

# *Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 32.*

## Wallace on the Tigers of Singapore.

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November 2024

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*Summary:* Historian John van Wyhe has written a good deal on Alfred Russel Wallace's travels in the Malay Archipelago in the 1850s and 1860s, in so doing coming to a number of generally derogative surmises on Wallace's thoughts and collecting efforts that disagree with the conclusions made by other scholars. In this work one example of such treatment is given, concerning Wallace's estimation of the number of persons in Singapore attacked by tigers over the middle years of that century. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, Singapore, maneaters, tiger attacks, historiography, Malay Archipelago

### ***Introduction***

While it may be an admirable agenda for a historian to seek to correct "historiographical myths and legends" (Leyin 2014a), it is not so admirable to employ lawyerly styles of argumentation in such efforts that ignore the differing conclusions of others. This has routinely been the case in the writings of John van Wyhe on Alfred Russel Wallace (for criticism of Van Wyhe's approach and theories, see: Beccaloni 2014a, 2014b, 2020; Costa & Beccaloni 2014; Davies 2012; Fichman 2014; Leyin 2014a, 2014b; Smith 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016; Smith *et al.* 2020; Williams 2020). This is all the more unfortunate, as Van Wyhe's corpus also features a large body of excellent grass roots historical research on time and place. But he seems to have decided *a priori* that Wallace would make a fine subject for his overall 'historiography mission,' and has proceeded to torment – 'pick on' – him accordingly.

In this work I would like to discuss one such skirmish, involving the number of persons allegedly attacked or killed by tigers in the Singapore of Wallace's time (*circa* 1854-1862). In his *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace (1885 ed., p. 35) writes: "There are always a few tigers roaming about Singapore, and they kill on an average a Chinaman every day, principally those who work in the gambir plantations, which are always made in newly-cleared jungle." Van Wyhe takes issue with this estimation, writing in 2015 how it is one of "a considerable number of small inaccuracies" and "memorable stories" that "turn out to be mistaken" in that work, and in his book two years earlier (Van Wyhe 2013) how it was all no more than a "legend." While it certainly is the case that Wallace sometimes erred in the reporting of dates and names, this blanket assessment seems harsh, and unwarranted.

Strangely, in the 2013 work Van Wyhe provides some rationale for the notion that the 159 reported deaths between 1831 and 1890 (see below) might actually represent a significant undercounting, but then dismisses his own arguments. The first thing we will

do here is to quote from a number of period pieces on the subject, from newspapers. Then we will note some remarks postdating Van Wyhe's 2013 and 2015 statements, and finally offer some further analysis.

### ***Period Newspaper Accounts***

Following are excerpts from seventeen reports that appeared in a variety of midcentury newspapers; some of these are from Eastern sources, others from reprints that appeared in British titles:

*The Tigers of Singapore.* The number of the *Comptes Rendus* of the sittings of the French Academy contains a curious and startling communication from M. de Castlenau, French Consul Siam, with respect to the abundance of tigers in the island of Singapore. He says: "In the little island whence write this letter the statistics of the police show that, on an average, a man per day is devoured by these terrible animals; and as the Chinese and Malays, who are almost the sole victims, seldom report to the magistrates the disappearance of their friends, we may, without fear of exaggeration, presume that about 700 persons are annually devoured in single island which has but a few leagues of surface. The most curious fact is that, when the English established themselves at Singapore, about forty years ago, it was on record among the Malay fishermen who inhabited it that no tiger had ever been seen there, and, in fact, during the first five or six years none appeared but, contrary to what one would have supposed, in proportion as the island obtained a considerable population, received a numerous emigration of tigers, which swam across the Straits of Malacca." M. de Castlenau relates an extraordinary instance of the audacity of these formidable brutes, which appear to have become emboldened by the cowardice of the natives. Forty or fifty men had formed sort of village in an island; a band of tigers swam to attack them, and, in spite a desperate resistance, carried off twenty of the inhabitants of the village. Although a considerable premium is paid for every tiger's head, the natives dare not hunt them, and it is rare even that they attempt to defend themselves when attacked. – *The Falkirk Herald* (Falkirk, Stirling), 13 October 1859, p. 4.

*Tigers in Singapore.* These animals, eager for prey, cross from the mainland by swimming the narrow strait, hardly more than half a nautical mile in width, which separates it from the island. Dr Logan, the excellent editor of the *Singapore Free Press*, assures us that within the last six or seven years, 360 natives had been carried off the tigers! Even at present, over 100 persons a year are killed in the forest by the tigers there. – *Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, 2 August 1862, p. 1.

