

Transcription, February 2015:

*Chicago Evening Post, Friday Literary Review* (11 Aug. 1911): 1c (George Cram Cook).

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‘Fifty Years After.’

*The World of Life*, by Alfred Russel Wallace. [Moffat, Yard & Co.]

A notable book in 1911 from the man who fifty years ago shared with Darwin the honor of independently formulating the Darwinian theory of natural selection is an event that strikes the imagination. The development of that theory, which first came into clearness in the brains of Darwin and Wallace, has been so immense—that potent idea of theirs has so transformed our intellectual life—we have been led by it down such long roads of thought—it now seems scarcely possible that that beginning of things can still exist as a recollection of his own life in the brain of a man still living.

But here is a book by such a man, and not a book of weakness. It comes with a challenge. In its subtitle it affirms “The World of Life” to be “A Manifestation of Creative Power, Directive Mind and Ultimate Purpose.” It comes with an answer of its own to the fundamental question, “What is Life?” It attacks the monism which assumes that the universe is self-ruled and one; it dares to uphold the ancient dualistic faith that the universe is one thing and God another. It marshals not for themselves, but for the sake of their bearing on fundamental questions, all its host of special facts concerning Recognition-marks, Distribution, Heredity, Variation, Adaptation. It makes its description of the feather of a bird lead to an argument for an organizing mind which thought out the perfect feather in advance. It concludes with an admittedly speculative hope that man “is destined to a permanent, progressive existence in the World of Spirit.” It comes heralded as “a reaction from the crude materialism of Haeckel,” and we find the aged author protesting against the “extremely dogmatic and assertive character” of the writings of that antagonist of his youth.

Of course it is not a new discovery—the dogmatism and assertiveness of Ernst Haeckel—nor is the crudeness of his materialism, nor the tendency of his great generalizations to be “a little in advance of the facts.” It must be said for Haeckel that not many men in advance of facts have seen so many facts catch up with them. He who stood so isolated in Europe at the beginning of his battle was made harsh by isolation—by a whole world set and hardened in error against him. The materialism into which he threw his energetic soul was crude, and his voice proclaiming it to a hostile world was strident. Wallace shows the ridiculously low value Haeckel placed upon thought, upon consciousness. Haeckel reduced man to “a placental mammal” and seemed to think that by so classifying him he had forever disposed of all man’s god-like possibilities. His unexpressed, erroneous, scholastic premise was that “a placental mammal can have no god-like possibilities.”

But after all has been admitted that can be admitted of Wallace’s criticism of Haeckel’s intellectual manners and Haeckel’s philosophical views, the consensus of the world’s best thought today cannot go with Wallace in his war. It is only too easy to lay one’s finger upon one unproved assumption after another in this book by Wallace. Facts he adduces to prove organizing mind, directive purpose, creative power as he conceives it, are all susceptible of other interpretations which he disregards. It is not true that our only escape from the crude materialism of Haeckel lies in the spiritualism of Wallace. Another

avenue leads out from crude materialism—to fine materialism—to a unitary world-conception based on that marvelous matter which has melted in our searching thought into a phase of Power.

Unfortunately the finer monism which has grown out of and silently superseded the harshly battling monism of Haeckel is finding no adequate expression in the writings of men of science today. They seem content to rest in their truth themselves and feel no impulse to offer battle for its triumph in the minds of others. From the point of view of literature and of life the expression of truth—the battle for it—is truth's intensest part. To whom can we turn for a true, corrected picture of the world of life, as large and glowing as those erroneous pictures of the earlier time? Is there any today who can see or make us see the forest in spite of its trees?

It is the virtue of Wallace's book that he endeavors to give "a kind of bird's-eye sketch of the great life-drama." The flaw in it is that Wallace arrived in advance at a conception which the thinking world has outgrown.

His book makes me wish that some man of today—among thousands of Masters of Science a master of science indeed, and also a master of art—would rise to the height of the great argument and in the broad lost manner body forth in beauty the truer, finer, fuller conception which still lies latent in the hoarded splendor of all our slowly gathered knowledge of the world of life. It should be a great synthesis, rather than a "bird's-eye sketch"; it should be a great story—how the moneran became man—the epic of the earth.

The finest fate this late work of one of the early men could meet would be to evoke a splendid answer which should destroy it. One conceives such a book as separating and re-crystallizing all that is precious in the work of 10,000 patient investigators as a grain of radium chlorid is separated and crystallized from a ton of pitch-blende. It would be a real tribute to Wallace if this book of his old age proved to have power to draw an adequate answer from some modern man of science large enough to see the whole design, artist enough to make us see and feel it. To strike the steel needs flint. Here in the large, old-world view of this old master of the passing generation is there not noble error worthy of the best of modern steel?

George Cram Cook.

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