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[p. 6]

‘Alfred Russel Wallace—1822-1913.’

The death of Alfred Russel Wallace, removes the last of the great scientific personalities of the Victorian era. Born in Usk, Monmouthshire, in 1822,¹ Wallace was 13 years younger than Darwin, two years younger than Herbert Spencer, and three years older than Huxley, and he long outlived these three great compeers, and carried his remarkable philosophical researches and his unwearying literary and scientific activities not only through the whole reign of Queen Victoria, but well into this the fourth year of the reign of George the Fifth.

Wallace was the son of a lawyer who neglected law for literature, and who ruined himself in publishing high-class artistic and philosophical magazines. His mother traced her descent back to an eminent Huguenot family. In his youth Alfred Russel Wallace tasted the bitterness of poverty, and in his autobiography (“My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions, 1905”) he tells how he had to act as a pupil teacher in a private school, his fees being remitted to pay for his services. For years after his cheeks used to burn when he remembered the invidious position he occupied, and the slights to which his frank and sensitive temperament had to submit. So poor was he that College and University were out of the question. Thus he never took any University degree. In this he resembled his great contemporary, Herbert Spencer—both were men who fought their way into recognition as among the choice and master spirits of their age, against the prejudice and opposition and disparagement of University circles, who naturally believed no man could be great unless he had attended formal lectures and passed certain stereotyped examinations. But the genius, the insatiable eagerness to achieve, the inborn instinct for original investigation, together with the power to give forth again in lucid language the results of his research and observation, enabled Wallace to beat down the excluding barriers of the College men until even the great University of Oxford was proud to bestow an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws upon him, and the famous Royal Society of London elected him with acclamation as a Fellow.

Wallace was also chosen at times as an Examiner in Science for Civil Service and other Government examinations. He gives some beautiful “bloomers” made by candidates. Here are examples:—“The depth of the Atlantic is measured by large things called ravines. The depth is ninety million miles. Gold is found at the bottom.” “The principal Atlantic icebergs come from the Alleghanies on the East of America. When they reach the valley below, they melt and form small straits, which in time spread out into rivers. They enrich the climate through which they pass.” “Icebergs are formed by geysers shooting up in the air and frozen there.” “A volcano is a raised piece of land in about a thousand years, then in another thousand years it has become larger and larger, till it becomes as high as would be called a volcano. But a geyser is a raised piece of land done in a night. Difference: the volcano takes a long time to be at the point of saturation, but the geyser is done all in one night.” “Extinct volcanoes not having emptied for a length of time is one cause which has brought about the extinction of animals.”

After various vicissitudes Wallace became a surveyor—an occupation for which his mathematical mind made him singularly fitted. The great railway “boom” in the later “thirties” and the “forties,” when

England was rapidly gridironed with iron roads, gave unprecedented opportunities for employment. Meanwhile he was developing his predilection toward every form of social and scientific investigation. He early took up with Socialists and sceptics. He was closely associated with Robert Owen, the celebrated promulgator of the co-operative idea in industrial life. He also fell away from the Church of England, in which he had been educated. First, he preferred the Nonconformist temples. But the doctrine of eternal punishment proved repugnant to him, and he cast it aside. He was, indeed, deeply religious. But his views, even though they would not square with the Westminster Confession, differed vastly from the materialism of Spencer and Tyndall and the agnosticism of Huxley. In "The World of Life," published in 1911, he explicitly contends that the beauty and elaborations of a bird's feather or a beetle's wing proved "the absolute necessity for and organising and directive life principle...a creative power...a directive mind...and an ultimate purpose...this purpose...being the development of man, the one crowning product of the whole cosmic process of life-development...a supreme and over-ruling mind as their necessary cause." He never ceased to believe in another existence beyond the grave. Indeed he became one of the most strenuous believers in the doctrines of modern spiritualism, and never wavered in his advocacy of the genuineness of several well-known "mediums." He asserted that his own personal experience convinced him that, among others, Home, Katie Fox, and the Davenport Brothers were truly in communication with discarnate spirits. He believed in materialization, levitation, table turning, and spirit rapping. Any reader who desires to know his views more fully is here referred to his "Life," or to the more easily accessible "Chambers' Encyclopaedia," in which the article "Spiritualism" is from his pen. In 1876, with Edward Gurney, Professors Barrett and Sedgwick, and Frederick Myers, he founded the Society for Psychical Research.

