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‘Literature. The Book of the Week.’

“My Life,” A Record of Events and Opinions, by Alfred Russel Wallace, with facsimile letters, illustrations, and portraits. London: Chapman & Hall. Two volumes.

There are few works of travel more interesting in their way than Dr. Wallace’s account of the Malay Archipelago. Had his energies been confined to the accumulation of the materials for this masterpiece he would have established a considerable reputation. But he is far better known as the co-discoverer with Darwin of the development of organic evolution through the process of natural selection. He had, indeed—had he cared to assert it—some claim to a priority of place in the promulgation of that epoch-making theory. Some time before the appearance of the “Origin of Species” Dr. Wallace outlined in two essays a scheme identical in all but name with that of Natural Selection.

One day something brought to my recollection Malthus’ “Principles of Population,” which I had read about 12 years before. I thought of his clear exposition of “the positive checks to increase”—disease, accidents, war, and famine—which keep down the population of savage races to so much lower an average than that of more civilised peoples. It then occurred to me that these causes or their equivalents are continually acting in the case of animals also; and as animals usually breed much more rapidly than does mankind, the destruction every year from these causes must be enormous in order to keep down the numbers of each species, since they evidently do not increase regularly from year to year, as otherwise the world would long ago have been densely crowded with those that breed most quickly. Vaguely thinking over the enormous and constant destruction which this implied it occurred to me to ask the question—Why do some die and some live? And the answer was clearly that on the whole the best fitted live. From the effects of disease the most healthy escaped; 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 necessarily improve the race, because in every generation the inferior would inevitably be killed off and the superior would remain—that is, the fittest would survive... The more I thought over it the more I became convinced that I had at length found the long-sought-for law of nature that solved the problem of the origin of species.

Wallace, in a letter to Darwin, gave particulars of his discovery. Darwin, himself, was then preparing for the press his “Origin of Species,”¹ which not long afterwards took the scientific world by storm. The case is interesting as furnishing an emphatic illustration of that concurrent or dual law of discovery with which the precedents of Newton, and Leibnitz, Adams, and Leverier had already made scientific men familiar. So far, however, from any rivalry existing between the two men, we find Wallace expressing the most sincere satisfaction that it was not left for himself to undertake the “Origin of Species.”

I know not how, nor to whom, to express fully my admiration of Darwin’s book. To him it would seem flattery, to others self-praise; but I honestly believe that, with however much patience I had worked and experimented on the subject, I could never have approached the completeness of his book. I really feel thankful that it has not been left to me to give the theory to the world.

Even if not suited, as he modestly pleads, to those more elaborate processes of induction and correlation which, in Darwin's hands, revolutionised scientific thought, he was nevertheless able to seize upon many a group of unappropriated facts, and trace out the generalization which brought them under the reign of admitted law. Wallace's detachment from petty jealousies was admirably reciprocated by Darwin, who, ten years after the publication of the "Origin of Species," wrote to his friend as follows:—

"I hope it is a satisfaction to you to reflect—and very few things in my life have been more satisfactory to me—that we have never felt any jealousy towards each other, though in some sense rivals. I believe I can say this of myself with truth, and I am absolutely sure that it is true of you."

It was well, perhaps, for the theory, which had so much antagonism to face and overcome, that it was originated by men so highminded and free from every form of moral pettiness as Darwin and Wallace. There can be no doubt that the different view taken by Wallace on the origin of man was a source of some annoyance to Darwin and his friends. There are, in Wallace's opinion, certain characteristics in man which could not possibly have been produced by the evolutionary process; some of which would have been useless, nay, positively injurious to him, when first engendered, and consequently opposed to a law which, as stated by Darwin, could not possibly work, except to a good end. The brain of the savage, for example, appears to be larger than it need be, implying the possession of faculties which, in his undeveloped state, he never had occasion to use. But the essence of the laws of evolution is that they lead to a degree of organisation exactly proportionate to the wants of each species, never beyond those wants. No preparation can be made by them for the future development of the race, nor did any part of the body ever increase in size or complexity, except in strict co-ordination to the pressing wants of the whole. "The brain of prehistoric and savage man seems to me to prove the existence of some power, distinct from that which has guided the development of the lower animals through their ever-varying forms of being." The absence of hair, again, from so much of man's body, from the back especially, which the savage seeks to supply, by covering, could not have been otherwise than harmful. Nor is the origin of the higher faculties of man, his ideal conceptions of space and time, of eternity and infinity, his capacity for science and art, to be explained by the mere preservation of useful variations in the savage; while, in the moral sense, nay, in consciousness itself, we have instances of results equally transcending the power of evolution by material law. Mr. Wallace here parts company with science, which knows no occult or spiritual agency or force in nature and man, prior and superior to all law, and exterior to the unity of cosmical order. At the outset Wallace, like Spencer, was "absolutely non-religious" and "purely agnostic." From that state of mind he passed to an assertion of the supremacy of spirit and its immortality, accompanied by a buoyant optimism, and a belief that there are no absolutely bad men or women.

