

## Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 26. Confessions of a 'Wallace Enthusiast'.

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"Ideas and beliefs are certainly not voluntary acts. They come to us – we hardly know how or whence, and once they have got possession of us we cannot reject or change them at will. It is for the common good that the promulgation of ideas should be free – uninfluenced by either praise or blame, reward or punishment..." – A.R. Wallace 1909, p. 10

*Summary:* The author's longstanding interest in the life and thought of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) is profiled in three ways, through: (1) a brief factual review of its history (2) a discussion of some problems with the way Wallace has been treated over the years, and (3) a consideration of the author's personal experience with the paranormal, and how this has made him, if not always a full believer, more patient with divergent explanations of the type Wallace was famous for. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles H. Smith, autobiography, spiritualism, intellectual history, natural history, paranormal experiences

The honor this May of being awarded the Wallace Medal by the Alfred Russel Wallace Memorial Fund calls not only for my sincere thanks, but additionally some tangible response – past awardees have presented in-person celebratory talks in Britain, but I have no plans for being in the U. K. neighborhood in the coming months. What I have decided to offer instead is a three-part essay covering widely varied yet connected autobiographical topics: some purely factual details of my history with Wallace, some peeves, and some background on my continuing interest in Wallace's embrace of spiritualism. We begin with the facts, and nothing but the facts.

My first exposure to Wallace's writings came in 1972, during my senior year in college. I had elected to organize a reading course focusing on the works of a dozen or more writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who had contributed to the foundations of "biological aspects of geology," as I think I put it. I can't remember for sure at this point which other figures were involved, but I do remember checking out library copies of Wallace's *Island Life* and *Geographical Distribution of Animals* for a look-see. I don't recall being overly impressed at the time, but several years later when I dove into a geography masters program at Indiana University and decided to focus on biogeography, Wallace's name came up again, as inevitably it does for any biogeographer in training. When I moved over to Champaign-Urbana to begin my doctoral studies, still in biogeography, I started to read some of Wallace's other works, including the Ternate essay on natural selection. In 1980, in a conversation with another graduate student named Gila Shoshany, it occurred to me that Wallace's steam engine analogy from that paper might be morphed into an evolutionary dispersal model, which I proceeded to develop as my dissertation project. This inspired me to begin looking into even more Wallace material.

I quickly came across Marchant (1916), a 'letters and reminiscences' biography that contained a nearly 400 item-long list of Wallace's publications. It became apparent, however, that this list was neither very accurate nor very comprehensive, so I initiated an aggressive attack on the problem, making full use of the University of Illinois' excellent interlibrary loan services. After I graduated in 1984, I continued to seek out material. By the late 1980s I'd found enough items to nearly double the Marchant list, and included the update as a sixty-three page appendix to my first Wallace book, Smith (1991).

Meanwhile, my search for an academic position in geography was not going well (despite my reasonable publication record, my subject interests were not well matched to the teaching opportunities at most geography departments). Eventually, I decided to retrain as a science librarian, and after doing so secured a position as such at Western Kentucky University (WKU) in 1995. By then I had added another hundred or more items to the 1991 tally. This was right around the time the internet, especially the World Wide Web, was really taking off, so I decided to start working on transcriptions of Wallace material that could be mounted online at a central site. The first version of 'The Alfred Russel Wallace Page' was activated in 1998, initially as part of the online 'Evolution' page hosted by the Museum of Paleontology at UCal Berkeley. I proceeded to get some internal support from WKU in 2000 to bring the site to Bowling Green, and over the next several years was able to add hundreds of transcribed Wallace texts to it, and to expand its number of features. By 2010 the expansion of features largely had been concluded, but I was still adding transcriptions to the site at the rate of more than fifty a year. I was also giving considerable attention to locating writings *on* Wallace, and transcribing some of these. Further funding from both internal and external sources made it possible to increase the rate of addition of transcriptions in the mid-2010s; meanwhile I continued to look for, and find, a good number of previously unknown Wallace publications besides. By the time of my retirement in 2018, the Wallace writings tally was at about 1100 items, with about that many again secondary sources (books, essays, reviews, obituaries, etc.). As of this writing the full Wallace-authored publications bibliography extends to 1130 items, almost all of which I have transcribed and made available at the WKU site. (John van Wyhe has also used many of these transcriptions as the basis for perhaps ninety percent of the texted items on his own Wallace site, which otherwise would have taken years longer to complete.)

