponded with, and supplied information to, him. Up to now the connections involved had been obscure, but a new investigation suggests that Wallace had previously interacted with Ananda's mother and/or father. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, Elizabeth Clay Beebe

Introduction

In a previous installment in this series (Smith *et al.* 2019), some of Wallace's links to South Asian politics and culture were briefly outlined. Among the items discussed there was Wallace's connection to the prominent arts and cultural historian and metaphysician Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947). Evidence suggests that as a youth Coomaraswamy was practically infatuated with Wallace's work, an influence that eventually led to his establishing a correspondence with Wallace, and contributing some photographic material to his *Studies Scientific and Social* (Wallace 1900). How this relationship evolved was not immediately apparent, a minor mystery presenting but few useful clues.

Recently I came upon several pieces of information that bear on this story. First, Wallace's personal library, now owned in part by the University of Edinburgh, contains a volume by Sir Mutu (or Muthu) Coomaraswamy (1834-1879), Ananda's father: his translation into English of *Arichandra: The Martyr of Truth*, a classic Tamil drama. The 1863 volume is not annotated, but bears the label of a local bookstore. Sir Mutu was an illustrious figure: a prominent lawyer, politician, and folklorist, and the first Tamil to be knighted. He spent some years in England in the early 1860s, and again, for a slightly briefer period, in 1873-75. During the second visit he married Elizabeth Clay Beebe, a young woman from a prominent family in Kent, before returning with her to Ceylon, where Ananda was born in 1877. A third visit to England was planned for 1879, but while Lady Coomaraswamy and Ananda were sent ahead early, Sir Mutu succumbed to Bright's disease in May 1879 in Ceylon before he could join them.

Lady Coomaraswamy decided to remain in England, at first staying with relatives. She and her son then settled in Worplesdon, Surrey, north of Guildford. This probably remained their home through the years (1889-1895) of Ananda's attendance of Wycliffe College in Stroud. Sometime later (no earlier than 1904, according to a note in the 15 September 1904 issue of the *North Devon Journal*), long after he had moved on, she relocated to Sparsholt, near Winchester. She died there in 1939 (Raja Singham 1973).

Mutu Coomaraswamy had quickly established a solid reputation after arriving in England in 1862. In 1863 he starred in a production of the work he had translated, playing

to an audience that included Queen Victoria. He lectured locally and on the Continent on cultural and political subjects, and became a member of three or four British professional societies, including the Royal Geographical, and the British Association for the Advancement of Science. To the latter's Section E Fall 1863 annual meeting he delivered a paper entitled 'On the Ethnology of Ceylon'; here his path very likely crossed with Wallace's, who delivered his paper 'On the Varieties of Men in the Malay Archipelago' to the same section of that meeting. They both may also have attended various sessions of the RGS during this period, as Coomaraswamy was made a member during the meeting of 11 January 1864, and Wallace had been one since 1854. Coomaraswamy was also present at the 7 July 1873 meeting of the RGS, during which he contributed remarks on Sir Bartle Frere's paper on Africa; whether Wallace was present is unknown.

That Wallace owned a copy of *Arichandra* might be explained in a number of ways. He may have purchased a copy after hearing Coomaraswamy speak or getting to know him in the 1860s, or later, in the 1870s. Since it was a bookstore copy, it is less likely it was a gift (though the Coomaraswamy family was very wealthy, and if they had no supply of free copies at hand might easily have purchased one for him). But it is also possible he obtained one much later, from Lady Coomaraswamy, or from Ananda.

This latter possibility has its points because, first, Ananda and his mother lived rather close to the Wallaces during the period 1879 to 1889: Worplesdon is about thirty miles from Croydon, where the Wallaces were from 1878 to 1881, and a mere ten miles from Godalming, where they resided from 1881 to 1889. After moving to the Bournemouth area in 1889 Wallace would have been more than fifty miles from them, either in Worplesdon or Sparsholt, though near to directly connecting railway lines.

According to Raja Singham (1973), Lady Coomaraswamy was interested in science education (as her deceased husband had been), and did much to encourage young Ananda's early attraction to the study of nature. But, most significantly, the same source suggests that she may have held spiritualist beliefs. On exploring this lead, I found that she is mentioned in news stories in related connections over a period of more than thirty years. In 1879, soon after her return to England from Ceylon, she attended a séance by 'Miss Cook' (probably the famous Florence Cook, 1856-1904), as reported in *The Spiritualist* (Blackburn, 17 January 1879); the same periodical lists her as attending a 'spiritualist reception' a few months later (Anon., 4 April 1879) that included people Wallace knew, for example William Tebb, the antivaccinationist. In 1890 she is mentioned in *Light* as having attended a meeting of the London Spiritualist Alliance (Anon., 21 June 1890); in the same title in 1908 she is recorded as being Treasurer of The Psycho-Therapeutic Society (Anon., 11 July 1908), verifying another of her interests as reported in Raja Singham (1973). Considering this and her association with the Tebbs and others, she was probably an antivaccinationist, another commonality with Wallace. Another clue is offered by a note in *Light* (Anon., 3 February 1906) concerning the death of Lady C.'s mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Kentish Beeby, in which the older lady is remembered as having been "for nearly half a century a devoted Spiritualist." Further miscellaneous mentions of Lady C. appear in the 1902, 1903, 1904, 1910, 1911, and 1913 volumes of *Light*.

One or more of these connections, and perhaps a recollection of Sir Mutu's reminiscences of his first trip to England in the 1860s, likely caused Lady C. to get in touch

with Wallace sometime in the 1870s, 1880s, or early 90s. Variations on this theme can be imagined; perhaps as a child Ananda learned that Wallace had been an acquaintance of his father's and/or mother's and wrote to him, or perhaps, if they did not actually meet at some function, Wallace heard of Lady C.'s situation and interests and chose to reach out himself. In any case, Wallace clearly became an inspiration to Ananda during his teen years, and to some extent later on as well.

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