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‘Literature. Review.’

The Malay Archipelago. The Land of the Orang-Utan, and the Bird of Paradise. A Narrative of Travel, with Studies of Man and Nature.—By Alfred Russell Wallace. 2 vols. Macmillan and Co., London.

Mr. Wallace is generally understood to be the originator of the theory of “Natural Selection,” as propounded by Mr. Darwin, and certainly in the volumes above-mentioned he brings numerous phenomena which he regards as illustrative of that theory very vividly under the notice of his readers, and that, too, as if he were but a disciple of Mr. Darwin, and not an original discoverer. Some of his reasonings appear objectionable, more especially those wherein he attempts to call in question the truth of the opinion that indications of design are observable in the vegetable kingdom; but, notwithstanding this fault, and in our eyes it is a grave one, his volumes are of immense value to naturalists of every grade, and will long be regarded as standard works on the region of which they treat.

Mr. Wallace spent from 1854 to 1860¹ in the islands of the Malaysian Group, and during this period he collected 125,660 specimens of birds, beasts, and insects, comprising 3000 bird’s skins belonging to about 1000 species, and 20,000 beetles and 7000 butterflies and moths. A great number, in fact some thousands, of these specimens in Natural history were new to science. If we consider these facts, and further consider that his work abounds in pleasing descriptions of savage men, savage manners and wild scenery, and is replete with curious information respecting the ethnology, geology, and geography of the region of which it treats, we must come to the conclusion that the book is a valuable addition to philosophical literature.

The value of a work like that produced by Mr. Wallace will be evident if we take into account the vast extent of the region to which it relates. The Malaysian Archipelago includes Borneo, with an area of 289,070 square miles, and an estimated population of 1,200,000 souls; Sumatra, the area of which is 172,250 square miles, and the population about two millions and a half; Celebes, having an area of 72,650 square miles, and a population of 2,500,000; the Philippines and Sooloos, about 114,125 square miles in area, and containing a population of six millions of souls; Java and Madura, containing about 52,000 square miles of surface, and more than thirteen and a half millions of people; in addition to the Moluccas, the Lesser Sundas, and numerous other smaller islands and islets. The region extends more than 4000 miles from east to west, and more than 1300 miles from north to south, and, as most of the islands are mountainous, it includes almost every variety of climate. A work written on such a region by a careful, painstaking, and enthusiastic naturalist like Mr. Wallace, must be a valuable contribution to the literature of science, and worthy of a place on the shelves of every library.

Here is a picture of country life in the Celebes:—

My host, Mr. M., enjoyed a thoroughly country life, depending almost entirely on his gun and dogs to supply his table. Wild pigs, of large size, were very plentiful, and he generally got one or two a-week, besides a deer occasionally, and abundance of jungle fowl, hornbills, and fruit pigeons. His buffaloes

supplied plenty of milk, from which he made his own butter; he grew his own rice and coffee, and had ducks, fowls, and their eggs in profusion. His palm trees supplied him all the year round with 'sagueir,' which takes the place of beer; and the sugar made from them is an excellent sweetmeat. All the fine tropical vegetables and fruits were abundant in their season, and his cigars were made from tobacco of his own raising. He kindly sent me a bamboo of buffalo milk every morning; it was as thick as cream, and required diluting with water to keep it fluid during the day. It mixes very well with tea or coffee, although it has a slight peculiar flavour which after a time is not disagreeable.

Apropos of flavors: We doubt Mr. Wallace's judgment on this topic after the praise he has lavished on the Durian. This fruit (*Durian Libethinus*) is a large round fruit enclosed in a hard shell, protected by sharply-pointed tubercles. It grows on lofty trees, and when it begins to ripen, falls daily, and almost hourly, and not unfrequently on the heads of persons walking or working under the trees. Mr. Wallace tells us that when it strikes a man in falling, it produces a dreadful wound, the strong spines tearing open the flesh, while the blow itself is generally heavy. Well, this durian, a single fruit of which would infect the air of a house as with a smell of putrid animal matter, and which is consequently an abomination to most Europeans is highly praised by Mr. Wallace, who says it smells like rotten onions, but the taste of it "resembles custard flavoured with almond and intermingled with wafts of flavour that call to mind cream cheese, onion sauce, brown sherry, and other incongruities." He considers that it would be worth a voyage to the East to experience the pleasure of eating it. Can there be any disputing about tastes after that?