My own published writings on Wallace, beginning in 1984, now amount to about seventy-five in number (including seven books) – all as first or only author – plus some twenty-five or more book reviews and semi-publications. I have included many of the more recent items in the 'Alfred Russel Wallace Notes' series I edit for the electronic repository at the university here. There's a lot to say about Wallace, and I have found the publication pace of conventional venues too slow to accommodate the flow!

So much for the enumerations; most readers here would probably be more interested to hear some explanation for why I have devoted so much attention to the man. One answer to this is that I quickly perceived a void in Wallace studies, both in terms of the previous limited bibliographic coverage, and a tendency for past students to perpetuate weakly drawn conclusions about him as a result. Further, most people who have studied Wallace in the past have come at his work from points of limited perspective or training. Compartmentalization is a frequent reality in historical studies, of course, but there is

hardly anyone in the history of science who is more poorly served through such a strategy of investigation.

There are several different ways that investigation of Wallace has been harmed by the 'one-potshot-at-a-time' style of approach. After so many years of study of his work, I feel that his intellectual vision, while certainly not faultless, is nevertheless more extensive, many-directioned, and internally consistent, than just about anyone else concedes. It will not do for him to be criticized by rigid specialists on matters outside of their own narrow fields of training; nor can historians without a healthy background in philosophy and/or the natural or social sciences be expected to get very far in trying to understand his overall worldview. Meanwhile, Wallace's high reputation as a field naturalist, romantic characterization as a world traveler, and relationship with Darwin – though themselves interesting – have diverted attention away from his importance as an independent and creative thinker as well, as has his association with several non-science subjects that are unpopular with academics. This rather reminds me of the way that one of the great rock songs from the 1960s – 'Kicks,' by Paul Revere & the Raiders – was treated when it was released in the Spring of 1966: about drug use, it was summarily banned from the AM airwaves in some places merely because of this, despite the reality of its rather out-front *anti*-drug use lyrics. Interestingly, its success was also negatively influenced by the fact that many in the then-burgeoning *pro*-recreational drug use community regarded it as 'square,' and reactionary. Darwinophiles, take note.

Among the people who have done the most damage to 'Wallace appraisal' is the American-born historian John Van Wyhe, now a faculty member at the University of Singapore (Van Wyhe always promotes himself as 'British,' but easily obtainable records show that he was born in California, attended high school in Lemoore CA and Lake Havasu City AZ, and majored in history at the University of Arizona in the early 1990s.). Van Wyhe has on various occasions professed that "his 'agenda' (his usage of the term) has long been to correct '... *historiographical myths and legends*'" (Leyin 2014a). Van Wyhe, a Darwin acolyte who apparently at some point decided it would be convenient to actualize his agenda by denigrating 'Darwin competitor' Wallace, has spent a good deal of time and energy researching the latter's movements and places of residence during his Malay Archipelago travels, and reporting his results in several well-publicized works (e.g., Van Wyhe 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Van Wyhe & Rookmaaker 2012).

Unfortunately, while featuring some very good grass-roots historical research, these works also project a very one-sided, 'lawyerly' approach to the presentation and interpretation of evidence that largely ignores other, better, readings of what Wallace was actually doing and thinking during his years abroad (for critical reactions to Van Wyhe's theories, see: Beccaloni 2014a, 2014b, 2020; Costa & Beccaloni 2014; Davies 2012; Fichman 2014; Leyin 2014a, 2014b; Smith 2013a, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a; Smith *et al.* 2020; Williams 2020). Further, Van Wyhe doesn't bother trying to meet the criticisms he has received, most recently (Van Wyhe 2020) having still summarized his various conclusions as if they were uncontested, accepted, fact.

Worst of all, moreover, has been his condescending attitude toward the opinions of other investigators, who he has frequently publicly branded as 'fans,' 'amateurs' and 'enthusiasts.' Seemingly, he believes only trained professionals degreed as historians

have any right to make comment. He even claims to have been the first historian (as distinct from scientists having an interest in the history of their subject) to have studied Wallace in any depth, summarily dismissing the previous efforts of, for example, Gerald Henderson, H. Lewis McKinney, Malcom Jay Kottler, Michele Malinchak, Jane Camerini, Jean Gayon, Michael Shermer, and Martin Fichman.