But the main love of this manysided man was for natural history. By dint of attending scientific lectures, reading, roaming in museums, and observing life in the fields in every spare hour, he gradually acquired vast knowledge. He soon became known to the authorities of the British and other great museums as a brilliant student and an original investigator.² The Entomological and Zoological Societies soon welcomed his presence and acclaimed his papers. In 1846 he was despatched by wealthy collectors to the Amazon,³ where he spent several years. His observations opened up new sources of knowledge of the fauna of that vast region, and to this day his book, in which he recounts his experiences, is widely esteemed. Later on, in 1854, he went on a mission to the Malay Archipelago. Here he passed eight active years, chiefly collecting every kind of winged insect, but also making geological and botanical observations of incalculable value. It was while absent on this long tour that occurred the outstanding event in Wallace's career. This was the strange coincidence that simultaneously with, but independently of, Darwin he brought forward a new theory in support of the already accepted doctrine that living species are evolved one from another by continuous changes.⁴ He was impressed by Malthus's essay on "Population," and realised that nature produces life in extravagant and wasteful profusion, and that many die compared to the few which live. Evolution in itself was an ancient idea, but Chambers and Herbert Spencer had refurbished it. Wallace and Darwin, however, explained its action by the argument that while untold myriads of organisms perish in a bitter struggle for existence, those survive which can adapt themselves to their environment. These survivors imperceptibly change, and transmit their changes to their progeny,⁵ and all the manifold varieties of life are caused thereby. This doctrine Spencer aptly named "the survival of the fittest."

Wallace's coincident but independent results, as embodied in a learned paper, reached England just as Darwin was startling the world with his epoch-making theory.⁶ But Wallace, with a true scientific

modesty, never attempted to wrest the palm from Darwin. Instead he became one of that great thinker's warmest disciples. In his work on "Darwinism" (Macmillan's Edition) he trumpeted the fame of the older man in no uncertain note. But although Wallace in most respects supported and agreed with Darwin, he parted company when the question of a "living soul" was raised. Darwin, as readers of the "Descent of Man" remember, believed the higher consciousness of man to be the logical product of physical evolution—merely the intelligence of the horse or the dog or the monkey, polished to a finer point, and made stronger and more perfect because the brain was more complex and heavier. Wallace, however, maintained that at a definite point in the evolution of animals God directly intervened⁷ and breathed into man a living soul—an immortal spirit—so that he was not simply a little higher than the ape, but a little lower than the angels.

Space will not suffice here to more than catalogue a few of the innumerable departments of research and knowledge which Wallace took for his own. Book after book poured from his pen, and all were readable, earnest, and learned. In most things Wallace was heterodox. His friends among the scientists looked upon him as a crank of genius; but Wallace himself always argued his points, however at variance with accepted ideas, with a wealth of illustration and a fervour of conviction which rendered it impossible not to admire even though unconvinced.

Long before Henry George he published a work in which he extolled land nationalisation as a remedy for many social ills.⁸ But withal he felt that man naturally craves for a bit of land of his own, and his system allowed of a selection for permanent residence and cultivation purposes in fee simple being acquired by each citizen once in his lifetime.

Another of his hobbies was mesmerism. He practised it at times himself, and advocated its general use. The ephemeral waves in favour of hypnotism which sweep over the medical world show that in this Wallace simply carried to extremes a doctrine which, within sharp and limited bounds, has a true place. Phrenology also, the old system of "bumps," he advocated warmly to the astonishment of his confreres. In addition, he was perhaps the most influential of the anti-vaccination propagandists. In his work, "The Wonderful Century"—a glowing panegyric of the achievements of the nineteenth century—he argues with wonderful adroitness and power that "Vaccination is a delusion, and its penal enforcement a crime." If it were not that experience—as in the present epidemic—shows that it is the unvaccinated who almost wholly contract the disease, while their vaccinated house-mates, although equally exposed to infection, escape, it would be hard to resist Wallace's impassioned pleading. It has indeed made anti-vaccinationists of thousands of the "laity."

