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[p. 10c]

‘The Darwin-Wallace Celebration.’

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the famous joint communication by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace “On the tendency of species to form varieties, and on the perpetuation of varieties and species by natural means of selection,” a special meeting of the Linnean Society of London was held yesterday at the Institution of Civil Engineers in Great George-street. The president of the society, Dr. Dukinfield H. Scott, occupied the chair, and there was present a large and distinguished company representative of learned and scientific societies, as well as the Danish and Swedish Ministers, and the following members of the Darwin family:—Sir George and Lady Darwin, Dr. Francis Darwin, Major Leonard Darwin, and Mr. William Darwin. There were also present Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, whose name is inseparably associated with that of Darwin in the great event which provided the occasion for yesterday’s celebration, and the venerable Sir Joseph Hooker, one of the two friends to whom Darwin first confided his epoch-making generalization.

The President, in welcoming the delegates and guests, said that they were met to celebrate what was without doubt the greatest event in the history of the Linnean Society since its foundation. Nor was it easy to conceive the possibility in the future of any second revolution of biological thought so momentous as that which was started 50 years ago by the reading of the joint papers of Mr. Darwin and Dr. Wallace, communicated to the society by Sir Charles Lyell and Sir Joseph Hooker. In Darwin’s contributions, the now classic term “natural selection” was used for the first time. In Dr. Wallace’s paper, the same idea was expressed with equal clearness. With both authors the key to evolution was at the same time the key to adaptation, and the great characteristic by which living things were distinguished. Darwin and Wallace not only freed us from the dogma of special creation—a dogma which we now found it difficult to conceive of as once seriously held—but they afforded a natural explanation of the marvellous indications of design which had been the great strength of the old doctrine; and themselves, with their disciples, added tenfold to the evidence of adaptation. Any new development of the doctrine of evolution must be prepared to face fairly and squarely the facts of adaptation. He was proud to welcome on behalf of the Linnean Society the illustrious gathering which had assembled to commemorate an event so unpretentious in its circumstances, so profound in its significance. The presence of Dr. Wallace, one of the two creators of the theory, and of Sir Joseph Hooker, who brought it into the world, was in itself enough to render the meeting memorable. While regretting the absence of Professor Weissmann and Professor Haeckel, those valiant champions of evolution, he rejoiced to welcome Professor Strasburger, who represented in the present day the great school of Hofmeister, who helped to make straight the way for “The Origin of Species.”

The ceremony of presenting the special Darwin-Wallace medals was then entered upon.

In making the presentation first to Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace,

The President said that Dr. Wallace’s brilliant work both in natural history and geography had often received distinguished recognition. In asking him to accept the first Darwin-Wallace medal, the Linnean

Society was really offering him his own. There was nothing in the history of science more delightful or more noble than the story of the relations between Darwin and Wallace—the story of a generous rivalry in which each discoverer strove to exalt the claims of the other. It was a remarkable and momentous coincidence that both should have independently arrived at the idea of natural selection after the reading of Malthus's book; and it was a most happy inspiration that Dr. Wallace should have selected Darwin as the naturalist to whom his discovery should be communicated. Like Darwin, Dr. Wallace was, above all, a naturalist, a student and lover of living animals and plants. It was to such men—those who had learnt the ways of nature in the open—that the doctrine of natural selection especially appealed, and therein lay its great and lasting strength. (Cheers.)

Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, who was very cordially received on rising to respond, said that since the death of Darwin in 1882 he had found himself in the somewhat unusual position of receiving credit and praise from popular writers under a complete misapprehension of what his share in Darwin's work really amounted to. It has been stated not infrequently in the Press that Darwin and he discovered natural selection simultaneously, while a more daring few had declared that he was the first to make the discovery, and that he gave way to Darwin. To avoid further errors it would be well to give the actual facts. The one fact that connected him with Darwin was that the idea of "natural selection" or "survival of the fittest," together with its far-reaching consequences, occurred to them both independently. But what was often forgotten was that the idea occurred to Darwin in October, 1838, nearly 20 years earlier than to himself, and that during the whole of that 20 years Darwin had been laboriously collecting evidence and carrying out ingenious experiments and original observations. As far back as 1844, when he (Dr. Wallace) had hardly thought of any serious study of nature, Darwin had written an outline of his views which he communicated to his friends Lyell and Hooker. The former strongly urged him to publish his theory as soon as possible lest he should be forestalled, but Darwin always refused till he had got together the whole of the materials for his intended great work. Then at last Lyell's prediction was fulfilled, and without any apparent warning his (Dr. Wallace's) letter reached Darwin like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky. How different from this long study and preparation, this philosophic caution, this determination not to make known his fruitful conception till he could back it up by overwhelming proofs, was his own conduct! The idea came to him, as it came to Darwin, in a sudden flash of insight. It was thought out in a few hours, and was written down with such a sketch of its various applications and developments as occurred to the mind at the moment. Then it was copied on to letter paper and sent on to Darwin, all in one week. He was the young man in a hurry; Darwin was the painstaking and patient student. Such being the facts, he should have had no cause of complaint if the respective shares of Darwin and himself had thenceforth been estimated as roughly proportional to the time that each had bestowed upon their theory when it was first given to the world—that was to say, as 20 years was to one week. If Darwin had listened to his friends and had published his theory after ten years, 15 years, or even 18 years' elaboration of it, he would at once have been recognized, and should ever be recognized, as the sole and undisputed discoverer and patient investigator of the great law of "natural selection" in all its far-reaching consequences. It was a singular piece of good luck that gave him any share whatever in the discovery. During the first half of the 19th century many great biological thinkers and workers had been pondering over the problem, and had even suggested ingenious, but inadequate solutions. Why did so many of the greatest intellects fail while Darwin and he hit upon the solution? A curious series of correspondences both in mind and in environment led Darwin and himself, alone among their contemporaries, to reach identically the same theory. First and most important in early life, both Darwin and he became ardent