I don't know that Van Wyhe has ever said anything in print regarding my own qualifications for writing on Wallace; I'm supposing he would at the least count me as an 'enthusiast' for my PhD. having been in a non-history subject. In any case, my PhD. minor was in history and philosophy of science, and I would not be surprised to find that I actually have more coursework background in that subject than he does (given the nature of course-minimal graduate education in England, and the fact that in the early 1990s the University of Arizona offered no program in that direction, and barely even any individual classes: I checked). Just for the record, during my undergraduate and postgraduate education I completed graded courses in the following related subjects:

American Intellectual History, History of Science I and II, Readings in the History of 'Geobiology', History & Philosophy of Geography, Readings in Philosophy of Biology, Survey of Logical Positivism, History of Geography, History of Biology, History of Ethology, Readings in History of Zoogeography I & II. (One of my PhD. advisors was the noted historian of biology Richard Burkhardt; moreover I was married during my graduate student years to a historian of science.)

In addition, I audited (for no grade) another half dozen or so further courses on similar subjects. My graded biology-related classes included:

Intro Bio I & II, Invertebrate Paleontology, Evolution, Ecology, Vertebrate Zoology, Vascular Plants, Animal & Plant Ecology, Plant Geography, Animal Behavior, Forest Resources Management, Zoogeography, Readings in Zoogeography. (Biologists Joel Cracraft and Leigh Van Valen served on my PhD. advisory board.)

Graded statistical/methodological/systems theory-related courses:

Elementary Statistics, Statistics, Biostatistics I & II, Research Methods in Forest Resources, Advanced Statistics in Geography, Research Methods in Geography, Intro to Stats in Geography, Advanced Stats in Geography I, Research in Geography (plus audits: Advanced Stats in Geography II, Seminar in Spatial Interaction Modelling, Systems Theory in Physical Geography, Multidimensional Scaling, Factorial Ecology Methods, Seminar in Location Theory, and parts of several others). The late spatial statistician Arthur Getis was the chairman of my Dissertation committee.

Beyond these were a further dozen or so 'core' science classes that contributed centrally to my B.A. major in geology and M.A. and PhD. in geography, and several 'independent research' ventures that led to some early publications.

My interest in Wallace has always been about trying to set the record straight – not in the Van Wyhe sense, with its obvious agenda-driven mission, but instead as an honest effort to get at what Wallace actually did, and meant by what he said. My fairly broad training, evidenced by the above, assists me with this; also, I feel a camaraderie with Wallace regarding his long-standing interest in evolution – not just in natural selection, but also in anything else that contributes to an understanding of the overall subject. (Hey, even so far back as the age of five I was already fully smitten by the story of the

dinosaurs...) I admit to being a tad anal-retentive in my bibliographic and list-construction activities, but it was never my intention just to pile up sources. Yes, I also feel that even doing that has its real uses, especially when connected to public access to the results, but the scientist in me looks primarily toward the causes of things, and not just their mere existence. I have natural and social science research agendas that extend far beyond historical reconstruction *per se* (see for example: Smith 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1986, 2014; Smith & Derr 2012; Smith & Georges 2015; Smith *et al.* 2015, 2023), and continue to do work in these areas.

There remains here perhaps the trickiest subject that pertains to my interest in Wallace: his embrace of spiritualism.

Long ago I realized that I would have to come to grips with Wallace's adoption of spiritualism. It has taken some time to do so, but I am satisfied with the results, which suggest that he was naïve to believe the evidence he accepted from séance phenomena, but possibly not so off-target overall in his efforts to reach beyond natural selection-based explanations. My thoughts on these matters can be found in a number of places; see, for example, Smith (2004, 2008, 2012, 2013b, 2013c, 2016b, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

I have been open to following this route in part as the result of a series of personal experiences I have had since a child, and up to the present time. Many of these qualify as 'paranormal' in nature, and have served to remind me that, as Wallace says (as a good Humboldtian), "there is no law of nature yet known to us but may be apparently contravened by the action of more recondite laws or forces" (Wallace 1885, p. 809). There have been perhaps twenty such experiences that I continue to recall, though three stand out.

