

Transcription, March 2016:

The Westminster Gazette 42(6376) (7 Nov. 1913): 7a-7b (anon.).

[p. 7]

‘Dr. A. Russel Wallace. Death of The Famous Scientist This Morning.’

(*Special to the “Westminster Gazette.”*)

We regret to have to report that Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace died at 9.25 this morning.

Dr. Wallace has been ill for some days, and his condition was thought to be sufficiently serious yesterday to warrant the members of his family being summoned.

Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., D.C.L., LL.D., F.R.S., who has passed away at the advanced age of ninety years, was remarkable for the amount and value of his scientific work. Over fifty years ago he discovered the great principle of natural selection—a record which will for all time associate his name with that of Charles Darwin. Since that time he has pursued many useful studies, and notwithstanding the advance of age kept his mind alert and his pen free from rust in the pursuit of knowledge and social betterment. Granted a civil pension of £200 by Mr. Gladstone, he has lived during later years in his pleasant home above Poole Harbour a contented and busy life.

Dr. Russel Wallace had no advantages of birth and education. He was born at Usk, in Monmouthshire, on January 8, 1823, being descended from Scottish and Huguenot forbears. Commencing as a land surveyor and architect, he at length became a master in the collegiate school at Leicester, where he met Mr. H. W. Bates, and together they planned an expedition to the Amazon “in order to observe nature and make a living by collecting.” Later the two naturalists parted company, and Wallace made a tour on his own account to the Malay Islands, where for eight years he carried on his work and where he made his famous essay on natural selection.

“Survival of the Fittest.”

The story of Wallace’s discovery is most interesting because of its human incidents. Whilst he was lying ill with intermittent fever in 1858 at Ternate, in the Malays, he thought of Malthus’s “Essay on Population,” which he had read some years previously. Almost at a flash the idea of the survival of the fittest came to him, and in an incredibly short space of time he had thought out the complete theory, and, working at high pressure, he prepared his complete essay on the subject in three evenings. Wallace conceived the plan of sending his essay to Darwin, who received it on June 18, 1858. In the covering letter Darwin was asked for his opinion, and also requested to forward the essay for a similar purpose to Sir Charles Lyell. The fact that Wallace sought Darwin’s opinion was at least a striking coincidence. Twenty years earlier, by promptings also received from Malthus’s work, Darwin himself came to the

conclusion that “selection was the keystone of man’s success.” He wrote in his diary at the time, “Under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this,” he added, “would be the formation of new species. Here, then, I had a theory by which to work.” He had made a beginning with the subject, and had communicated his plans to Sir Charles Lyell and Sir Joseph Hooker. When, therefore, he forwarded Wallace’s MS. to Sir Charles Lyell he wrote, “Your words have come true with a vengeance—that I should be forestalled.” Darwin also added: “I never saw a more striking coincidence. If Wallace had my MS. sketch written out in 1842 he could not have made a better short abstract. Even his terms now stand as heads of my chapters.”

At this time Wallace as a comparatively speaking young man of thirty-five, whilst Darwin was forty-nine.

The most honourable action was taken by Darwin. He referred the whole matter to his two friends Lyell and Hooker, and even offered to place on one side his own contribution; but the latter decided that Wallace’s essay should be sent to the Linnean Society in conjunction with a summary of Darwin’s conclusions. To this Lyell and Hooker appended an introduction signed by themselves explaining the whole circumstances. The whole communication was read before the Linnean Society on July 1, 1858, and appeared in the Society’s journal under the title, “On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties; and on the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection.” The title given to Wallace’s section was, “On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type.” The joint essay contained some new phrases which were destined to live as scientific terms, and in addition, to become the Aunt Sallies for all sorts of people, from the bishop to the buffoon on the boards. Wallace was responsible for the phrase “struggle for existence,” whilst to Darwin belonged the coinage of “natural selection.”

Before this approach on the part of Wallace to Darwin they had only met once before. The fact remains as high tribute to both scientists that though competition might have entered into the coincidence established by Wallace they remained on terms of warm friendship until the death of Darwin in 1882. It may be recalled that in 1860, after Darwin’s “Origin of Species” was published, he wrote to Wallace: “I admire the generous manner in which you speak of my book. Most persons would, in your position, have felt some envy or jealousy. How nobly free you seem to be of this common failing of mankind.”

Divergence From Darwin.

In some details Wallace differed from Darwin. In his exposition of Darwinism he endeavoured to secure a firmer foundation for the theory from evidence that should extend beyond the domesticated animals and cultivated plants. Darwin generally appealed to dogs and pigeons, but Wallace carried the comparison to a much larger number of species. In obedience to criticisms levelled against his theory, Darwin is thought to have receded somewhat from his position in later years, but Dr. Wallace made it his boast that he was an advocate of pure Darwinism. His opinions on these points are admirably expressed in “Darwinism,” published in 1889. Here he introduced his notable dissension from Darwin in reference to the mental powers of men. The “struggle for existence,” he claimed, did not produce the faculties of the master minds of the world. Thousands of years would be required to bring to perfection the thinkers, musicians, artists, dramatists and philosophers who wrote their names on the page of history. “We must

look for another origin,” he declared, “and for this origin we can only find an adequate cause in the universe of spirit.”

Wallace and Revealed Religion.

Early in life Dr. Wallace seems to have accepted the orthodox views regarding revealed religion, but in later life this belief was relinquished. In its place he accepted Spiritualism, unlike the large proportion of scientific men, and declared in his book on “Miracles and Modern Spiritualism” that “Spiritualism is an experimental science; and affords the only sure foundation for a true philosophy, a pure religion.”

As a Social Reformer.

Wallace was also a sociologist. He looked to Socialism as the panacea for the ills of mankind, especially after his study of the problem of wealth and poverty. He believed that one result of the enormous increase of the nation’s wealth and poverty was a corresponding increase of poverty, insanity, suicide, and, he also added, probably even of crime, together with other indications of moral and physical deterioration. Long before Mr. Henry George expressed his views Dr. Wallace was a Land Nationaliser,¹ and his book on the subject, published in 1882, set forth the necessity of the State ownership of land. From this position he did not budge, and in his declining days he hailed with the keenest satisfaction the proposals submitted by Mr. Lloyd George. In fact, this subject was one of the last to engage his attention, and his final pronouncement upon it is actually in the Press at the moment. Dr. Wallace, as president of the Land Nationalisation Society, decided to write the preface to a book written by Mr. Hyder, secretary of that organisation, entitled “The Case for Land Nationalisation,” and this book, with Dr. Wallace’s contribution, is to be published shortly.

“A wonderful man—a wizard,” was his eulogy to an interviewer concerning the Liberal statesman. Always daring in his outlook and regardless of the so-called consequences, he sought the betterment of the industrial classes by the advocacy of a revision of taxation on the basis that taxes should begin higher up the scale and continue on the same level.

Wallace was married to the eldest daughter of Mr. William Mitten, the botanist, by whom he had two² children.

¹[Editor’s note: The accuracy of this statement could be debated: Wallace’s first writing on land nationalization appeared in 1880, while George’s *Progress and Poverty* came out in 1879.]

²[Editor’s note: Three, not two, children.]