

Transcription, April 2021:

The Morning Post (London) No. 29737 (31 March 1869): 3b-3d. (anon.).

[p. 3]

‘The Malay Archipelago.’*

Books of travel now form a considerable section of our current literature. This may be attributed to a more widely diffused mental culture among mankind, as well as to their increased facilities of locomotion, a view of the case which is sufficiently attested by the fact that scientific pursuits are often largely dealt with in works of the kind. An example of what may be termed this literary amalgamation occurs in these volumes on the Malayan Archipelago, the greater part of which is occupied with details of natural history. The arrangement of the work, as explained by Mr. Wallace in his preface, greatly facilitates the attainment of the information which it imparts. He has in the first place divided the Archipelago into five groups of islands, and has described them as much as possible according to the order in which he visited them, passing from island to island in what seems the most natural succession. It will, however, suffice to note the more general heading of each division, as—first, “The Indo-Malay Islands,” which also comprises the Malay Peninsula; secondly, “The Timor Group;” thirdly, “Celebes;” fourthly, “The Moluccan Group;” and fifthly, “The Papuan Group;” and with the latter “The Ké Islands are likewise described on account of their ethnology, although zoologically and geographically they belong to the Moluccas.” He states further that “the chapters relating to the separate islands of each of these groups are followed by one on the natural history of that group; and the work may thus be divided into five parts, each treating of one of the natural divisions of the Archipelago.” Still, it must not be supposed that the author’s descriptions of his scientific researches in the islands are confined to the chapters set apart for those subjects. His chief intention in prosecuting his several journeys was evidently to study and collect specimens of many rare objects of natural history peculiar to the Archipelago; and his narratives throughout the whole course of his travels necessarily correspond with this design. The extent of his explorations appears at once from his statement, that he made 60 or 70 separate journeys, and travelled about 14,000 miles within the Archipelago; while the completeness of his collections may be judged from the fact of their being shown to amount in the aggregate to 125,660 specimens of natural history. In addition to his explanatory preface, Mr. Wallace gives an introductory chapter which treats in a general way of the physical geography of the islands. He first indicates the boundaries and extent of this large insular tract which, from its peculiar race of inhabitants, has obtained the name of the “Malay” Archipelago. “To the ordinary Englishman,” he says, “it is perhaps the least known part of the world,” and he thinks that owing to this and other causes “few persons realise that, as a whole, it is comparable with the primary divisions of the globe, and that some of its separate islands are larger than France or the Austrian empire.” He brings this comparative measurement more home to us by adding that “the Archipelago includes three islands larger than Great Britain,” and that “in one of them—Borneo—the whole of the British Isles might be set down, and would be surrounded by a sea of forests.” The chart which he has furnished in illustration of this last remark is very curious. The author has arrived at one important conclusion through his observations on the natural history of the Archipelago, which is thus stated:—“From many points of view these islands form one compact geographical whole, and as such they have always been treated by travellers and men of science; but a more careful and detailed study of them under various aspects reveals the unexpected fact that they are divisible into two portions, nearly equal in extent, which widely differ in their natural products, and really form parts of two of the primary divisions of the earth.” The proofs which he brings forward to establish this theory will be found in the body of his work, but he anticipates them to a certain extent by a train of fundamental reasoning and the deductions therefrom in this chapter. These consist of speculations concerning the changes which this part of the world has undergone through volcanic disturbance causing the upheaval or immersion of land at various periods. The shallowness of some of the channels between the islands is considered as a strong proof that the latter might once have formed part of a continent,

and were separated through the convulsions of nature, as partly shown by the broken chain of extinct and still active volcanoes—from Asia on the one hand, and Australia on the other. Here it is, Mr. Wallace says, that the naturalist steps in to the assistance of the geologist, by showing that the natural productions and animal life of the western half of the Archipelago—including the large islands of Java, Sumatra, and Borneo—assimilate with those of Asia; while what are seen in the eastern division are akin to those of New Guinea and Australia. Nowhere, he states, is the great contrast between the two sections of the Archipelago so abruptly exhibited as on the passing from the Islands of Bali to that of Lombok, where the two regions are in closest proximity. In Bali, for instance, there are barbets, fruit-thrushes, and woodpeckers; on passing over to Lombok these are seen no more, but there are abundance of cockatoos, honey-suckers, and brush-turkeys, which are equally unknown in Bali, or any island further west. The information which the author afterwards obtained, that there were a few cockatoos at one spot on the west of Bali, is only regarded as evidence that the intermingling of the productions of these islands is now in progress. The drift, however, of his propositions will be apparent from what has been said, and any further notice of them is unnecessary. Neither does the bulk of his work require any close examination, the greater part of it being occupied with details of natural history, an adequate discussion of which would be vainly attempted in a limited space.