The first of these three, an encounter that I finally got around to writing up and sending to MUFON several years ago as their Report 70084, took place in the late summer of 1968 in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I and a friend had decided to go camping before attending college (my friend eventually became an engineering research psychologist); one of our goals was to hike up the several mile trail from the base of Mount Washington to its top. We accomplished this by noon, and in the early afternoon turned around to go back down the way we came up. By a couple of hours later, in mid-afternoon, we had reached the timberline, and after another half hour or so were walking through a stunted evergreen forest of trees about twenty feet tall. The forest was not particularly dense; we could see perhaps two hundred feet or more into it at ground level. It was sunny, with just a small amount of mist and wind. Suddenly, we heard something down the trail, to the right (west) of it. We stopped to listen, and as we did a loud *sound* proceeded to move up the mountain, parallel to the trail, pass us, and continue on upslope. It moved at a rate of, had its source been 200 feet away, about fifteen miles per hour. Remarkably, and although its dominant tone was at about 440 hz and sounded something akin to a billion buzzing/whining mosquitos, it quavered in intensity and tone not the *slightest* bit the whole way (as any cloud or flock of animal life would have), apart from the to-be-expected coming and going Doppler effect. At its closest it was producing a landscape-dominating din, comparable in loudness to what a medium-sized helicopter would have made at that distance. We saw absolutely nothing. The whole event lasted for only about a minute. To

that side of the trail is total wilderness for a full mile, sloping down perhaps 750 feet to meet a lightly traveled back road down in the valley.

We experienced no unusual sensations. Not eager to go crashing into the forest to get a closer look we just stood and waited, afterward starting back down the trail. The MUFON people, who later contacted me by phone to question me when I filed the report almost fifty years after the fact, were mystified, but apparently accepted it – being as it occurred, veridically, in front of two PhDs in broad daylight at close range, under perfect observation conditions. Perhaps notable is that this took place only several miles from the 1961 Barney and Betty Hill alleged abduction incident (I didn't realize this until even after the MUFON contact), which also involved a buzzing sound. No one has ever pointed me toward a possible conventional explanation for our experience.

Some twenty years later, while in my late thirties, an event of a different kind took place. I had become involved in regular meditation activities; late one afternoon I sat down on my bed and, as I often did, set some quiet ambient music playing at low volume. I then closed my eyes and began to repeat a particular mantra, per custom. Usually nothing much happened when I did so, but this time, only a minute or two into the exercise, an extraordinary resetting of my closed-eyes 'inner stage' unfolded. As I continued to sit and repeat my mantra and keep my eyes closed, my inner vision expanded into a sound stage-like environment within which a bank of brightly backlit 'clouds' emerged and approached me. Over this environment a perfectly audible, well-modulated (NPR-like) voice then spoke out, saying: "Hello, I heard you meditating, and thought we might talk."

I cannot describe how different this mental environment was from anything I have ever experienced with my eyes closed, before or since. I continued to repeat the mantra 'under my breath' as the still distinctly audible ambient music played in the background. A short low-key conversation ensued, with perhaps a half dozen simple question-responses taking place; my remarks were not spoken out loud, but rather deliberately thought, word by word. All the while I struggled to keep the 'connection' going. The final remarks expressed by my 'visitor' went something like: "That's interesting; well, keep up the good work." The voice and backlit clouds rapidly retreated and disappeared, as did the expanded mental ambience. A few seconds later I quite deliberately stopped the meditation and opened my eyes. The ambient music tape was still playing.

Now I admit this all sounds pretty strange, and you can believe me that the event took place as just described, or not. (But it did!) In any case, it is now easy for me to understand how such scenarios might lead to religious epiphanies and conversions, or perhaps to terror – especially if the 'voice' at the other end were received as more menacing or manipulative. Honestly, I don't know how I might have reacted had the intervention been more aggressive in that respect; anyway, if some intelligence (other than myself!) really had just attempted to make contact, it must have had in mind producing a less dramatic kind of impact on me...

The third event took place in early 2017, close to thirty years after the one just described. In late 2016 a routine checkup revealed a significant irregularity in the rhythm of my heartbeat. An attempt was made to 'shock' me back into regularity, but it didn't do the trick. Not long afterward, I entered the hospital for exploratory work, including cardiac catheterization. My cardiologist was alarmed to find a nearly ninety percent blockage in

my heart's LAD artery, and inserted a corrective stent on the spot. He later would refer to me as his 'miracle' patient, not only because the blockage had been found somewhat by accident (I had had no other significant symptoms such as pain, etc.), but also because he was somewhat surprised I was still alive at all at that point.