*Tigers in Singapore.* Captain Nelson, of the Madras Presidency, induced by the unceasing accounts appearing in the newspapers of the dreadful destruction of human beings in Singapore occasioned by tigers, has written to the government to suggest that an attempt might made to poison the brutes by means of strychnine. . . . The method recommended by Captain Nelson is about being tried here by the commissioner of police and we hope it will be found successful, although there are doubts on the point, as reported attempts have been made in Singapore to poison tigers but without any good result. Dogs have been tied up in the jungle in places resorted to by tigers, their necks having been previously shaved and rubbed with strychnine, means being taken to prevent their licking off the poison. Calves have also been tethered in the jungle with their necks prepared the same manner, but none of the experiments succeeded . . . we are assured it has been generally observed that in Singapore tigers do not return to eat bodies, whether of men or

beasts, which they have only partly consumed. – *The Westmorland Gazette*, 12 May 1864, p. 7.

*The Snakes in Scinde.* – There is something very singular in the extent of the snake nuisance in Scinde, which three hundred appear to have been lost in the course the year. This, taken in conjunction with the slaughter occasioned by wolves in the Punjab, amounting to somewhere about twice as much again, and the destruction in a few months of thirteen men by tigers at Singapore, impresses the mind forcibly with the fact of the existence of a scanty and helpless population than folio statistical tables. . . . – *Norfolk News* (City of Norwich, U.K.), 3 November 1855, p. 6.

*Deaths from Tigers, at Singapore.* From the report of inquests held during the week, it will be seen that no less than three deaths from tigers had been inquired into by the Coroner. There is no exaggeration, we are persuaded, in saying that, at least one person a day is killed by tigers, in Singapore. This is a frightful state of things, and demands the most serious consideration of Government. It is very apparent that the means adopted of late years have been inadequate to ensure the destruction of these animals, and we would therefore recommend that the reward should be again raised to that amount which was found in former times sufficient to incite people to take means for their capture . . . – *The Armagh Guardian*, 9 Nov 1855, p. 3.

The French Consul states that the tigers in Singapore eat a man a day, and are multiplying in numbers and increasing in ferocity. – *Fife Herald* (Cupar-Fife), 20 October 1859, p. 4.

*Destruction of Human Life by Tigers.*— In Singapore average mortality caused by tigers has for a long time been calculated at one man a day. The local government have recently made great efforts to drive away these destructive animals. Convicts have been specially employed hunt them down, and the reward offered for their destruction has considerably increased. These measures have to a certain extent proved successful, but that they have not been altogether so is shown by a statement in a late number of the *Straits Times*. In little more than a fortnight in the month of August last five men had been killed by tigers, and these were not merely conjectural cases, but cases in which the evidence of the cause of death was indisputable. – *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (Sheffield, York), 28 Oct 1864, p. 3.

*Destruction of Human Life by Tigers in India.* The annual loss of human life from tigers at Singapore, says Captain Keppel, chiefly among the Chinese settlers, is perfectly fearful, averaging no fewer than 365, or one per diem. Great exertions are still making for the destruction of these animals, which is effected by pit-falls, cages baited with a goat, dog, or monkey, or other restless animals, and by sundry cunning contrivances. – *Westmorland Gazette*, 2 April 1853, p. 3.

*A Country of Tigers.* *The Straits* (Singapore) *Times* says that the island is more infested with tigers than ever, and that large numbers of Chinese woodcutters, who work in the jungle, are killed by those beasts. Although the island is only fifteen miles square, and one hundred thousand persons live on it, it is not cleared of jungle. One hundred dollars is paid for every tiger killed. The tigers swim over to Singapore from the Malay peninsula, which is only a quarter of a mile [actually, more like one to two miles in most places]. – *Louth and North Lincolnshire Advertiser*, 6 June 1863, p. 3.

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that till within the last six or seven years, 360 natives had annually been carried off by the tigers. Even at present, over 100 persons a year are killed in the forest by the tigers that prowl there. Shortly before our arrival, in the month of March, four persons had perished by these voracious animals. For an explanation of such horrible occurrences we must consider the heedlessness of the natives and the peculiar conditions affecting the mode of agriculture followed on the island . . . – *Hampshire Advertiser*, 28 June 1862, p. 7.

