

### THE WONDERFUL CENTURY.\*

ONE rises from a careful perusal of Mr. Wallace's book with the conviction that the title is a piece of scientific irony, for much more than half of its contents is devoted to the demonstration of our intellectual shortcomings, and even those earlier chapters which narrate the "wonderful" progress of discovery and invention are tinged with that persistent "note" of pessimism which so often pervades the retrospect of old and thoughtful men. We ourselves do not blame Mr. Wallace for his pessimism, any more than we should find fault with Tennyson for the still deeper despair of his "Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After." The young rising generation, with their buoyant, and too often ignorant, over-confidence in themselves and their contemporaries, seem to require the warning voice of those who are "sadder," but also, as Coleridge added, "wiser," than themselves. It is not, therefore, the somewhat too despairing tone of Mr. Wallace's book, but rather the lack of true philosophy in his fault-finding, which offends us.

We have grown up in admiration of the author's early scientific achievements, and can never bring our minds to the contemplation of Darwin's great generalisation without coupling with what is usually called the "Darwinian theory" the name of Wallace. And hardly less than his eminence as a naturalist may be ranked Mr. Wallace's modesty and self-effacement in regard to the greatest scientific speculation of this "wonderful century." This combination of profound knowledge and originality with true intellectual modesty must always make the name of Alfred Russel Wallace one to be held in honour; and accordingly we read anything from his pen with a feeling of personal respect, which in the case of some of his "fads" would be altogether lacking but for his name.

We must, however, confess to a feeling that the author's heart seems to be in the "faddy" portions of his book; and that the opening chapters dealing in a common-sense way with the scientific progress of the age, and its multitudinous discoveries and appliances, are written in a rather dull and perfunctory spirit. This is indeed always the case. A man's heart warms to his hobby, and far less gifted writers than Mr. Wallace become at times interesting, if not eloquent, when describing their pet fancies and fallacies. So it is that while any well-informed journalist with the *Encyclopædia Britannica* at his elbow could have written the first part of *The Wonderful Century*, only its author, with his strange blending of scientific knowledge and popular credulity, could have written the latter half. We propose, therefore, to devote the remaining space at our disposal to a brief consideration of Part II. of this book, which its author entitles "Failures."

Mr. Wallace labels as the chief "failure" of our "wonderful century" the neglect of phrenology. Mr. Wallace carefully restates the convictions and opinions of Gall, Spurzheim, and their British disciple, George Combe, much in the reverent spirit in which a theologian quotes from the Fathers of the Church. No one will question for a moment that Combe was a man of conspicuous ability; and the fact that such men as the Prince Consort and Cobden thought fit to consult him on the subject of education is a proof that he possessed "practical" as well as

"theoretical" ability. But in the following estimate of Combe we cannot help feeling that Mr. Wallace altogether overrates him:—

"It may be truly said that no every subject on which he wrote—the constitution of man, natural religion, education, criminal legislation, the lunacy laws, the currency question, moral philosophy—he was far in advance of his age; and almost all his principles and his proposals on these subjects, though considered heretical or impracticable by most of his contemporaries, are now either actually adopted or admitted to be correct both in philosophy and in practice. But the one subject to which he gave more careful study than to any other—phrenology—which was indeed the very foundation on which his philosophy and educational theories were built, was contemptuously rejected by the great bulk of the scientific and literary men of his time, without adequate examination, without any reasonable study of so complex and important a subject, but almost entirely on false assumptions, gross misrepresentations, or a priori reasoning."

This passage is very fairly representative of Mr. Wallace's reasoning throughout. He fails to see that the world, in its wisdom, gradually accepted and absorbed Combe's doctrines wherever they proved to be in accordance with human experience; but rejected those empirical speculations which (like so many of Mr. Wallace's own) are merely personal "fads." That phrenology has a certain basis of fact and truth is self-evident; but that Combe or any of his disciples can set forth, as on a map or chart the inner and spiritual nature, and the intellectual endowment and gifts of men and women by an examination of their "bumps" we hold to be a fallacy, on a par with the fashionable fortune-telling of the lady professors of palmistry.

It is after the perusal of such a chapter as this on the "Neglect of Phrenology" that we gain some insight into Mr. Wallace's curious mental "blend" of science and superstition. We no longer marvel at the avidity with which he has "swallowed" wholesale the so-called spiritualistic manifestations of professional mediums; and, though we may deplore, we can at least understand the facility with which he has given his great name to the support of the grossest fallacies of the hour. Yet even in these pages we meet with much good sense mixed with child-like credulity. And thus, while utterly unable to follow the author in his lengthy diatribes against vaccination, we have read not without profit and pleasure his condemnation of the "Demon of Greed." Mr. Wallace is very severe on the "Vampire of War"; and here, again, our peace-loving philosopher fails to see that the conflict of races and the survival of the fittest have been, as Darwin and himself have told us, the great law of human development; and that War is, after all, the competitive examination of nations.

It may interest politicians to know that Mr. Wallace's "remedy for want" is "a progressive Income-tax on that portion of all incomes above £10,000, rising to 100 per cent. on the surplus above £50,000"

\* *The Wonderful Century*, by Alfred Russel Wallace. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co. (7s. 6d.)