

Transcription, March 2015:

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[p. 10e]

‘Alfred Russel Wallace, Noted Scientist, Views the World Through Blue Spectacles.’

When a man is one of the world’s most famous scientists and reaches the age of ninety and tells us that the world is all wrong we are compelled to think that either he is right or there is something the matter with him. “You pays your money and you takes your choice,” as the old saying has it.

The man who says such awful things about the world is our old friend Alfred Russel Wallace. For many years—more years and lustrums and decades than we care to recall, in fact—we have known that Alfred Russel Wallace was numbered among the wisest of the wise. In natural history, social science and scientific literature very few names have been inscribed higher than his has been. So learned is he and so well thought of in his own land, which is England, that the king’s most gracious majesty has been moved to bestow upon him the decoration of the Order of Merit, which is about as high a distinction as can fall to the lot of a non-royal Briton. His fame goes way back to the time when he discovered the evolution theory simultaneously with the great Darwin, and the latter generously acknowledged his rights, in a letter which is one of the best of its kind.

Wallace is a decided pessimist concerning the social status of the earth in this year of grace. Just listen to him as he speaks in his new book, “Social Environment and Moral Progress:”

“We see a continuous advance of man’s power to utilize the forces of nature to an extent which surpasses everything he had been able to do during all the preceding centuries of his recorded history. We also see that the result of this vast economic revolution has been almost wholly evil.

“We see that this hundredfold increase of wealth, amply sufficient to provide necessaries, comforts and all beneficial refinements and luxuries for our whole population, has been distributed with such gross injustice that the actual condition of those who produce all this wealth has become worse and worse, no efficient arrangements having been made that from the overflowing abundance produced all should receive the mere essentials of a happy and healthy existence.”

According to Dr. Wallace, human nature has not been affected for the better by the material progress of the world. Even the mental powers of mankind have not advanced, he thinks. We are not of higher stature intellectually or morally than were our remote forefathers. He ought to speak with authority, since he has been a close and successful student of mankind for nearly a century.

But in all ages of the world the aged have been what the Romans called “praisers of times past.” In view of Dr. Wallace’s undoubted services to the world much may be forgiven him. Besides, he may be right.

Arthur J. Brinton.

[\[Return\]](#)

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