

Transcription, March 2015:

*Chicago Daily Tribune*, (9 Dec. 1905): 9 (Jeannette L. Gilder).

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‘Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace’s Autobiography.’

In this year, which has been prolific of biographies and autobiographies, there has been nothing more important or more entertaining than the autobiography of Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, which will be published in the course of a few days by Messrs. Dodd, Mead & Co. Dr. Wallace was, if I may use a racing expression, the running mate of Darwin. He is the author of “Man’s Place in the Universe,” “Darwinism,” and other scientific books. There was much competition among American publishers—I dare say the same in England—for Dr. Wallace’s autobiography, and now that I have it before me I cannot wonder. “*My Life, A Record of Events and Opinions*,” he calls it; and in a short preface he tells us that these two volumes would not have been written had not the representatives of his English and American publishers assured him that they would probably interest a large number of readers. These representatives were wise men, though it would not take much wisdom, judging from what Dr. Wallace has already written, to predict that his autobiography would be a mine of interest.

Dr. Wallace had promised his son and daughter that he would write some account of his early life for their information, but as he had never kept a diary, except when abroad, nor preserved any of the earlier letters of his friends, he thought that he had no materials for any full record of his life and experiences. But when he set to work in earnest to get together whatever scattered memoranda he could find, the numerous letters he possessed from men of eminence, dating from his return home in 1862, together with a few of his own returned to him by some of his correspondents, he discovered that he had a pretty fair amount of material.

Dr. Wallace having been assured that a true record of his life, especially if sufficiently full as to illustrate development of character so far as that is due to environment, would be extremely interesting, has kept this point in mind. He confesses that he found it difficult to write such a record, extending to the memories of nearly eighty years, without subjecting himself to the charge of diffuseness or egotism; but he will find those charges made by no one but himself.

Dr. Wallace was the son of “poor but honest parents,” and at an early age he was obliged to work for a living. He began as a surveyor’s apprentice, which gave him plenty of out of door exercise. Indoors he devoted his time when not at work to reading, and mostly the reading of scientific books. He attended lectures and lost no means to improve his mind. He always had an idea of being a writer and he gives us in the first volume of this autobiography his first literary effort, which was a description of the South Wales farmer, and an interesting description it is, too.

In a chapter devoted to his character at 21, Dr. Wallace tells us the characteristics he had and those that he lacked. If he had one distinct mental faculty more prominent than another, it was the power of correct reasoning from a review of the known facts in any case to the causes or laws which produced them, and also in detecting fallacies in the reasoning of other persons. This power naturally greatly helped him in all his writings, especially those on natural history and sociology. The determination of the direction in which he should use those powers was due to his possession in a high degree of the two

mental qualities usually termed emotional or moral, “an intense appreciation of the beauty, harmony, and variety in nature and in all natural phenomena, and an equally strong passion for justice as between man and man—an abhorrence of all tyranny, all compulsion, all unnecessary interference with the liberty of others.”

Among the marked deficiencies in his mental equipment were his “inability to perceive the niceties of melody and harmony in music,” though he had “a fair appreciation of time, expression, and general effect, and was always deeply affected by grand, pathetic, or religious music,” and “in the power of rapidly seeing analogies or hidden resemblances and incongruities.” The rhythm and pathos as well as the inimitable puns of Hood were the delight of his youth, “as are the more recondite and fantastic humor of Mark Twain and Lewis Carroll in my old age.” He confesses also to a want of assertiveness and of physical courage, which, “combined with delicacy of the nervous system and of bodily constitution and a general disinclination to much exertion, physical or mental, have caused that shyness, reticence, and love of solitude which, though often misunderstood and leading to unpleasant results, have, perhaps, on the whole, been beneficial to me.”

The first volume of these memoirs is not as interesting as the second. Dr. Wallace was finding himself through these pages. When we get to the second volume the interest is more general. We meet his distinguished contemporaries—Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, and the rest. Soon after his return to England, in 1862, after his voyage down the Amazon,<sup>1</sup> Darwin invited him to come to Down for a night, and there he had the pleasure of seeing the famous scientist in his own home and in the midst of his family. A year later, writing to Dr. Wallace, Darwin says:

“I am glad you like the little orchid book, but it has not been worth the ten months it has cost me. It was a hobby horse, and so beguiled me.

“How puzzled you must be to know what to begin at! You will do grand work, I do not doubt. My health is and always will be poor; I am that miserable animal, a regular valetudinarian.”

The chief differences of opinion between Darwin and Wallace are on the subject of the theory of natural selection; but on other points they were pretty thoroughly agreed.

Writing of Spencer, Dr. Wallace says: “Among his intimate friends Herbert Spencer was always interesting from the often unexpected way in which he would apply the principles of evolution to the commonest topics of conversation, and he was always ready to take part in any social amusement. He once or twice honored me by coming to informal meetings of friends at my little house in St. Mark’s crescent, and I also met him at Sir John Lubbock’s pleasant week end visits, and also at Huxley’s, in St. John’s Wood. 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 Fashion,’ but all with 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 principle in that I do not wear a white tie!’”

Of all the scientific men of his day Wallace was most intimate with Huxley, and yet he does not tell us as much of Huxley as we would like to know. Perhaps he was afraid of being too personal on account of his intimate friendship.

In the autumn and winter of 1886 Dr. Wallace came to America to deliver lectures at the Lowell Institute of Boston, and while in this country he traveled around with his eyes open. On reaching New York he had his first experience with American prices and was much impressed with the fact that he had to pay \$2 for a cab to a hotel a mile off, where he spent the night. He drove out to Central park in company with the late Henry George, who was then candidate for mayor, and with Mr. George he attended a meeting, at which he was called upon to say a few words to an American audience. "I tried my best to be forcible, praised George, and said a few words about what we were doing in England, but I could see that I did not impress them much."

Dr. Wallace not only lectured in Boston but he traveled through the country from New England to San Francisco, seeing much and being greatly impressed. The climate of America apparently agreed with him, and he seemed to like the food, for he said he had never had a better appetite and never felt better.

Jeannette L. Gilder.

<sup>1</sup>A bit of a mistake by the reviewer, as Wallace had returned from the Malay Archipelago, not the Amazon.

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