beetle hunters. There was no other group of organisms that so impressed the collector by the almost infinite number of its specific forms and their innumerable adaptations to diverse environments. Again, both Darwin and he had “the mere passion of collecting,” an intense interest in the mere variety of living things. It was this superficial and almost childlike interest in the outward forms of living things which happened to be the only one that could have led them to a solution of the problem of species. It was the constant search for a detection of often unexpected differences between very similar creatures that gave such an intellectual charm and fascination to mere collecting, and when, as with Darwin and himself, the collectors were of a speculative turn of mind, they were constantly led to think on the why and the how of this overwhelming and at first sight purposeless wealth of specific forms among the very humblest forms of life. Then a little later both Darwin and he became travellers and observers in some of the richest and most interesting portions of the earth and thus had forced upon their attention all the strange phenomena of local and geographical distribution. Thenceforward the mystery of how species came into existence began in Darwin’s phrase “to haunt” them. Finally, both Darwin and he, at the critical moment when their minds were freshly stored with a considerable body of personal observation and reflection bearing on the problem to be solved, had their attention directed to the system of “positive checks” as expounded by Malthus in his “Principles of Population.” The effect of this was analogous to that of friction on the specially prepared match, producing that flash of insight which led them immediately to the simple but universal law of the “survival of the fittest,” as the long-sought effective cause of the continuous modification and adaptation of living things. He attached much importance to the large amount of solitude which he and Darwin enjoyed during their travels and which gave them ample time for reflection. This view of the combination of certain mental faculties and external conditions that led Darwin and himself to an identical conception also served to explain why none of their precursors or contemporaries hit upon what was really so very simple a solution of the great problem. He accepted the crowning honour conferred upon him that day as a too liberal recognition of the moderate amount of time and work he had given to explain and elucidate the theory, to point out some novel applications of it, and to extend those applications even in directions which somewhat diverged from those accepted by his honoured friend and teacher—Charles Darwin. (Loud cheers.)

The President, in presenting the medal next to Sir Joseph Hooker, said it was with profound pleasure that they welcomed one whom Darwin 50 years ago wrote of as “our best British botanist, and perhaps the best in the world,” words which had gained in force with the half-century that had elapsed since they were written. Sir Joseph Hooker’s early appreciation and unswerving support of a doctrine too often misunderstood did more than any other circumstances to ensure a fair hearing among true men of science for the theory of the origin of species by means of natural selection, leading ultimately to its general acceptance. (Cheers.)

Sir Joseph Hooker, who was loudly cheered on responding, said that, considering the intimate terms on which Mr. Darwin extended to him his friendship, he thought that on that occasion it would be appropriate if he could from his memory contribute to the knowledge of some important event in Darwin’s career. (Hear, hear.) He had selected as such an event one germane to this celebration, and also engraven on his memory—namely, the considerations which determined Mr. Darwin to assent to the course which Sir Charles Lyell and he suggested to him—that of presenting to the society, in one communication, his own and Mr. Wallace’s theories on the effect of variation and the struggle for existence on the evolution of species. They had all read Francis Darwin’s fascinating work as editor of his father’s “Life and Letters,” where they found a letter addressed on June 18, 1858, to Sir Charles Lyell by