Singapore is the first place which Mr. Wallace describes, and like other travellers he notes the strange appearance presented by its motley population, chiefly consisting of a variety of Eastern races. Among these the Chinese predominate, and are said to include some of the wealthiest merchants, the agriculturalists of the interior, and most of the mechanics and labourers. The picture of the Chinese merchant is well drawn. He is represented as generally “a fat, round-faced man, with an important and business-like look. He wears the same style of clothing (loose white smock and blue or black trousers) as the meanest coolie, but of finer materials, and is always clean and neat, and his long tail, tipped with red silk, hangs down to his heels. He has a handsome warehouse or shop in town, and a good house in the country. He keeps a fine horse and gig, and every evening may be seen taking a drive bareheaded to enjoy the cool breeze.” The author speaks very favourably of the French Jesuit missionaries in this island, and of their success in making converts among the Chinese. His account of Singapore, however, is short, as it offered no particularly varied field for the study of natural history, although he obtained there a fair collection of butterflies and of other orders of insects. The same may be said of Malacca, which he next visited; but he explains that the meagreness and brevity of his sketches of these places may also be attributed to the loss of some private letters and a note book, as well as of a manuscript sent to the Geographical Society. He professes, however, to regret these casualties the less because so many works have already been written on Singapore and the Malay Peninsula; and as he always intended to pass lightly over his travels in the western and better known portions of the Archipelago, in order to devote more space to the remoter districts, about which hardly anything has been written in the English language. The details of his residence and different excursions in Borneo chiefly concern Orang-Utan hunting and the manners and customs of the Dyaks as distinct from those of other native tribes who inhabit the islands. In connection with the first subject he describes some unusual incidents of sport, and gives an amusing sketch of the general habits, mode of life, and appearance of those strange animals the Orang-Utans in their forest homes. With respect to the Dyaks, his sketch is so far pleasing that it attests their superiority in mental capacity, morality, and honesty over the Malays and Chinese; but he points out at the same time that the treatment of their women, who labour like beasts of burden from childhood to extreme old age, is a mark of barbarism which nothing but the advance of civilisation will remove. His statement that the moral character of the Dyaks is undoubtedly high will seem strange, he says, to those who have heard of them only as head-hunters and pirates. The Hill Dyaks, however, among whom the author especially made his observations, have never been pirates, since they never go near the sea; and head-hunting he regards as “a custom originating in the petty wars of village with village and tribe with tribe, which no more implies a bad moral character than did the custom of the slave trade 100 years ago imply a want of general morality in all who participated in it.” At the conclusion of his remarks upon Borneo, he bears testimony to the good which was effected by the late Rajah of Sarawak, Sir

James Brooke, in ameliorating the condition of the people under his rule. The difficulties are duly noted with which he had to contend in dealing with the Mahometan Malays on the one hand and the Dyaks on the other; and it is shown that by his judicious treatment he at last secured the good-will of both parties. Some useful information concerning the mode of government pursued by the Dutch in Java, and a variety of details descriptive of travelling in that island and Sumatra, bring his account of the Indo-Malay Islands to a close, with the addition of the promised chapter on the natural history of this division of the Archipelago. The latter is intended to support the theory advanced by the author as to the recent separation of Java, Sumatra, and Borneo, as well as the Malay Peninsula and the Philippine Islands, from the Continent of Asia. The Timor Group, the Celebes, the Moluccas, and the Papuan Group are all successively considered in the same way. Among the curiosities noted in Timor are its soap springs. One of these which the author saw at the village of Oeassa, where he stayed, is described as "in the middle of the place, bubbling out from a little cone of mud to which the ground rises all round like a volcano in miniature. The water has a soapy feel, and produces a strong lather when any greasy substance is washed in it. It contains alkali and iodine, in such quantities as to destroy all vegetation for some distance round." His description of "bee-hunting," which appears to be a favourite pursuit with the natives of this island, is also very curious. The account of Celebes occupies several chapters, and is more circumstantial than that of the western islands. It begins with a pleasing picture of the town of Macassar and its vicinity, and gives many interesting particulars relating to the aspect of the country, the domestic life of the inhabitants, the natural products and cultivation of the land. During his stay at Rurukan, in Celebes, Mr. Wallace experienced a pretty sharp earthquake shock, and describes the scene of panic which it caused as "a strange mixture of the terrible and the ludicrous." He mentions afterwards that at his second visit to Ternate, in the Moluccas, he felt another slight shock, scarcely more perhaps than has been felt in this country; but occurring in a place that had been many times destroyed by earthquakes, it was rather more exciting. "In walking about the suburbs of Ternate," he says, "we find everywhere the ruins of massive stone and brick buildings, gateways and arches, showing at once the superior wealth of the ancient town and the destructive effects of earthquakes. His visits, however, to "the Papuan Group," on the extreme west of the Archipelago, added some of the most valuable specimens to his collections of natural curiosities that he obtained during his travels. This group consists of the large territory of Papua or New Guinea, and several clusters of small islands in its neighbourhood, rarely visited by traders or ordinary travellers. Among these remote districts "the Aru Islands" offer the most attractions to the naturalist, and it was here that one of the author's objects in coming to the Far East was accomplished, by his securing several specimens of those beautiful and rare creatures, the birds of Paradise. After he has concluded the history of his various journeys and residences in the different divisions of the Archipelago—a narrative full of diversified scenes and incidents of travel—he devotes an entire chapter to giving, in a connected form, the results of his observations and inquiries respecting the habits and distribution of these wonderful birds in their native forests. He claims to be (as far as he is aware) the only Englishman who has thus studied them, and to ornithologists especially the information which he affords will be highly acceptable. He first points out how little was virtually known of them even by Linnæus, or succeeding naturalists, down to our own days, and then describes each of the known species separately, with some general remarks on their natural history. His work terminates with a short statement of his views as to the races of man which inhabit the various parts of the Archipelago, the aborigines of the islands, Malays, Dyaks, Papuans, and the rest. He considers them with reference to their distinctive characteristics, their affinities with each other and with surrounding tribes, their migrations and probable origin. He thus traces their past history as far as the obscurity in which it is involved will allow; and, in conclusion, he predicts the early extinction of "the true Polynesians" who inhabit the farthest isles of the Pacific if the tide of emigration should be extensively turned in their direction, more especially of the Papuan race, a warlike and energetic people, who will not submit to national slavery or to domestic servitude.

*The Malay Archipelago, the Land of the Orang-Utan and Bird of Paradise: A Narrative of Travel, with Studies of Man and Nature. By Alfred Russel Wallace, author of "Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro," "Palm Trees of the Amazon," &c. In two volumes. London: Macmillan and Co.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2021.