I feel myself that my character has continuously improved, and that this is owing chiefly to the teaching of spiritualism, that we are in every act and thought of our lives here building up a character which will largely determine our happiness or misery hereafter; and also, that we obtain the greatest happiness ourselves by doing all we can to make those around us happy.

Dr. Wallace admits that between spiritualism and religion there is a great gulf fixed. "The phenomena of spiritualism might be proved, and yet nothing that matters to Christianity might be established." At an early period Wallace was a believer in mesmerism. It was after his return from the Malay Archipelago that he gave his attention to spiritualism, in respect to which he was a witness of some of the more remarkable phenomena that occur in the presence of mediums. At Wallace's invitation Tyndall attended a

séance given by a medium named Miss Nichol, by whose “revelations” Wallace himself had been greatly impressed.

On being asked to sit at the table with my sister, Miss Nichol, and myself, he declined, saying—“I never form part of my experiments. I will sit here and look on”—drawing his chair about a yard away. So we three sat without him, with our hands on the table; and rather to my surprise the rapping sounds began, and were much stronger and more varied in character than when Dr. Carpenter had heard them. They were, in fact, very varied in tone—some mere ticks, others loud slaps or thumps. But to all this he paid no attention. He joked with Miss Nichol, he was always ready for fun, and after the raps had gone on some time he remarked—“We know all about these raps. Show us something else. I should see something remarkable.” But nothing else came. Then, after a little talk and more chaff with Miss Nichol, he said, “Good-night,” and though I begged him to appoint a day for the next sitting he never came again.

Its unpopularity no more deterred Wallace from an advocacy of spiritualism than it did from an advocacy of socialism, land nationalisation, and anti-vaccination. At the very outset of his career he made his protest against the world’s standard:—

So far from being angry at being called an enthusiast (as you seem to suppose), it is my pride and glory to be worthy to be so called. Whoever did anything good or great who was not an enthusiast? The majority of mankind are enthusiasts only for one thing—in money-getting; and these call others enthusiasts as a term of reproach because they think there is something in the world better than money-getting. It strikes me that the power or capability of a man in getting rich is in an inverse proportion to his reflective powers and in direct proportion to his impudence. It is perhaps good to be rich, but not to get rich, or to be always trying to get rich.

Elsewhere he makes what, in view of his abounding energies, must be deemed a strange confession:—

I am, and always have been, constitutionally lazy, without any of that fiery energy and intense power of work possessed by such men as Huxley and Charles Kingsley. When I once begin any work in which I am interested I can go steadily on with it till it is finished, but I need some definite impulse to set me going, and require a good deal of time for reflection while the work is being done.

Differing from Carlyle, Dr. Wallace attaches very little importance to labor for its own sake, holding that the highest law of mankind is not work, but justice. For this reason he is an advocate of Socialism, which he defines as “The use by everyone of his faculties for the common good, and the voluntary organisation of labor for the equal benefit of all.” For the same reason, the doctrine of land nationalisation, which, he says, he learned from Herbert Spencer, has his ardent support, and he boasts that while his teacher went back upon the doctrine, he himself has never seen reason to change his mind. With Spencer, personally, he was very friendly.

Once I remember dining informally with Huxley, the only other guests being Tyndall and Herbert Spencer. The latter appeared in a dress coat, whereupon Huxley and Tyndall chaffed him as setting a bad example and of being untrue to his principles, quoting his essay on “Manners and Fashions,” but with all the most good-humored banter. Spencer took it in good part, and defended himself well, declaring that the coat was a relic of his early unregenerate days and where could he wear it out if not at the houses of his best friends? “Besides,” he concluded, “you will please to observe that I am true to principles and that I do not wear a white tie!”