Mr. Darwin, who stated that he had that day received from Mr. Wallace, written from the Celebes Islands, a sketch of a theory of natural selection as depending on the struggle for existence so identical with one he himself entertained, and fully described in MS. in 1842, that he never saw a more striking coincidence. After writing to Sir Charles Lyell, Mr. Darwin informed him (the speaker) of Mr. Wallace's letter explicitly announcing his resolve to abandon all claim to priority for his own sketch. He (the speaker) could not but protest against such a course, no doubt reminding him that he had read it, and that Sir Charles knew its contents some years before the arrival of Mr. Wallace's letter, and that the withholding of their knowledge of its priority would be unjustifiable. He further suggested the simultaneous publication of the two, and offered, should Mr. Darwin agree to such a compromise, to write to Mr. Wallace fully informing him of the motives of the course adopted. In answer Mr. Darwin thanked him warmly for his offer to explain all to Mr. Wallace, and in a later letter stated that he was disposed to look favourably on the suggested compromise, but that, before making up his mind, he desired a second opinion as to whether he could honourably claim priority, and that he proposed applying to Sir Charles Lyell for this. It might be interesting to recall that the last ordinary meeting of the session of the Linnean Society was held in the middle of June. The occasion of the meeting on July 1 was exceptional, being due to the death of the eminent botanist Robert Brown. As a mark of respect to that great past president, the ordinary meeting of June 17 was adjourned, and a special meeting called in order to elect a successor to the vacancy on the council, caused by his decease, George Bentham being nominated in his place. The usual election of council and officers had taken place at the anniversary meeting only a month before, and, oddly enough, among the new members of that body was Charles Darwin. Other papers were read at the special meeting of July 1, but the whole correspondence relating to the two papers on the evolution of species was subsequent to June 17; indeed, the joint letter from Sir Charles Lyell and himself communicating them to the society was only written on June 30. Thus the death of Robert Brown was the direct cause of the theory of the origin of species being given to the world at least four months earlier than would otherwise have been the case. He concluded by asking their forgiveness for intruding upon their time and attention with the half-century old real, or fancied, memories of a nonagenarian as contributions to the history of the most notable event in the annals of biology that had followed the appearance, in 1735, of the "Systema Naturæ" of Linnæus. (Cheers.)

The medal was next presented in turn to Professor Ernst Haeckel and Professor August Weismann (in whose behalf and absence it was received by Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg, of the German Embassy), Professor Eduard Strasburger, Dr. Francis Galton, and Sir E. Ray Lankester.

The President, in making the presentation, delivered in each case a short address to the medallists, who responded.

The delegates of corporate bodies were then received by the president in the following order:—

Christ's College, Cambridge (Dr. Peile, F.B.A., Master); Shrewsbury School (Mr. C. J. Baker, Chief Science Master); and Hertford Grammar School (Mr. G. W. Kinman, M.A., Headmaster)—connected with the early training of Darwin and Wallace; the University of Oxford (Dr. T. H. Warren, Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor E. B. Poulton, and Dr. A. H. Church), the University of Cambridge (Dr. Francis Darwin), the University of St. Andrews (Professor P. R. Scott Lang), the University of Glasgow (Professor John Graham Kerr), the University of Aberdeen (Lieutenant-Colonel Prain), the University of Edinburgh (Professor I. B. Balfour), the University of Dublin, Trinity College

(Dr. H. H. Dixon), the University of Durham (Professor M. C. Potter), the University of London (Sir W. T. Thiselton-Dyer), the University of Manchester (Professor F. E. Weiss), the University of Wales (Professor R. W. Phillips), the University of Birmingham (Sir Oliver Lodge), the University of Liverpool (Professor Herdman), the University of Leeds (Professor V. H. Blackman), the University of Sheffield (Professor Denny), University College, Nottingham (Professor J. W. Carr), the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Stockholm (Professor Einar Lönnberg), the Royal Society (Sir Archibald Geikie), the Society of Antiquaries (Lord Avebury), the Royal Irish Academy (Dr. R. F. Scharff), the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society (Mr. C. Bailey), the Royal Society of Edinburgh (Professor D'Arcy Thompson), the Geological Society of London (Professor Hudleston), the Cambridge Philosophical Society (Dr. S. F. Harmer), the Royal Astronomical Society (Mr. H. F. Newall), the Zoological Society (Mr. G. A. Boulenger), the British Association (Sir David Gill), the Entomological Society of London (Mr. C. O. Waterhouse), the Royal Microscopical Society (Lord Avebury), the Chemical Society (Dr. Horace T. Brown), the Marine Biological Association (Mr. A. E. Shipley), the Malacological Society (Mr. R. H. Byrne), the British Academy (Sir E. Mannde Thompson).

Short addresses were delivered on behalf of the Universities and schools by Dr. F. Darwin and Sir W. T. Thiselton-Dyer, and on behalf of the academies and societies by Professor Einar Lönnberg and Sir Archibald Geikie.

Professor Lönnberg announced that the King of Sweden had ordered him to convey to the society his hearty greeting on that occasion, when one of the most important events in the history of natural science was being celebrated. (Cheers.)

Lord Avebury, in conclusion, delivered an address, in which he gave personal reminiscences of Darwin as one who made his acquaintance 60 years ago.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.