Many travellers have recently been carried off by tigers at Singapore, which have become very numerous. – *Bradford Observer*, 20 May 1852, p. 5.

*Tigers at Singapore.* We have this week to report three deaths from tigers, in the immediate vicinity of cultivated lands. One occurred at Tanling [Tanglin], where a Chinaman was the victim. His body was recovered by his friends, and as usual, buried without any intimation being given to the police of the cause of his death. It coming to the knowledge of the deputy magistrate that a body had been buried under rather suspicious circumstances, he caused the coffin to be dug up and opened, when the appearance of the body at once showed the cause of the death. The Chinese who live in the jungle, it is known, never think of giving information of the ravages committed by tigers, so that it is only by inquiry that the facts become known. Their feelings of superstition in regard to tigers may perhaps be a cause of this. We have been informed that they believe that when a person is killed by a tiger, his “hantu,” or ghost, becomes a slave to the beast, and attends upon it; that the spirit acts the part of a jackal as it were, and leads the tiger to his prey: and so thoroughly subservient does the poor ghost become to his tigerish master, that he often brings the tiger to the presence of his wife and children, and calmly sees them devoured before his ghostly face. The old pyongs or umbrellas, which may often be seen stuck on the tops of newly-made graves, are intended to mark the spot where a tiger-slain body is deposited, but from what motive they are placed there we have not been able to learn. That the general belief as to the extent of the deaths caused by tigers, and their prevalence on the island, is not based on false grounds, we can attest Laving made considerable inquiry on the subject. We are informed, on the best authority, that in one district between Bukit Timah and the old Straits, six persons on an average are every month carried off from the Gambier plantations, and that not one of these cases is ever made known to the authorities. Lately, in the Kallang district, a cow which was grazing at no great distance from a house on one of the large plantations was attacked by a tiger, who carried it off. On Monday morning the body of a Chinaman was brought to the police-office, having been found at a short distance beyond the Sepoy lines, near the road leading to New Harbour. The body was quite fresh, and apparently newly killed. The companion of this man, who had gone with him into the jungle, has not since appeared; so that it may be concluded that the tiger has also killed him, and carried away the body to his lair. – *Singapore Free Press*, in the *Morning Post*, 30 December 1843, p. 8.

We noticed a while ago the extraordinary number of people that are killed by tigers at Singapore. The *Friend of India* has, it appears, suggested the possibility of at least a part of this mortality being really the work of the Chinese Secret Societies. Our sharp friend at Serampore says: – “Is it possible to imitate the bite of a tiger? If it were we might be half inclined to suspect that some of the thirteen deaths from tigers might be added to the amount of wilful murder. The Chinese societies are not very scrupulous.” To this the *Free Press* replies: – “If the *Friend* had ever seen the corpse of a person killed by a tiger he would not have mooted such an absurd suspicion. The Chinese societies may not be very scrupulous, but we question if they are so ingenious as to have conceived the idea of such a way of concealing their handiwork.” It is difficult to set bounds to Chinese ingenuity, especially in the art of mangling the human body, but it would, we should suppose, be

taxed almost to the uttermost to imitate successfully the marks which the tiger leaves on his prey. – *Bombay Gazette*, 7 November 1855, p. 1059.

*Tigers in Johore.* – The Chinese pepper and gambier planters in Johore were making great complaints of the inconvenience to which they were subjected owing to the numbers of their coolies carried off by tigers. They say they have now great difficulty in procuring coolies in sufficient numbers; and a respectable planter had stated, that since the 1st January, 1859, at least one thousand five hundred Chinese had been killed by tigers in those parts of Johore where pepper and gambier plantations have been opened. On one river, alone, inhabited by Chinese, no less than four hundred men were killed during the above period. This far exceeds the rate of mortality occasioned by tigers in Singapore, and is to be ascribed to the much greater number of tigers to be found in Johore. The tigers in the latter place, before the Chinese immigration occurred, no doubt chiefly subsisted on the wild pigs, deer, and other game to be found in the jungle, but now that there is such a large Chinese population scattered about in plantations, the tigers have probably ascertained that the Chinese coolies are prey much more easily obtained than the game of the jungle, and furnish a more abundant repast. . . . – *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 12 May 1860, p. 420.