Soon afterwards Wallace was invited to dine with Spencer at Bayswater, where the sympathetic philosopher lived with “a rather commonplace set of people”—retired Indian officers and others. The visit was frequently repeated.

I was amused when some popular error was solemnly put forth as the explanation of some phenomenon. Spencer would coolly tell them that it was quite incorrect, and then proceed to explain why it was so, and on principles of evolution could not be otherwise. In the evening, after we had had a little private conversation, we would go into the drawing-room, where there was music, and Spencer would sometimes play on his flute. On my remarking to him one day that I wondered he could live among such unintellectual people, he said he had purposely chosen such a home in order to avoid the mental excitement of too much interesting conversation; that he suffered greatly from insomnia, and he found that when his evenings were spent in commonplace conversation, hearing the news of the day or taking part in a little music, he had a better chance of sleeping.

Of Huxley he stood in some awe, as the following quotation shows:—

Although Huxley was as kind and genial a friend and companion as Darwin himself, and I was quite at ease with him in his family circle, or in after-dinner talk with a few of his intimates (and although he was two years younger than myself), yet I never got over a feeling of awe and inferiority when discussing any problem in evolution or allied subjects—an inferiority which I did not feel either with Darwin or Sir Charles Lyell. This was due, I think, to the fact that the enormous amount of Huxley’s knowledge was of a kind of which I possessed only an irreducible minimum, and of which I often felt the want.

An even-tempered toleration of most things and people has always been a leading characteristic of Wallace, and helps to explain his great popularity. But occasionally his temper has been ruffled, as it was when the late Duke of Buccleuch made a “spectacle of himself” as President of the British Association in 1867:—

The President’s address has in every other case been considered a very serious affair, requiring the labor of some months to compose in order to render it worthy of an audience consisting practically of the best scientific intellect of our country, but the president on this occasion evidently considered it a condescension on his part to be there at all. He began by telling us that he had never written a speech in his life, and never intended to; that he knew very little about science, though, no doubt, it was very useful in its way. Thus, he went on with a lot of commonplaces, hardly up to the level of an audience of tenant farmers, for, I suppose, nearly an hour, and then there were complimentary speeches.

Usually the controversies in which Wallace has been concerned have arisen out of his refusal to concur in generally-accepted views, but for once in a way he fought on the orthodox side, when he disputed Mr. John Hampden’s assertion as to the flatness of the earth. Hampden had issued *et urbi et orbi* a challenge to prove for a wager of £500 the rotundity of the earth. Wallace accepted the bet, and satisfied the stakeholder. Hampden, however, proved a marvel of obstinacy. Assailing the victor with a storm of abuse he demanded the return of the money. For years the persecution lasted, and ultimately Dr. Wallace was compelled to take proceedings against Hampden, who was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. No sooner did the man emerge from gaol than he brought an action for the return of the £500, and won by a legal technicality. Not even then was the champion of flatness satisfied. Almost till the day of his death he persisted in his attacks, verbal and epistolary. It was doubtless a useful lesson which Dr. Wallace learned “not to get money by any kind of wager,” but it was a lesson dearly bought. A character almost as queer as Hampden was a certain Dr. Purland, a distinguished dentist, whose curious notion of pleasantry caused

him to date his letters from “Fang Castle.” This gentleman had an indignant horror of chloroform, ether, and nitrous oxide, and would under no circumstances employ an anæsthetic.

Besides, he despised anyone who could not bear the pain of tooth-drawing, and would turn away any patient who required the gas to be administered. A year or two after the date of his last letter, says Mr. Wallace, my teeth were in a very bad state, and I had a number of broken stumps which required to be extracted preparatory to having a complete set of artificials. Entirely forgetting his objections, which, in fact, I had hardly believed to be real, after making an appointment I asked him to get a doctor to administer nitrous-oxide, as I could not stand the pain of three or four extractions of stumps of molars in succession. This thoroughly enraged him. He wrote me a most violent letter, saying he could not continue to be the friend of a man who could ask him to do such a thing, and gave me the name of an acquaintance of his who had no such scruples, and whose work was thoroughly good. And that was the last communication I ever had from Dr. Purland.

¹[Editor’s note: This is not quite accurate. Darwin had been preparing a much longer work, and only after he was contacted by Wallace did he begin to construct *The Origin of Species*.]

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