

Transcription, January 2015:

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[p. 7a]

‘Dr. Wallace’s Studies, Scientific and Social. (Macmillan).’

The friends of Dr. Alfred Wallace will be glad to see collected in a permanent form the many papers, full of excellent work, which he has contributed to magazines during the last thirty-five years. In “Studies, Scientific and Social,” we are struck by the variety of the knowledge, the fair mindedness of the inquirer, his ingenuity, and his fresh, vivid treatment of even old questions. In the second volume, which treats chiefly of economical and political problems, there is much to criticize. To speak plainly, Dr. Wallace is rash, confident, and impulsive when he deals with political questions; and we are more impressed by his naïve confidence, his proneness to solve hastily the most difficult problems, than by the closeness of his reasoning. His authorities are selected with little discrimination; and, though he is never dull or uninteresting, he is by no means a safe guide when he quits his own domain. On the other hand, some of the scientific papers are excellent; clear, full of matter, and candid, popular expositions, but far from superficial. Nothing could be much happier than the essay entitled “Epping Forest and the Temperate Forest Regions”—an essay, not perhaps very profound, but sure to make every reader long to verify, in the forest itself, Dr. Wallace’s observation. The essays on “Inaccessible Valleys,” “English and American Flowers,” and “The Disguises of Insects” are in Dr. Wallace’s best manner, with plenty of novel facts and unflagging enthusiasm in Nature’s operations. Many of his readers have visited the Haslithal in Switzerland; his account of “The Gorge of De Aar and its Teaching” will be novel to those who have seen the Aarschlucht more than once. The essay on the Coleoptera of Madeira, in which is discussed the theory of the late Mr. Andrew Murray as to the coleopterous fauna of the Atlantic islands, proving the existence of a continent, now submerged, of which they once formed part, is based chiefly on the researches of Mr. Wollaston; but Dr. Wallace uses the facts with ingenuity as a text from which to preach a telling homily on natural selection. Even in regard to questions which he has specially studied, and as to which he has been a pioneer, he is not a cautious guide when he passes from the intelligent and vivid description of facts to the consideration of principles. Nor do we find that he always appreciates the full effect of the difficulties, on the whole growing, in the way of the reception of the theory of development. A paper on “Human Selection” opens with the sentence, “In one of my latest conversations with Darwin he expressed himself very gloomily on the future of humanity, on the ground that in our modern civilization natural selection had no play, and the fittest did not survive.” Dr. Wallace endeavours to reassure us, but the reasoning is not convincing, the hope on which he builds is frail. In the second volume are one or two charming essays on scientific or semi-scientific subjects; for example, “Museums for the People” and “American Museums.” In the dissertations on reciprocity of trade, land nationalization, disestablishment and disendowment, there is much questionable matter, and they leave the impression that the most patient study of natural science is no adequate preparation for the handling of the problems of politics and political economy. We must add that the illustrations are many and excellent.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.