

Transcription (from hardcopy), January 2015:

*The Manchester Courier* 77(13775) (2 Jan. 1901): 3a (anon.).

[p. 3a]

‘Literary Notices.’

“Studies Scientific and Social,” by Alfred Russell Wallace. Macmillan, 2 vols., 18s.’

In the evening of his days Dr. Wallace, the patient investigator whose brilliant pen has done so much to dispel the notion, once prevalent, that scientific books must necessarily be unattractive, has collected together his more important contributions to periodical literature during the last thirty-five years. The range over which they extend is very wide, education and anthropology, politics, biology, and sociology being only a few of the subjects treated of. In cases where later advances have made it advisable, the articles have been brought up to date, so that one is nowhere confronted with a view of things no longer tenable. As regards the scientific papers, especially those dealing with botany or biology, the author’s immense knowledge of facts, mostly derived at first hand, is conspicuously displayed, a twelve years’ residence in the tropics having given him unique advantages in this respect. His principal work has, of course, been in connection with the theory of evolution, and in helping to modify the views of extremists, who, having once become possessed of an idea, hold it so close to them as to shut out the true perspective of things, and fall into obvious errors in consequence. Such are Mr. Bateson and, to a certain extent, Mr. Spencer, Prof. Henslow, and Sir Francis Galton, among others, with all of whom Dr. Wallace deals most courteously, but convincingly, when they neglect broad principles to emphasise one of minor importance. That the author preserves an open mind upon matters which will probably always be under dispute is shown by his attitude towards Weismannism, a theory not of his own period, as it were, yet one which he welcomes as throwing light upon the vexed question of the hereditary transmission of characters. Upon social problems Dr. Wallace has much to say, and in many directions he points out methods by which poverty and suffering might be greatly alleviated. Behind these theoretical views, however, there lies the almost insuperable difficulty of putting them into operation, besides the uncertainty of knowing how far the imperfections of human nature have been taken into account. We include under this latter head the storm of opposition which would be raised if, for example, the Government were moved to declare that after a fixed date they

will not allow transfers of stock (except in cases of inheritance), but will pay the dividends to the holders at that date for their lives and for the lives of any direct heirs living at the time they make their will or die, after which all payments will cease, and the community will at length be released from the oppressive and unjust burthen it has so long borne.

This is by no means the only one of Dr. Wallace’s revolutionary ideas. No doubt they would all work admirably if a sufficient proportion of the nation at large could be induced to share his views, but we fear original sin, or whatever it may be called, is too deeply ingrained to give a chance to these speculations. Obviously a book which is itself largely a collection of reviews cannot be adequately discussed in much less than its own bulk, but the following specimen of Dr. Wallace’s descriptive powers we take to be almost unsurpassable.

In no part of America, east of the Mississippi, is there such a succession of floral beauty and display of exquisite colour as are to be found in many parts of England. Such, for instance, are the woods and fields of daffodils, “which come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty”; the wild hyacinths, whose nodding bells, of exquisite form and colour individually, carpet our woods in April with sheets of the purest azure, the soft yellow of primroses in coppices or along sunny hedge banks; the rich golden yellow of the gorse-bushes, which, when seen in perfection, as in the Isle of Wight, Cornwall, or Ireland, is so superlatively glorious that we cannot wonder at the enthusiasm of the great Linnæus, who, on beholding it, knelt down and thanked God for so much beauty; later on, the clearer yellow of the bloom is hardly less brilliant on our heaths and railway banks, while the red ragged-robin, and the purple or rosy orchises often adorn our marshes and meadows with masses of colour; then come the fields and dry slopes, gay with scarlet poppies, and the noble spikes of foxgloves in the copses and on rough banks, followed by, perhaps, the most exquisitely beautiful sight of all, the brilliant sheets and patches of purple heath, sometimes alternating with the tender green of the young bracken, as on some of the mountain slopes in Wales, sometimes intermingled with the rich golden clumps of the dwarf gorse, as on the wild heaths of Surrey or Dorset.

[\[Return\]](#)

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