

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

MY LIFE. A Record of Events and Opinions. By ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE. Two vols. (Chapman and Hall. 25s. net.)

Mr. Wallace's Life may not be a great book, but it is a real one and an uncommonly good biography, which will have permanent interest and value for several reasons. A man of mark, a naturalist of world-wide reputation, twin discoverer with Darwin of the theory of organic evolution by natural selection, an original observer and thinker, on terms of intellectual and personal intimacy with many prominent men of his time, a vigorous controversialist, an explorer, a great traveller who has seen men and cities and the strange things of nature in remote regions, Mr. Wallace, now in his eighty-third year, has had a long and full life to furnish him with material. But that is only half the battle; the matter may be a dead weight if the manner be lacking. We all know (the reviewer to his cost) those terrible machine-made biographies in two heavy volumes of dull narrative and duller letters which pious memory or the publishing market offers up to the manes of the eminent dead. That is one sort. Another, and a worse, is the indiscriminate eulogy of the eminent living; and a third is the complacent self-revelation of the eminent egotist, living or dead. All these may have plenty of matter, killed in the handling. Mr. Wallace does not kill his matter, he enhances its value. He writes with the crystalline simplicity that belongs to a sincere and candid mind, that invests even trivial things with interest, and continues to charm when wit and fancy, unless they be of a very high order, seem faded or forced. He is not an egotist, as he proved once and for all by his classic renunciation in the matter of his own and Darwin's theory; and the modest fear, expressed in the preface, that this autobiography may lay him open to the charge has no foundation.

No one would guess this to be the work of an octogenarian, but we are told that it was all written by his own hand within the last fifteen months. There is no sign of diminished vigour, whether in the earlier part, which is written almost entirely from memory, or in the later, which is largely devoted to a trenchant defence of socialism, spiritualism, and other darling fads of his old age. The book may be divided into four sections, which will doubtless appeal with varying force to different readers. First we have boyhood and adolescence—the student; then the famous expeditions to South America and the Malay Archipelago—the naturalist and collector; thirdly, the scientific and literary work at home, the intercourse and correspondence with eminent contemporaries—the evolutionist; lastly, the struggle with economic problems of modern life—the socialist and reformer. Through it all runs the golden thread of a sweet and generous nature, equally free from self-consciousness and from self-seeking, diffident and retiring, but strongly independent, ardent, tenacious, and perfectly fearless in pursuit of truth as he sees it. His intellectual qualities, here fully revealed, present some curious contradictions. Sagacious, penetrating, and acutely critical in some things, he displays the readiest credulity in others. He reasons closely and with subtlety about evolution, he cannot accept the Christian faith for want of evidence, and avows himself an agnostic of the old school; but he swallows with ease the tricks of professional "mediums" and the unproved premisses and assumptions of Socialism, without any real study of economics on the one hand, or of the condition of the people on the other. Perhaps this inconsistency is bound

up with his lack of a sense of humour, which implies the perception of incongruity. He confesses to a deficiency in this respect, though he could enjoy a joke and appreciate the delicate whimsicalities of Frank Stockton. He connects it with an inability to master mathematics; but it may go deeper than he supposes. The lack is very evident in his autobiography, and constitutes its greatest defect. Humour is nowhere more appropriate than in the easy-going armchair discourse that is made up of reminiscence and reflection; it is the salt of the dish which gives piquancy when sprinkled in due proportion. The unvarying sobriety of Mr. Wallace's narrative would be monotonous were his style less perfectly simple and his matter less real and varied.

To the majority of readers the most attractive part of the book will probably be that which deals with the personalities known to fame with whom Mr. Wallace's work brought him into contact—Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, Lewes, and others. But some will find charm in the recollections of boyhood, which are new, and in the adventurous voyages, of which the story is here retold. Mr. Wallace was born on January 8, 1823, at Usk, whither his father had moved from London a few years before for the sake of economy. The father seems to have lived a thoroughly idle life. He was a solicitor, but never practised, being cursed with the fatal "competency" of £500 a year. During a prolonged bachelorhood he lived at his ease, did nothing more serious than collect epitaphs and riddles—perhaps the most pottering of all occupations—and spent his income. Consequently, when he married he could settle to no work, but dabbled and pottered, made a mess of things, and got his affairs "involved," as it is elegantly called. But his failure was the making of the boys, of whom there were four. The move into the country was good for their health, and the struggle for life compelled them to resist the natural indolence that they inherited from their father. Alfred was the third son, and when he was five or six the family, which moved about nearly as often as the Micawbers, migrated to Hertford, where he went to school. He gives a singularly detailed account of the school life, the studies, games, and meals. The boys did not play football, but they gambled fiercely at marbles. All the schooling Alfred had was at Hertford, and it seems to have been moderate, eked out with a good deal of reading.

