

Transcription, June 2016:

The Daily News (London) No. 17086 (27 December 1900): 3c (anon.).

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‘Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace. “Scientific and Social Studies.”’

Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace is not only the greatest of our living naturalists, but is an active political and social reformer. He has worked in the vast field of the Amazon, has spent several years in the Malay Archipelago, has written standard books on various scientific subjects, and has been a leading exponent of scientific and social questions in reviews and other periodicals for five and thirty years. These contributions have a permanent value, and Dr. Wallace has collected, revived, and republished them in these two volumes. The essays are not merely studies, they are clear popular expositions or shrewd and suggestive discussions. A large number of effective illustrations have been introduced, and many of the older articles have been enlarged and modified so as to be, as Dr. Wallace says, “a new piece of work.” The two volumes have thus become a very interesting and stimulating contribution to popular science, and we may add to popular politics. Dr. Wallace is one of the most fearless of modern writers. He has Huxley’s clearness of exposition and unswerving devotion to what he believes to be true. He is the discoverer of that doctrine of natural selection which Darwin fully and conclusively established. In political and social questions he is “convinced that the society of the future will be some form of socialism which may be briefly defined as the organization of labour for good of all.” He is President of the Land Nationalisation Society, and the last paper in his second volume is an address to the International Congress of Spiritualists, in which he founds a plea for Justice, not Charity, on the conception of mental and moral continuity between this life and the next.

It is not possible in the space at our disposal to give account of the variety of the topics which Dr. Wallace discusses. The first part of the first volume is a series of “Earth Studies,” and the first chapter is on the formation of valleys, with good views of the great Yosemite Valleys in California, and the Doone Valley in Devonshire. It is now believed by all geologists that valleys are formed by denudation, and by processes similar to those which are going on at the present day. Everybody asks why a river, like the Avon, at St. Vincent’s rocks, or the Ouse and the Cuckmere, which cut through the South Downs at Brighton and Beachy Head, do not find their way to the sea along the valleys which lie close at hand. The explanation is that the river began its course when the land first rose from the sea, and that the rise of Hills, like the Clifton Downs or the South Downs, was so slow that the rivers cut their way down as fast as the land rose up.

The Great Colorado Canon.

The most wonderful example of the power of water to denude and erode the hardest rocks is afforded by the great canon of the Colorado river. This river has been cut for 400 miles to a depth of from 4,000 to 7,000 feet, mainly through masses of hard palæozoic rocks.

“The Permanence of the Great Ocean Basins” is a striking account of the view now held by most scientific men on this subject. The legends of a Continent of Atlantis, sunk beneath the Atlantic, have no

support from science. The ocean floor “is vast, slightly undulating plain, the slopes rarely exceeding a hundred feet in a mile, except near the margins of the continental areas, while usually the gradients are so slight that they would be hardly perceptible to the eye.” The depth of the ocean is nearly seven times the mean height of the land, while of the whole surface of the earth 28 hundredths is land and 72 hundredths is water:

Consider for a moment what would be implied by the building up of a continent the size of Africa from the main depth of the ocean . . . if all the land of the globe above the sea level could be transferred to mid-ocean it would not be sufficient to form the new continent, but would still leave it nearly 2,000 feet beneath the surface.

We pass over the elaborate argument in which Dr. Wallace restores the old view of a molten interior to our planet, with a crust some eighteen miles thick, and other geological discussions, to glance at the well-illustrated chapters on monkeys. Dr. Wallace is no believer in man’s descent from any existing species. He says,

The true conclusion seems to be that the combination of external characters and internal structure which exists in the monkeys is that which, when greatly improved, refined, and beautified, was best calculated to become the perfect instrument of the human intellect, and to aid in the development of man’s higher nature; while, on the other hand, in the rude, inharmonious, and undeveloped state which it has reached in the quadrumana, it is by no means worthy of the highest place; or can be held to exhibit the most perfect development of sub-human animal life.

There is a striking chapter entitled, “Human Selection,” which is a reply to Darwin’s gloomy view of the world’s future, expressed in one of his latest conversations with Dr. Wallace. In our modern civilization, Darwin said, Natural Selection has no play, and the fittest do not survive, so that deterioration is constantly going on. Dr. Wallace admits the danger, and sees the remedy in social reform. Mr. Edward Bellamy dreamed in “Looking Backward” of a state of society when every woman should be a lady, and every man a gentleman. Dr. Wallace comes to nearly the same thing by his requirement of “Equality of Opportunity” for all. But, by a novel and curious course of reasoning, he shows how Natural Selection is to improve the race. More boys are born than girls, but men die quicker than women as society is now constituted. Unhealthy employments will, however, be eliminated, deaths from preventible causes will be stopped, and then:

How the Influence of Women Will Increase.

It seems highly probable that in the society of the future the superior number of the males at birth will be maintained throughout life, or at all events during what may be termed the marriageable period. This will greatly increase the influence of women in the improvement of the race. Being in a minority they will be more sought after, and will have a real choice in marriage, which is rarely the case now. This actual minority being further increased by those who from various causes abstain from marriage, will cause considerable numbers of men to remain permanently unmarried, and as these will consist very largely, if not almost wholly, of those who are the least perfectly developed either mentally or physically, the constant advance of the race in every good quality will be ensured.

In the papers devoted to educational, political, social, and economic questions there are the elements of controversy in almost every page. Dr. Wallace is a Land Nationaliser, and he holds that the unborn

should not inherit. He republishes, however, an important article on “Coal a National Trust,” which he contributed to “The Daily News” twenty-seven years ago, and which he contends, is “even more applicable to-day.” He points out that coal is in this climate a necessary of life, that its quantity is limited, and that by sending it out of the country in enormous quantities “we are destroying forever a considerable and ever-increasing proportion of the mineral wealth of our country,” and rendering it “less habitable and less enjoyable for our descendants.” He concludes, therefore, that it is “clearly our duty to check the further exhaustion of our coal supplies by at once putting export duties on coal and iron in every form, very small duties at first, so as not to produce too sudden a check on the employment of labour, but gradually increasing them, till by stimulating an increased production in other countries, they may no longer be required.”

There are other economic articles in which Dr. Wallace states the case for paper money for “reciprocity,” and for Land Nationalisation, in which we are totally unable to agree with him. But his presentation of the argument is always clear and cogent, even when not convincing, and we put down his two volumes with the feeling that if we have been led in unaccustomed and unwelcome ways, it has been with a companion for whose encyclopædic learning and philanthropic earnestness we retain great and lasting respect.

“Studies, Scientific and Social.” By Alfred Russel Wallace, LL.D., D.C.L., F.R.S., etc. Two vols. With numerous Illustrations. Macmillan and Co.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.