...He [Sir J. Elphinstone] had never heard, then, that any objection was made to the settlement on account of its being a convict station. The great objection to it was the tigers. (Laughter.) Singapore was separated from the main land by a river, and the tigers found no difficulty in swimming across from the opposite jungle and carrying off some one or other. Scarcely a day passed without some such an occurrence taking place, as the tigers of the neighbouring jungle were the most ferocious in the world, and the consequence was that many plantations had been abandoned, from the place being infested by such animals. (Hear.) – *Home News for India, China and the Colonies*, 17 April 1858, p. 530.

*Tigers.* The *Singapore Free Press* of the 25th Jan. records further instances of men being killed or carried off tigers. A week previously a Chinese, who was cutting wood, was carried from his fellows, who, however, followed and rescued him, but not before he was shockingly mangled, one of his legs having been completely devoured. Another Chinese was killed at one blow from the paw of small tiger, which pounced on him in a wood. The inhabitants had recently caught several tigers in pit-falls. – *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 22 May 1844, p. 2.

*A Field for Sportsmen.* The *Singapore Free Press* mentions the astounding fact that since January, 1859, 1,500 Chinese have been carried off by tigers in Johore – the end of the Malacca peninsula. This much worse than in Singapore. The tigers show more than their usual cunning and regularly feed on human flesh. They lurk close to the narrow jungle paths and spring out from behind on the unfortunate passer-by. The Chinese have immigrated into the peninsula in large numbers and have entirely monopolised the cultivation of gambler and black pepper. The refuse leaves of the gambier ( terra japonica ) are used as manure for the pepper plant. It is now difficult to induce coolies to work in Johore, so great is the danger. At the present rate of deaths the cultivation must decline. . . . – *The Cornish Telegraph* (Penzance), 6 June 1860, p. 4.

### ***A More Recent Appraisal***

In 2016 Miles A. Powell published a review of the matter which included the following remarks:

. . . By the mid nineteenth century, Singapore had become famous for tiger attacks, with many contemporaries reckoning fatalities at one per day. In 1843, *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register (AJMR)* reported that Singapore's tigers carried off "more than three hundred natives" annually. In 1856, shortly after gaining fame for 'opening' Japan to Western commerce, American Commodore Matthew Perry avowed that in Singapore, "not a day passes without the destruction of one human being . . . by these ferocious beasts". Thirteen years later, prominent naturalist and co-discoverer of natural selection Alfred Russell [sic] Wallace reported that in Singapore, "[tigers] kill on an average a Chinaman every day". Considered in isolation, these observations might appear anecdotal, even fanciful, but the sheer quantity of the claims is striking.

Observers did not base these numbers strictly on body counts, for many Europeans in Singapore believed that Chinese planters underreported and even concealed deaths caused by tigers. White Singaporeans noted that word of fatalities forced plantation operators to pay higher wages. Europeans added that planters were loath to transport a body many miles from the island's interior to town for a coroner's inquest. In seeming confirmation of their suspicions, white Singaporeans did succeed, at least on occasion, in catching Chinese planters clandestinely interring bodies that bore clear signs of tiger attacks. Because Chinese plantations dominated the interior, where deaths by tiger were most frequent, Europeans felt confident liberally extrapolating the number of casualties far beyond those reported.

Multiple factors may have driven Chinese planters to underreport deaths but Europeans might have overstated fatalities for reasons of their own. Singapore's journalists needed to sell newspapers, and tiger attacks made for good headlines. Foreign periodicals certainly suspected that Singapore papers were exaggerating. . . . European visitors to Singapore might also have exaggerated the danger of tigers. Sending back reports of insatiable man-eating beasts would make the travellers' adventure seem all the more daring and exotic.

Tigers may not have claimed a human life per day in Singapore, but abundant evidence exists for shocking numbers of fatalities. A summary of coroner's records at the notoriously violent settlement over a period of month in 1855 recorded thirteen verdicts of 'Death by Tiger', as compared to five 'Wilful Murder', and two for 'Natural Causes.' In their official correspondences, Straits Settlement leaders lamented the frequent ravages of tigers, which the skeleton administration felt powerless to prevent. Finally, a perusal of Singapore's major English language newspapers between 1831 and 1890 reveals at least 159 reported fatal tiger attacks, with authors consistently emphasising that the overwhelming majority of cases remained concealed. We are thus left with a range of between just under 160 and several thousand fatal attacks in the nineteenth century, with the actual number likely measuring in the hundreds. (Powell 2016, pp. 461-462)

In short, a more dispassionate view would have it that Wallace's summary verdict of 'one a day' was quite possibly an overestimate, but probably not a 'gross' overestimate. The question is, just how short of the 'one death per day' figure the reality was, and whether Wallace's remark is worthy of being singled out as an example of incompetent reporting, as Van Wyhe has chosen to do. Clearly, Wallace, who spent eight years in the East, had many opinions at his command, and not all of these were editors trying to sell more newspapers. His assessment is a matter of record, and perhaps the only lamentable element to his reporting in this regard was his decision not to add something like "It is said

that” to the beginning of his statement. On the other hand, perhaps he was confident enough of his estimate that he deliberately withheld the extra qualification, even by 1885.

