

OBITUARY.

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

So much has been written about this illustrious man, both before and after his death on November 7th, that it is difficult to say anything fresh or arresting. Looking back over a warm friendship of more than twenty-five years, and reading again the numerous letters received from him, I do however recall memories and find striking statements which help to create a picture of the great personality now lost to the world. Some of these have been recorded elsewhere ('Nature,' November 20th, pp. 347-9); others appear in the following pages.

The curious misconception about the date of Wallace's birth has often been referred to, but it is of interest to quote his own words on the subject. He wrote, February 23rd, 1903:—

"Up to about fifteen years ago I thought I was born in 1822. I suppose I had been told so. But I *then* came into possession of an old Prayer Book in which the date of birth of my father is given by his father, and of all my brothers and sisters in my father's handwriting, and there I am put down as born on January 8th, 1823, and the date is repeated for my baptism, February 16th, 1823. I, therefore, found myself then a year younger than I had supposed. . . ."

Although Wallace was eminently sociable and delighted in converse with his friends, he was strongly averse to publicity and ceremony of every kind; and I think that his appearance at the Linnean Society's celebrations in 1908 was due to a sense of duty,

and not from pleasure. He felt that it was a unique opportunity of paying homage to the mighty genius whose name had been, and will ever be, associated with his own.

In the summer of 1889 the Hebdomadal Council of Oxford University invited him to receive the hon. degree of D.C.L. at the Encænica. Professor Bartholomew Price wrote to inform Wallace of the decision. He wrote to me on May 28th :—

“You will probably be surprised and *disgusted* to hear that I have declined it. . . . I have at all times a profound distaste for *all* public ceremonials, and at this particular time that distaste is stronger than ever.” After referring to the amount of work he had to do, the letter continues: “Under these circumstances it would be almost impossible for me to rush away to Oxford, except under absolute compulsion; and to do so would be to render a ceremony, which at any time would be a trial, a positive punishment.

“Really the greatest kindness my friends can do me is to leave me in peaceful obscurity, for I have lived so secluded a life that I am more and more disinclined to crowds of any kind.”

A few years later he refused, for the same reason, to unveil a statue of Darwin in the Oxford University Museum, and I well remember the sly humour with which he hinted that Sir Joseph Hooker would be a far more appropriate central figure at the ceremony.

Ten years ago the Hon. John Collier generously offered to paint a portrait of Wallace. If the offer had been accepted we should have had a noble presentation of one of the greatest men of the last century—a splendid companion to the Darwin and Huxley we all know and love so well. But nothing would induce Wallace to sit. “My portrait is just appearing in ‘Black and White,’” he said, “and I am sure nothing could be better than that.” About ten weeks ago Wallace gave up his old objection, and was willing to sit for his portrait: arrangements were actually being made at the time of his death. It is still hoped that, with the help of photographs, a portrait, to be presented to the Royal Society, may be one of the memorials of this great man.

Although Wallace avoided humanity in the mass, he resembled Darwin in the breadth of his interest in mankind. The older naturalist, although he quoted Cobbett and spoke of the “bloody old *Times*,” still said that he could not do without it, and that it was “meat and drink” to him. Just a year before his death Wallace wrote, November 12th, 1912:—

"I am—for me—very busy now with two small books in hand, one semi-philosophical—on *Environment* and *Morality*—promised these two years—and the other on the *Labour Problem*. But I now have to work very slowly, and the *war-news* every day must be read."

I recall with the utmost pleasure a breakfast at Professor Meldola's the morning after the meeting of the Linnean Society on June 18th, 1896, when Wallace read his last paper before a scientific Society. The party, which also included Mr. (now Sir) Francis Darwin, sat and talked until far into the morning. Finally, as Wallace rose, he said "Well, I should like to go on in this way all day!"

Another marked characteristic of Wallace was his keen and generous appreciation of the work and successes of other men. I well remember the enthusiasm with which he read in 1889 of Stanley's journey across Africa. "He certainly is the prince of African travellers," he said. Again, he wrote on June 13th, 1897:—

"I was *delighted* with your account of Prichard's wonderful anticipation of Galton and Weismann! It is so perfect and complete. . . . His facts and arguments are really useful now, and I should think Weismann must be delighted to have such a supporter come from the grave; . . . had he been a *zoologist* and *traveller* he might have anticipated the work of both Darwin and Weismann!"

The last letter but one I received from Wallace, dated June 3rd of the present year, contains a generous if somewhat uncritical defence of the authenticity of G. W. Sleeper's "Recent Lectures," dated 1849 (*Proc. Linn. Soc. Lond.*, 1912-13, pp. 26-45). Alluding to the possibility of fraud, he said:—

"The writer was too earnest and too clear a thinker to descend to any such trick, and for what? 'Agnostic' is not in Shakespeare, but it may well have been used by some one before Huxley."

It is impossible on this occasion to speak of Wallace's scientific work, and even less possible to dwell upon the other subjects on which his eager intellect occupied itself. But a very interesting letter proves—as many must have suspected—that his mind was a continuous whole, whose varied activities influenced one another. He had asked me to read the proof-sheets of "Darwinism," and I finally came to the concluding parts which deal with the evolution of man. He replied to my criticisms Feb. 22nd, 1889:—

"Many thanks for your kindness in looking over my proofs. I will not trouble you with the last sheet, which would only horrify you still more. I am quite aware my views as to Man will be—as they have been—criticized. I have referred to Weismann's opinion

further on ; but I doubt if his view or yours will really account for the facts. Of course we look at the question from different stand-points. I (think I) *know* that non-human intelligences exist—that there are *minds* disconnected from a physical brain—that there *is*, therefore, a *spiritual world*. This is not, for me, a *belief* merely, but *knowledge* founded on the long-continued observation of facts—and such *knowledge* must modify my views as to the origin and nature of human faculty.”

Thinking of Wallace’s happy, strenuous life, we are led to realize man’s independence of wealth and circumstance, to know by his example that, if it be great enough, “the mind is its own place,” and is “not to be changed by place or time.” And looking back on his ninety years of strength and many-sided activity we recall other words written by the same great master of thought and language :—

“ Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair.”

E. B. POULTON.