Unlike some future naturalists, he exhibited no bent in that direction during school life, less perhaps than many ordinary boys. It was when surveying with his eldest brother William that he acquired a strong taste for natural history. William seemsto have been a wise and gifted youth. Several years older than Alfred, he had been apprenticed to a surveyor, and he was able to take his younger brother as a pupil on an extensive series of land surveys, which lasted for several years. They were largely in the West of England and in Wales, and the experience determined Alfred's career. Previously,

however, a short interlude in London with his second brother John, who was apprenticed to a builder, inspired an interest in social questions; he listened to lectures, studied socialistic and free-thought publications, and promptly began to be an agnostic and socialist. This is quite characteristic. His autobiography reveals an excessive susceptibility to plausible arguments, if they happen to deal with subjects of which he has no first-hand knowledge; on things he understands no one could be more keenly critical. The London episode is the occasion of two interesting digressions—one on the wages and standard of living of working men sixty years ago, in which he falls foul of Sir Robert Giffen, and the other on Robert Owen's model factory settlement at New Lanark.

In 1843, when he was twenty and engaged on surveying in Glamorgan, young Wallace began to collect plants and to write essays or draft lectures, in which he exercised his powers of observation and expression. In the following year, however, the surveying work came to an end, and it was necessary to look out for a living. He obtained a mastership at a school in Leicester, where he became acquainted with mesmerism and with H. W. Bates, the entomologist. This friendship was one of the most eventful incidents of his life, equalled only by another of the same date, which was the perusal of Malthus's Essay on Population, from which he derived the idea of natural selection, just as Darwin did. In 1846 his brother William, who lived at Neath, died suddenly; Alfred went to live there, and persuaded John to leave London and set up business with him. They got a certain amount of building or surveying to do; but there was plenty of time for natural history, and collecting went on pretty actively, stimulated by correspondence with Bates and by the perusal of Darwin's journal in the Beagle and the anonymous "Vestiges of Creation." Wallace's mind was already hard on the track of species and their origin. In 1848, having saved £100 from his surveying work, he arranged the voyage to the Amazon with Bates in search of specimens. It was a bold speculation on such a slender capital, but it succeeded, and would have succeeded better but for a great misfortune. He spent four years on the Amazon and its tributaries, and the collections sent home just paid expenses. On the return voyage, however, when he was bringing with him specimens living and dead valued at £500, as well as his own private collection, comprising hundreds of new species, the ship caught fire, and he lost, not only all the specimens, but notes, sketches, and journal. It was enough to break any man's heart, but Mr. Wallace bore it with equanimity. He was no sooner in London than we find him speculating whether he should next try the Andes or the Philippines.

By this time his work had brought him into notice with some of the learned societies, and he came in contact with Huxley, whose knowledge of comparative anatomy then and afterwards seems to have inspired Wallace with awe. He published two books on his travels in Brazil, visited Switzerland with his old schoolfellow and life-long friend George Silk, and prepared for another collecting expedition to the Malay Archipelago. His eight years' wanderings among the islands there are recapitulated in a terse and graphic narrative, chiefly by extracts from letters written at the time, and are illustrated by an excellent map. The year 1862 saw him back in London with his *Wanderjahre* behind, and his *Meisterjahre* before, him. The venture had been a decided financial success. The proceeds of the collections brought in a small fortune, which was invested and produced £300 a year ; though he afterwards lost most of it by unwise speculation. Then followed five years' work on his Eastern collections, numerous papers on many subjects, friendships, correspondence, and controversies. The theory of the origin of species by natural selection which had been given to the world by Darwin in 1859 was, of course, the great topic. Mr. Wallace retells the story of his own connexion with it, and no story better bears retelling. The full idea came to him as he lay sick of fever at Ternate in 1858 ; but he had already formulated the conception of an evolution or succession of species in an article written at Sarawak and published in 1855. Darwin wrote to him about it, and said that he agreed with " almost every word," but Wallace had no idea that this very thesis was to form the subject of the great work on species for which Darwin had been collecting materials for twenty years. Out in the Eastern seas the thing came to him in a flash of insight as he was musing on the superabundance of life produced and its constant reduction to an average. Then he thought of Malthus's checks to population, and saw the whole thing in outline—the struggle for existence, the survival of the fittest, the improvement of the race, the adaptation to the environment, and the origin of species. He wrote at once to Darwin, whose book was then nearly completed, and learnt with surprise that it was on this very theory. When the book came out no one appreciated it, or was in a position to appreciate it, so highly as Wallace. He wrote to Bates :—

I know not how, or to whom, to express fully my admiration of Darwin's book. To him it would seem flattery, to others self-praise ; but I do 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, its vast accumulation of evidence, its overwhelming argument, and its admirable tone and spirit. I really feel thankful that it has not been left to me to give the theory to the world.

We have no space to follow Mr. Wallace through the rest of his reminiscences, and can only mention a few points. He throws many interesting sidelights on Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall, J. S. Mill, Samuel Butler, and others. He tried to get them to take up spiritualism, but they would not be drawn. Huxley had other fish to fry, Darwin had no time, Lewes said he would come and did not, Tyndall came and laughed, Mill was coldly dissatisfied with the evidence, Romanes was afraid of being duped, and so on. All this is amusing enough, though Wallace was in deadly earnest. A good many hitherto unpublished letters of Darwin's supplement those contained in previous books and reveal the charming friendship between the two men. Three chapters devoted to travel and lecturing in America are dull ; but the reader should on no account miss the amazing story of Mr. John Hampden. It is almost incredible and highly diverting, though no joke to the victim. Poor Mr. Wallace brought upon himself a twenty years' persecution and considerable pecuniary loss through trying to convince a crank that the earth is round. That comes of wanting to argue.