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[p. 5c]

‘Dr. Russel Wallace. Darwin’s Rival and Friend. Ninetieth Birthday.’

What is there in achievement that lengthens life? Something there must be. How often do we see men like Newton, Wellington, Lyell, Darwin, Hooker, Herbert Spencer, Kelvin, and innumerable others who in literature, politics, art, philosophy, science, and invention have done something great, reach advanced years! Sir William Gull insisted that the brain was the central battery of life, and it would seem that great achievements are the motive elements of the battery. You shall find no better illustration of this theory than in the grand old man of science, who this morning, at his pretty home, topping the hill at Broadstone, Dorset, and overlooking the placid waters of Poole Harbour, looks back over a strenuous life of ninety years, and is still full of life and vigour. It was on Jan. 8, 1823, that Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., LL.D., D.C.L., F.R.S., was born at Usk, in Monmouthshire. There is everything in descent. Wallace is of remote Scottish and Huguenot, and immediate English ancestry. His North British forebears belonged to one of the branches of the family of the national hero, Sir William Wallace. Little he owed to his schools. Nature was his university, and travel his teacher. From fourteen years old, when he went surveying with an elder brother, he earned his own living, worked, and thought for himself; and at ninety he is working still.

THE EXPLORER.

Ill-luck often turns out good luck. Some sixty-five years ago Dr. Wallace experienced difficulty in finding work in London, and in consequence, having already commenced as a collector, he formed “the wild scheme of making a journey to the almost unknown forests of the Amazon, in order to observe Nature and make a living by collecting.” He had the good fortune to meet Henry Walter Bates, the entomologist, and the two travelled together. For four years, 1848-1852, they roamed on the banks of the Amazon and Rio Negro, and there Wallace made acquaintance with birds, insects, and man in a state of Nature. The marvelous adaptations of insects there seen set in motion currents of thought that helped wondrously in after years. Wallace came home, and nearly sixty years ago wrote his first book, “Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro.”

From the Far West he now turned to the Far East, and the next eight years, 1854-1862, were spent in the Malay Islands—the Timor Group, Celebes, the Moluccas, and the Papuan Group—and here he made the discovery which renders his name immortal.

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES.

If there had been no Darwin there would have been what we now call Darwinism. Wallace discovered the great doctrine of Natural Selection during these Eastern explorations. He had been thinking over the matter for years, and in 1855 he wrote an article “On the Law which has regulated the introduction of new species,” in which occurred the remarkable sentence: “Every species has come into existence coincident both in space and time with a pre-existing, closely-allied species.” This was next door to the great truth; yet one of his friends regretted that “he was ‘theorising’ instead of collecting facts!”

One day he was ill in bed, suffering from a sharp attack of intermittent fever. Something brought to his mind Malthus's "Principles of Population." Why, said he, do some animals live and others die? And the answer came: "The best-fitted survive." "From the effects of disease the most healthy escape; from enemies the strongest, the swiftest, or the most cunning; from famine the best hunters, or those with the best digestion, and so on. Then it suddenly flashed upon me that this self-acting process would improve the race, because in every generation the inferior would be killed off and the superior would remain—the fittest would survive." That was the great central truth at which Darwin, and indirectly Herbert Spencer, had arrived—it was the greatest truth in biological science of the last century.

NO JEALOUSY.

When Dr. Wallace's essay arrived in England Darwin was astounded. This man, his correspondent in Malaysia, had anticipated him, at any rate in making known his discovery. Darwin actually proposed to Lyell and Sir Joseph Hooker to hold back the paper he had intended for the Linnean Society. But, of course, the friends would not hear of it. The two communications were read together. Their authors knew no jealousy, and after the publication of the "Origin of Species" Darwin wrote to Wallace from Down, May 18, 1860:

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.

There has been nothing in the whole history of science more high-minded than Wallace's attitude towards his great rival.

ORIGIN OF MIND.

In one respect, and that a momentous one, Wallace has dissented from Darwin's view. He boldly proclaimed that the mental powers of men could not be accounted for by natural selection. In his fine work on "Darwinism" he asserts that the faculties of the great mathematicians, musicians, and artists were not produced by the struggle for existence. Natural selection would require thousands of years to produce the Greek thinkers and poets, the European dramatists, the masters of Italian art, the natural philosophy of Galileo, the wit of Molière, the music of Handel, the genius of Shakespeare; but, in fact, these splendours of mind grow and burgeon into perfection, as if by miracle. "We must look for another origin, and for this origin we can only find an adequate cause in the universe of Spirit."

THE OTHER WALLACE.

Besides Dr. Wallace the biologist, the geologist, author of "Darwinism," "The Malay Archipelago," "Tropical Nature," "The Geographical Distribution of Animals," "Island Life," not to mention innumerable other scientific essays, there is another Dr. Wallace—spiritualist, Socialist, anti-vaccinationist, and generally the most outspoken and daring theorist of the age. There is the author of "Miracles and Modern Spiritualism," who has declared that "Spiritualism is an experimental science, and affords the only sure foundation for a true philosophy, a pure religion." He devotes a volume to prove that probably the earth alone of worlds is inhabited by rational beings like man. In his "Wonderful Century"—the nineteenth—he points to such failures as "Neglect of Phrenology" and "Vaccination a Delusion." As a Socialist he helps to found, and is the president of, the Land Nationalisation Society. He denounces Eugenics as "the meddlesome interference of an arrogant scientific priestcraft." While speaking as a

Socialist, he hails Mr. Lloyd George as “a wonderful man—a wizard.” He tells an interviewer that for the working-class “everything is as bad as it can be”; the vast accumulations of wealth are criminal. The unborn heir should have no rights; the State should inherit the property and provide for him, and the vast flow of accumulated wealth would endow the nation with a sufficiency for all. May we venture a hint there is the man of science, and the man of sentiment, and in some of these opinions of Dr. Wallace he is rather more sentimental than scientific.

But to-day we think not of these things; we think of that tall old man, with his plentiful white hair and his bright eyes and genial features, who tells us that he is going to write another little book, “Social Evolution and Moral Progress.” And he reminds us of John Wesley’s saying in his old age: “I have never lost the elasticity of youth.” In all sincerity, in regard to mind and body alike, Dr. Wallace may say as much.

[\[Return\]](#)

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