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‘A. Russel Wallace Dies’

Originator with Darwin of Natural Selection Theory.

Lived to be Nonagenarian

Outlined Fifty-five Years Ago His Idea of the Survival of the Fittest.

London, Nov. 7.—Alfred Russel Wallace, one of the leading British scientists, died to-day, in his ninety-first year. He published many works of world-wide reputation on the theory of natural selection, the geographical distribution of animals and other branches of science. He was a great authority on the land question and was a strong advocate of land nationalization. He travelled in every part of the world in pursuit of his studies.

Alfred Russel Wallace was of Scotch ancestry, born at Usk, Monmouthshire, on January 8, 1823. He was educated at the Hertford Grammar School, and with an older brother was a land surveyor and architect from 1838 to 1844. Then he went to the Amazon with Bates and remained some years. Afterward he was in the Malay Archipelago.

For half a century the naturalist shared with Charles Darwin the credit of originating the theory that natural selection was the force that preserved some species and suppressed others. Wallace met Darwin in the insect room of the British Museum in 1854. While living in Borneo the same year he wrote a paper on “The Law Which Has Regulated the Introduction of New Species,” and it was published in 1855. Not until 1858, however, did Wallace really arrive at the conviction that “the survival of the fittest” was the controlling factor. He at once sent an outline of his theory to Darwin. He showed his outline to Lyell and Sir Joseph Hooker, and they urged its immediate publication.

Darwin himself had embodied the doctrine in a manuscript sketch as early as 1842, and in 1844 enlarged this to a paper of 230 folio pages. Upon the advice of Lyell and Hooker he consented to add an extract therefrom to Wallace’s paper when it was presented to the Linnæan Society, in 1858.

Dr. Wallace once said: “I would only wish to add that my connection with Darwin and his great work has helped to secure for my own writings on the same questions a full recognition by the press and public, while my share in the origination and establishment of the theory of natural selection has usually been exaggerated. The only great result which I claim for my paper of 1858 is that it compelled Darwin to write and publish his ‘Origin of Species’ without further delay.”

Less than a year ago Dr. Wallace declared that the progress of the world during the last century had resulted in a social system which was the worst the world had ever seen. The whole system of society he said was “rotten from the top to the bottom.” He had small patience with the eugenists.

Dr. Wallace was looked upon in England as “the last of the giants.” He belonged to that wonderful group of intellectuals composed of Darwin, Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Lyell, Owen and other scientists, whose daring investigations revolutionized and evolutionized the thought of the century. Though Dr. Wallace was the last survivor of the mighty coterie mentioned, he was the recognized leader also among the later group of scientists who dominate the advanced thought of the present day in England, ranking with the late Lord Kelvin, Sir William Crookes, Sir Oliver Lodge and Professor Barrett.

He was an awkward looking man, who seemed, so to speak, too large for himself. His clothes were so ample they seemed to fit him all over rather than at any one place, while his shoes appeared of the iron-clad variety, inclining to the Merrimac rather than to the Monitor style. His bearing betokened independence and a mind far removed from considerations of dress, though with all his apparent carelessness, there was an air of cleanliness and neatness.

Dr. Wallace was a member of the London Spiritualist Alliance, and was long a firm believer in the survival of human personality after death. He was convinced of the truths of spiritualism many years ago on investigating certain phenomena produced by a woman medium named Mrs. Marshall.

The scientist was not converted to belief in spirits, however, until after long investigation. Once satisfied in his own mind, he launched boldly—for it requires courage, even now, for a so-called “scientist” to admit spirit phenomena—upon a campaign of defence of things occult.

His book “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism” brought down upon his head a perfect tornado of abuse and vituperation; but he held his ground, retracted nothing, and succeeded in influencing a large body of public opinion. With reference to the dogmatic “scientific” view of the day, which seems inclined to sneer at things occult, Mr. Wallace had frequently pointed out that academic science in the past had made some pretty grave mistakes. For instance, the Royal Society itself laughed at Benjamin Franklin’s lightning rod idea; while no less a person than Sir Humphry Davy scoffed at the possibility of lighting London by gas. “Experts” testified that Stephenson’s locomotive could never be of commercial use, as it would not be able to attain a speed of twelve miles per hour. All the world knows what scientific convention did to men like Galileo, Harvey and other pioneers in thought. However, with men like Sir William Crookes, Sir Oliver Lodge, Professor Barrett and others to uphold him in his view of spiritualism, Dr. Wallace considered himself in good company.

During his early years Dr. Wallace was more or less of an agnostic; but after embracing spiritualism he became convinced that nature is ruled by some Intimate First Cause, and that, carrying out the behests of this Guiding Purpose, an infinite number of spiritual forces are at work.

“I think we have got to recognize,” once said the doctor on this point, “that between man and the ultimate God there is an almost infinite multitude of beings working in the universe at tasks as definite and important as any that we have to perform on earth. I imagine that the universe is peopled with spirits—that is, with intelligent beings—with powers and duties akin to our own, but vaster. I think there is a gradual ascent from man upward and onward, through an almost endless legion of these beings, to the First Cause. Everywhere I turn I find a purpose in creation. I cannot examine the smallest or the

commonest living thing without finding my reason uplifted and amazed [p. 7g] by the miracle, by the beauty, the power and the wisdom of its creation.

“I almost think a feather is the masterpiece of nature. No man in the world could make such a thing. It has been estimated that the feather of a heron’s wing is composed of more than a million parts.”

With all Dr. Wallace’s interest in things of a spiritual nature, he took the deepest pleasure in keeping thoroughly up to date. He was the head and front of many reform movements in England and president of the Land Nationalization Society and other organizations. During the recent land agitation in England his book on the subject of land nationalization was extensively quoted and was reissued to the extent of many thousands of copies.

He was in sympathy with the “votes for women” movement and an out-and-out Socialist. He also opposed vivisection. Naturally, his very advanced views on all these subjects laid him open to considerable adverse criticism; but he was never afraid of his convictions and was always able to give a good account of himself in the various controversies in which he was involved.

Some of Dr. Wallace’s works are “Travels on the Amazon,” “The Malay Archipelago,” “Natural Selection,” “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism,” “The Geographical Distribution of Animals,” “Tropical Nature,” “Australasia” and “Man’s Place in the Universe.”

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.