Anyhow, that evening I was kept in the hospital for overnight observation. A few hours into my sleep I became aware of the rather abrupt onset of a dream. Strangely, it proceeded from a rather pointed – demonstrative – first-person 'through the eyes' perspective featuring an unseen 'observer' (as in the 1947 Philip Marlowe film *Lady in the Lake*), opening in the vintage kitchen of some unfamiliar (to me, at least) house. Attention was quickly drawn to an old-style multiple-pane window looking out over a flat and open setting, perhaps meant to represent somewhere out on the Great Plains. Further attention was drawn to the sky outside; it was grey and churning, seeming to forecast a coming storm. Sure enough, after a few seconds a tornadic funnel cloud could be seen descending to the ground at a distance of perhaps a mile or two away. It immediately began to wind its way forward in the manner of those famous early scenes in *The Wizard of Oz*.

After just a few more seconds, the whole scene switched abruptly to an outdoor location perhaps two hundred feet from the house, and still facing the now rapidly-approaching tornado. Some fifty feet away, directly between the observer and the funnel cloud, stood an immense old oak or maple tree. The wind was now whipping around, and the ambient noise level increasing. The plot quickly thickened: there, lying at the base of the tree, on the side facing the observer's gaze, a naked, wildly gesticulating infant came into view. The observer pondered the situation for a moment or two, then decided to help out: rapid movement toward the child commenced. Just as the tornado was about to hit, the observer bent down over the infant in an apparent selfless – but likely to be futile – effort to shield it from harm. And then –

The dream was interrupted, not quite abruptly (but with just unbelievable timing!), by a nurse entering my darkened real-world hospital room in the dead of night, with no prior warning, to check on my vitals. During the second or so of fadeout, a 'message' was quite distinctly displayed, both in writing across my 'inner screen' and (faintly) audibly: "We protect our own."

Now one might be so cavalier as to pass all of this off as nothing more than a series of strange coincidences, but the rather deliberate 'plot', the initiation of the dream in deep sleep, the odd and peculiarly 'staged' first-person perspective, the all-too-perfect timing of the interruption, the final message, and overall greater context cannot help but make me wonder. I do accept that meaningless coincidences routinely take place (in fact, strangely, just as I was competing this third description here, a short segment on the cable television program 'Mysteries at the Museum' came on that relayed the rather obscure story of the originator of the cardiac catheterization procedure!), but at some point...

These three events in my life (and a number of others), occurring over a span of some sixty years, have caused me to maintain a less dismissive view of 'the paranormal' than many people have. Still, I remain largely on the fence: it is ultimately more productive to stay skeptical, and 'wait for better evidence.' But a predominating attitude of blanket

rejection is often even worse than one of indiscriminate belief. I think Wallace understood this as well as anyone (see my discussion in Smith 2022b).

The reader may take away that, all things considered, I don't actually mind being cast as 'an enthusiast.' Wallace himself once wrote:

...So far from being angry at being called an enthusiast (as you seem to suppose), it is my pride and glory to be worthy to be so called. Who ever did anything good or great who was not an enthusiast? The majority of mankind are enthusiasts only in one thing – in money-getting; and these call others enthusiasts as a term of reproach because they think there is something in the world better than money-getting. It strikes me that the power or capability of a man in getting rich is in an inverse proportion to his reflective powers and in direct proportion to his impudence. (Wallace 1905, p. 368)

Beyond this it should be emphasized that dropping off-putting labels of 'enthusiast' on your adversaries is not only rude, but also risks missing the point altogether. Wallace's interest in spiritualism as a contributing element to evolution is a good deal more illuminating than it is given credit for, the opinions of so many unenthusiasts notwithstanding. The real lesson in the 'Kicks' story presented earlier: do we really want to kill all the snakes we run into, just because they're snakes, and have a bad rep?

Wallace's eyes were arguably first opened to the complexities of nature by his early exposure to mesmeric trance: he became a skilled mesmerist himself, as is detailed in his autobiography, and his experiences struck deep. In those years the phenomenon was treated by most intellectuals as fakery, but they were wrong. We should be asking ourselves just what kinds of problems Wallace was trying to address through his ventures into the paranormal, instead of merely turning the dial to another station when a contrary tune comes up.

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