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‘Death of Great Scientist.—Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace.—Co-Discoverer with Darwin.—
Land Reformer & Naturalist.’

We record with regret the death of Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, the Grand Old Man of Science, who shared with Darwin the honour of the thought-revolutionising discovery of the principle of natural selection. After an illness of only four days the distinguished scientist, who was nearing 91 years of age, passed away at 9.25 yesterday morning at his residence, Old Orchard, Broadstone, Wimborne, Dorsetshire.

By the death of Alfred Russel Wallace the nation loses not only a stimulating and original thinker, a finely trained observer, a naturalist of world-wide reputation, a vigorous controversialist, a notable explorer and great traveller, but one of its last links with the Victorian era and a personality of versatility and charm.

He was “the last of the Romans.” Spencer, Darwin, Hooker, Huxley, Lyell, Galton, Bates and other master and fellow-workers preceded him; now the sole survivor of the heroic age of biology, of a day when it seemed as if Science really was to create “a new heaven and a new earth,” and substitute sight for faith, has passed away.

Alfred Russel Wallace, whose supreme achievement was the discovery of the process of Natural Selection simultaneously with Darwin, was born on January 8, 1823, at Usk, whither his father had moved from London a few years before for the sake of economy. His father was a solicitor who, cursed with a “competency” of £500 a year, never practised, but pottered, dabbled, collected epitaphs and riddles, got his affairs “involved,” and generally made a mess of things. There were four boys, Alfred being the third son.

SCHOOL, ADVENTURE, SHIPWRECK.

When he was 5 or 6 years old the family migrated to Hertford, and Alfred was sent to the Grammar School, where “the system was very bad.” His schooling, however, was supplemented with much promiscuous reading, ranging from “Paradise Lost” to “Dick Turpin’s Ride to York.” His elder brother William being a land surveyor, Alfred was apprenticed to him, but “the work,” he once told an interviewer, “did not suit me at all; in fact I hated it.” Of systematic scientific training he “never had any to speak of,” having left school before he was 14, but the series of volumes issued by the Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge afforded him the greatest delight, and one volume, Humboldt’s “Travels in South America,” fired him with a desire to see that country. Towards this end, when a drawing master at Leicester, he made the acquaintance of H.W. Bates, the entomologist, who easily persuaded him to accompany him up the Amazon.¹

They sailed in April 1848 in the *Mischief*, a barque of 192 tons, from Liverpool to Para, and Wallace remained four and a half years on the Amazon collecting specimens. The product of the first two years’

toil was consigned to England; the product of the second two years was consigned to the bottom of the sea, Wallace being shipwrecked on the way home. The vessel caught fire, passengers and crew had to take to the boats, and for ten days they were drifting about on the Atlantic, clad only in sleeping suits and living on raw ham and biscuits, before a passing vessel rescued them. The ship which saved them sprang a leak, and it was with 4ft. of water in the hold, and the men pumping for dear life, that she came up the Channel.

THE GREAT COINCIDENCE.

Wallace next went to the region round about the Malay Archipelago, having satisfied himself that that was the finest field for an exploring and collecting naturalist. Here he spent eight of the best years of his life, gathering specimens. For the greater part of the time he was absolutely alone.

It was during these pregnant years, he says, "that I began the course of study that eventually led me to hit on the theory of natural selection." Darwin also evolved, independently, precisely the same theory, and, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton has observed, "nothing in all the chronicles of great stories or great gentlemen is more manly and wholesome than the letters of Darwin and Wallace upon that matter."

It was whilst lying ill of fever at Ternate in 1858 that the full idea came to Wallace in a flash. He was reading Malthus on Population—the same book that gave hints to Darwin—when "there suddenly flashed on me," he said, "the idea of the survival of the fittest, and in the two hours that elapsed before my ague fit was over I had thought out the whole of the theory which I then wrote out and sent by the next post to Darwin."