Our author apparently spent his time happily enough in the Celebes. Speaking of his pursuits and pleasures he says:—

I have rarely enjoyed myself more than during my residence here. As I sat taking my coffee at six in the morning, rare birds would often be seen on some tree close by, when I would hastily sally out in my slippers, and, perhaps, secure a prize I had been seeking after for weeks. The great hornbills of Celebes (*Buceros cassididis*) would often come with loud flapping wings and perch upon a lofty tree just in front of me; and the black baboon monkeys (*Gymnopithecus negresceus*) often stared down in astonishment at such an intrusion into their domains; while at night, herds of wild pigs roamed about the house, devouring refuse, and obliging us to put away everything eatable or breakable about our little cooking house. A few minutes search on the fallen trees around my house at sunrise and sunset would often produce me more beetles than I would meet with in a day's collecting.....What delightful hours I passed wandering up and down the dry river courses, full of waterholes and rocks and fallen trees, and overshadowed by magnificent vegetation.

The enthusiasm of the Naturalist is finely displayed in the account which he gives us of the King Bird of Paradise, and of the way in which he obtained it. He says:—

My boy Baderoon returned one day with a specimen which repaid me for a month of delay and expectation. It was a small bird, a little less than a thrush. The greater part of its plumage was of an intense cinnabar red, with a gloss as of spun glass. On the head the feathers became short and velvety, and shaded into rich orange. Beneath, from the breast downwards, was pure white, with the softness and gloss of silk; and across the breast a band of deep metallic green separated this colour from the red of the throat. Above each eye was a round spot of the same metallic green. The bill was yellow, and the feet and legs of a fine cobalt blue, strikingly contrasting with all the other parts of the body. Merely in arrangement of colours and texture of plumage this little bird was a gem of the first water; yet these comprised only half its strange beauty. Springing from each side of the breast and ordinarily lying concealed under the wings, were little tufts of grayish feathers, about two inches long, and each terminated by a broad band of intense emerald

green. These plumes can be raised at the will of the bird, and spread out into a pair of elegant fans when the wings are elevated. But this is not the only ornament. The two middle feathers of the tail are in the form of slender wires, about five inches long, and which diverge into a beautiful double curve. About half an inch of the end of this wire is webbed on the outside only, and coloured of a fine metallic green, and, being curved spirally inwards, forms a pair of elegant glittering buttons, hanging five inches below the body, and the same distance apart. These two ornaments—the breast fans, and the spirally tipped tail wires—are altogether unique, not occurring in any other species of the eight thousand different birds that are known to exist on the earth, and, combined with the most exquisite beauty of plumage, render this one of the most perfectly lovely of the many lovely productions of nature. My transports of admiration and delight quite amused my Aru hosts, who saw no more in the Burong raja than we do in the robin or the gold-finch. Thus, one of my objects in coming to the Far East was accomplished. I had obtained a specimen of the King Bird of Paradise (*Paradisia regia*), which had been described by Linnæus from skins preserved in a mutilated state by the natives. I knew how few Europeans had ever beheld the perfect little organism I now gazed upon, and how very imperfectly it was still known in Europe. . . . The remote island in which I found myself situated, in an almost unvisited sea, far from the tracks of merchant ships and navies; the wild luxuriant tropical forest which stretched far away on every side; the rude uncultured savages who gathered round me—all had their influence in determining the emotions with which I gazed upon this thing of beauty.

The cardinal idea which Mr. Wallace places before his readers is that at one time the island of Lambok formed a part of Australia, while the island of Bali, and the islands of Sumatra and Java were parts of the great Asiatic continent. The two continents, he supposes, were then separated by the Lambok Strait, which is now about fifteen miles in width. In support of this hypothesis he urges a great variety of facts connected with the zoology, botany, ethnology, and geology of the islands of Malaysia. A shallow sea surrounds the Malay Peninsula, Surmatra, Java, Borneo, and Bali; another shallow sea surrounds the island of New Guinea, and its adjacent islands; while deep water lies around Celebes, Lambok, Sumbawa, Flores, Timor, and the Moluccas. These facts he regards as favourable to his hypothesis. He found many Australian forms of birds on the island of Lambok which were not to be seen in any of the islands westward of it, and amongst these birds small white cockatoos were conspicuous. He found of Javan birds 33 in Lambok, 23 in Flores, and 11 in Timor; and of Australian birds he found 4 in Lombok, 5 in Flores, and 10 in Timor; thus, showing a transition from the Asiatic to the Australian type as the traveller proceeds eastward. The same kind of transition is observable in the botany and zoology of Malaysia; and from these, and numerous other cognate facts, he draws the conclusion that at no very distant geological epoch the continent of Asia embraced the islands which now lie to the south and south-east of it, and approached much more closely to the continent of Australia than it does at present.

Mr. Wallace treats of almost every natural phenomenon which came under his observation during his residence in Malaysia, and treats of them, too, with the accuracy and discriminating sagacity of an accomplished naturalist. The great charm of his work is a truthful simplicity which the reader cannot fail to perceive, and which has the effect of inspiring him with confidence in the author. This book will long be regarded as a great storehouse of facts connected with the islands of the Malay Archipelago.

¹ [Editor's note: Actually, 1854 to 1862.]

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2014.