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‘Literature of the Day. Some New Books.’

*A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro, with an Account of the Native Tribes, &c., of the Amazon Valley.* By Alfred R. Wallace. Reeve and Co.

“The Wonderful Century” (Swan Sonnenschein), by Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, F.R.S., is a curiously unequal and, in certain respects, disappointing book. The author, we need scarcely say, shares with Darwin the distinction of having demonstrated, by brilliant and patient research, the doctrine of the Evolution of Species; and, therefore, few living men are better entitled to speak with authority on the scientific achievements which have made the present age memorable, not merely in the annals of the nation, but in the history of the world. The contents of the book are about equally divided between what Dr. Wallace calls the successes and the failures of the century. First of all he gives a luminous survey of the epoch-making changes which have been brought about in science, in the arts, and in all the possibilities of human intercourse both in person and by exchange of thought. He traces the growth of an exact knowledge alike of the earth and of the whole visible universe, which has effected, within living memory, a social no less than an industrial revolution. The men of the Nineteenth Century, he remarks, have not been slow to praise it, and sometimes, it must be added, enthusiasm in this direction has not been according to knowledge. He lays stress on the forces which have bridged distances if not annihilated space, and have brought the ends of the earth together through the circulation of thought as well as of merchandise. There is much that is fresh and significant in what Dr. Wallace has to say about the growth of communication as illustrated by railways, steam navigation, electric telegraphs, and the telephone, the new applications of fire and light in friction matches, the discovery of gas, electric illumination, photography, the Röntgen rays which open up a new world to surgical research, and the spectrum analysis which enables science to gauge the relative heat and chemical constitution of the stars, and even to measure the rate of motion of invisible celestial bodies. The conquest of pain in surgical operations by the use of anæsthetics is another triumph of the century, whilst the theoretical discoveries of our time have pushed knowledge into regions that former generations did not dream of, and widened in almost every direction our ideas of the universe. Dr. Wallace has no difficulty in showing that only five, or at most seven, inventions of the first rank can be placed to the credit of the centuries which precede the present—namely, the telescope, the printing-press, the mariner’s compass, Arabic numerals, alphabetical writing, the steam-engine, and the barometer—as against thirteen which fall within the compass of what is still an unexhausted epoch. It is in the second part of the book, or, in other words, the chapters which deal with what Dr. Wallace is pleased to call the failures of the age, that disappointment lurks. He places in the forefront of his indictment the neglect of phrenology, and the refusal to treat seriously the claims of hypnotism and psychical research. He denounces vaccination as a delusion and its penal enforcement as a crime, and almost a third of his book is devoted to this pet craze of a narrow clique. Such a book, we need scarcely say, raises many questions, and does so with acumen and judgment, and this circumstance only heightens regret that lost or causes, like chaff that has not been fully separated from the grain, are allowed to bulk so largely in a narrative marked, in the main, by common-sense as well as courage.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2023.