Understand, also, that Wallace’s original source for the *Malay Archipelago* remark was probably a private letter he sent home soon after arriving in the East: “While watching with eager eyes some lovely insect, the thought will occasionally occur that a hungry tiger may be lurking in that dense jungle immediately behind intent upon catching you. Hundreds of Chinamen are annually devoured.” (Wallace 1854, p. 4397). By the time he wrote *Malay Archipelago* in 1869, his opinion on the accuracy of the statement had apparently not changed, and in any case this was a book for the public, not a scientific audience alone.

## **Discussion**

I’m inclined to think that the real number could actually approach one death by tiger per day, at least for a number of individual years. It would not have taken local editors very long to realize that the plantation owners in the area would not have been at all happy to have the matter highly publicized, since doing so would quickly have led to agricultural workers demanding higher wages due to the danger, or reject taking on that kind of employment altogether. For that reason alone the vast majority of victims were likely never reported, and this doesn’t even take into account that anonymous burials made it possible to avoid the gruesome task of carting remains into the city for processing by the authorities.

Some may wonder how the small island of Singapore, only 269 square miles in area, could accommodate so many attacks. Of critical import is its separation from the mainland (the State of Johor, Malaysia, at the end of the Malay peninsula) by a narrow waterway called the Straits of Johor (‘Selat Johor’). This passage, nearly fifty miles in length, is for most of its trace about one to two miles wide. Tigers are easily able to swim such distances, and indeed in earlier times they were sometimes seen doing so in this very area. As the mainland across from Singapore was reported, as above, to be swarming with felines in those years, it is not a stretch to think that some few or more may have crossed the straits quite regularly. But how voracious might they have been? I wondered, so looked up some (easily obtainable) historical records for man-eating cats.

Online I found some interesting previously published data associated with several of the best known feline man-eaters from the last century:

The Champawat Tiger killed an estimated 436 individuals in Nepal and the Kumaon district of India over about four years around the turn of the twentieth century.

The Man-eater of Bhimashankar was a tiger that allegedly killed more than one hundred people in the Bhimashankar area (Pune District, Maharashtra) over just two years in the 1940s.

The Njombe (southern Tanzania) lions killed perhaps 1500 or more men, women and children in the 1930s and 40s.

In 1909 Chienghi Charlie, a white-furred lion, killed some ninety people on the border of Zambia.

The Leopard of the Central Provinces (India) is thought to have killed about 150 individuals over just a couple of years in the early 1900s.

The Panar (Northern India) Leopard reportedly killed some 400 people in the early years of the twentieth century.

The Leopard of Rudraprayag, India, killed over 125 people during the period 1918-1926.

These numbers suggest that even individual cats are more than capable of piling up huge kill totals over just a few years. While it is unlikely that any one feline in Singapore rang up such numbers, it should probably be asked why the mainland area hosted so many tigers to begin with, if not because of the availability of easily caught prey. An additional question is just how many of the actual victims were women and children: reports of these would likely have been even more underrepresented than of working men, and leopards, at least, are known to concentrate on hunting them rather than adult males.

A correspondent has noted: "For me, correcting historiographical myths involves correcting interpretations of history imposed on history by historians. JvW isn't objecting to historians' interpretations of Wallace and his tigers, but, rather, he is objecting to Wallace's statements on the subject. This isn't a historiographic critique, but simply an argument about numbers." The argument over numbers is probably not resolvable in any absolute sense, but, given his sources and the real potential for high totals, Wallace was probably not out of line for making the estimate he did. In any case, if actually an overestimate, it was likely not so bad that it deserved singling out by Professor Van Wyhe as an example of poor reporting, leaving the latter's motives for doing so suspect.

### ***Acknowledgments***

My thanks to the constructive comments made by Andrew Berry, George Beccaloni, Paul Sochaczewski and an anonymous reviewer on an earlier manuscript version of this work.

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- 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).

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