Wallace had also a furious hatred of war, and regarded militarism in any form as one of the most calamitous and iniquitous blots on mankind. His Socialism was no doubt of an academical type, but he held it strongly to the last. In the "Life" he enumerates many eminent men, among them Sir Oliver Lodge, Rev. Dr. Clifford, Sir Lewis Morris, in addition to others, who are widely known, as adherents of the Socialistic cause, as being one with him in this regard.

In personal life Wallace bore an unblemished reputation. He was the soul of honour himself, and had a certain simplicity of character which made him surprised that others were not all honest too. His unwearied activity and his keen intellect remained undiminished to the last. A few years ago, he published a book, in which he argued that this world was the centre of the sidereal universe—a theory which was naturally not accepted. Even within the last six months a new social work appeared from his pen.

His "Life" is written with a charming naivete. For instance, it described how after becoming engaged to a young lady and the day fixed, he was suddenly and unaccountably jilted. He is so matter of fact and unromantic in his relation of the story that one cannot but feel that perhaps the lady was wise. However, he did not take this to heart, and a year or so later, being then 40, he married a Miss Mitten, aged 18. He dismisses the subject in a few lines. Butterflies evidently interested him a good deal more. The lady was the daughter of a scientific colleague, and appears to have made a model wife and a life-long helpmate. Another episode is his being persecuted for years with libellous postcards by a "Flat earth Fanatic." This man had offered £100 to anyone who proved the earth was not flat. Wallace, by certain surveying devices, demonstrated the curvature of the water in a long straight canal. Instead of paying up, the flat earth fanatic reviled and insulted poor Wallace for years. Another time he had a long controversy with the British Museum authorities. He had sold them a skull for a certain sum. In sending him a money order they deducted a few pence to pay for the order. This Wallace properly considered dishonest. He spent hours of time and several shillings in stamps in his endeavour to get justice, but never succeeded.

Wallace, as may be judged from the great age to which he lived, was a man of splendid physique. He recounts that at 16 he was six feet high. As he grew in years all kinds of honours were bestowed on him. He toured America in the seventies,⁹ spending about nine months there and giving scientific lectures, and was hailed as one of the world's great men. He recounts that he was most appreciated in San Francisco, where his spiritualist lecture, "If a man die shall he live again?" was exceptionally popular. He numbered as personal friends most of the shining stars in literature and art and science and sociology of the Victorian age; and now that he has passed away full of years and honour the world has his eminent and splendid example of what even a poor and self-taught youth may attain to. Riches he never desired, and never had. He gave his great powers to unremunerative branches of science, and to the promulgation of humanitarian doctrines, which, while of benefit to all, brought little grist to the mill. His books sold well—that is for scientific books, but there is little profit in such books. One novel of Hall Caine's has a wider circulation and makes more money than all Wallace's works combined. But he can ever be held up to our youth, as one who worked and thought "until his eyelids would no longer wag," not for himself but for all, and will remain among the purest and noblest and most picturesque figures in the long roll of the illustrious dead.

T.J.H.

¹ [Editor's note: Actually, 1823.]

² [Editor's note: Not true! They were largely unaware of him.]

³ [Editor's note: Also not true: he and Bates went on their own auspices.]

⁴ [Editor's note: This was hardly "already accepted" at that point.]

⁵ [Editor's note: A rather severe misappreciation of the actual process.]

⁶ [Editor's note: Oops, wrong again: Darwin had made none of his views public at that point!]

⁷ [Editor's note: Actually, Wallace thought that *something* had intervened, but he was never quite sure just what...]

⁸ [Editor's note: Nope, George actually got there first.]

⁹ [Editor's note: Actually, eighties (1886-1887).]

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2014.