Darwin was "staggered" on receiving it, and small wonder, since the letter propounded the very theory which he had formulated some 20 years before, but had hesitated to make public until satisfied that the point of demonstration had been reached. In the end Wallace effaced himself, and the great discovery became known as the Darwinian theory, instead of, as it might have been, the Wallacian theory.

WHERE THEY DIFFERED.

For Darwin, Dr. Wallace entertained throughout his life deep affection and veneration. Where intellectually he parted company with him was when Darwin claimed not only that man's body had evolved from lower types by variation and natural selection, but that his mind also had evolved in like manner. Wallace, on the contrary, maintained that man's mental powers "cannot have been developed in this way," but "must have required an influx from a higher mind."

Wallace's Malay tour was a decided financial success; the proceeds of his collections brought him a small fortune, which was invested, and produced some £300 a year. This enabled him for the next nine years to remain in London, to work on his Eastern collections, write numerous papers, and make many friends. His pen was occupied with an amazing variety of subjects, from Spiritualism to sociology, and from anti-landlordism and anti-militarism to anti-vaccination, in addition to turning out delightful volumes of travel and science and luminous treatises bearing on both in-

organic and organic evolution. In 1866 he married Miss Mitten, daughter of William Mitten, the greatest English authority on mosses, by whom he had one son and one daughter.²

Wallace was a pioneer in psychical research, and held that “Spiritualism has convinced thousands of the reality” of a life after death. He tried to get Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall, Mill and other of his friends to take up Spiritualism, but they would not be drawn. Huxley had other fish to fry; Darwin had no time; Tyndall came and laughed; Mill was icily dissatisfied with the evidence. Huxley declared himself “neither shocked nor disposed to issue a Commission of Lunacy against you.”

SOCIALIST AND LAND REFORMER.

Wallace’s interest in social progress was as vivid and vital as his devotion to science. It was probably his horror of the lack of co-ordinate effort in the social system that led him to become a Socialist: “It is not too much to say,” he once declared, “that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and our social environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen.”

It is over thirty years since he published his book on land nationalisation, and, he remarked shortly before his death, “I should still like to see what I then proposed acted upon now.” A new volume on Land Nationalisation, to be published next week, will contain a preface which is one of the Doctor’s latest contributions to social reform. Always opposed to the Single Tax, because “the single taxers fail to see that there is as much monopoly in capital as in land,” he qualified his opposition by thinking that if that principle had been applied to the virgin land of the Western States “it would have kept in check the depredations of the Eastern capitalists.”

For Mr. Lloyd George and his work he had the highest admiration.

When I think of his achievement (he said) I am amazed. What a great thing it was, first of all, to conceive that Budget, then to carry the whole Cabinet with him, then to get the House of Commons at his back, and finally to triumph in the country against all the combined forces of wealth and social influence. One man’s work! And a man with no traditions behind him, a man of simple parentage, a statesman made by deep thought, acute observation, and profound sympathy.

Why don’t his enemies see and acknowledge what a great thing he has done—certainly the greatest thing in modern politics? How pitiful and degrading it is to read in speeches of his opponents, vulgar and contemptuous references to his birth, his profession, and his manners!

Is this all that they can say of a man who has accomplished an immense revolution by the sheer force of unanswerable logic? Do they not perceive what a vast thing it is he has done? Cannot they detach themselves from their petty interests and transitory inconvenience, to see that he has opened a new door for England, that future generations will be stronger for his action, that the State will be safer, securer, and richer in every way for his achievement?

The Insurance Act he considered as “perhaps the greatest, and on the whole the most beneficial, of all the attempts yet made to grapple with the great problem of poverty”—to quote from a letter he wrote last year to “The Daily Chronicle.”

To the end (he would have been 91 in January) Wallace maintained his marvelously keen interest in life and thought. With his death passes one of the most fruitful and richly freighted lives ever devoted to the twin causes of Truth and Humanity.

¹ [Editor's note: Most existing evidence suggests that it was Wallace who invited Bates, not the other way around.]

² [Editor's note: Wallace actually had two sons, but one died as a small child.]

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