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‘Dr. Russel Wallace and Evolution—Great Scientist’s Death—A Famous Discovery.—
Darwin’s Generous Rival.’

The last of the great British naturalists of the nineteenth century, of the men who opened new eras in biological science—Darwin, Hooker, Galton—has passed away, we regret to announce, in Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., LL.D., D.C.L., F.R.S., who peacefully fell asleep at 9.30 yesterday morning in his picturesque home, Old Orchard, Broadstone, Wimborne. The “Grand Old Man of Science” would, on Jan. 8 next, have completed his 91st year. He had been wonderfully hale and vigorous. When he celebrated his 90th birthday last January he said to friends: “I am better than I have been for many years, thanks to strict dieting. The secret in keeping well in old age is regularity in diet; medicines are no good.” Perhaps the venerable savant should have added two more elixirs of life from his own experience, a never-failing optimism and unabating activity, for until the heart ceased to beat he was still a worker and a thinker—and

A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile-a.

It was only the other day he brought out a volume on “Democracy” reviewed in *The Daily Telegraph* on Wednesday last—and he had more literary ventures in view. There is something in activity of the intellect, which science stimulates, that favours length of days. Up to Sunday last Wallace was well and vigorous. Then came an attack of ague, followed by drowsiness, and on Thursday the active brain lapsed into a state of coma, from which there was no recovery, and yesterday, in the presence of wife, son, and daughter, life ebbed slowly to the end, and as a friend telegraphs: “Mr. Wallace passed away very peacefully, and without regaining consciousness.” His medical attendant, Dr. Norman, certified that death was due to old age.

Early Years.

Dr. Wallace was born at Usk, in Monmouthshire, on Jan. 8, 1823. The family was not Welsh but Scottish, and, it has been said, traced its descent from Scotland’s national hero. His father, Thomas Vere Wallace, was a briefless barrister, also an experimenter, and more literary in his tastes than his circumstances could afford. He left London for Usk, and had a family of nine, Alfred being the youngest but one. The future naturalist left school at 14. Like Darwin he thought poorly of his early teaching. “Whatever little knowledge of history I have ever acquired,” he wrote, “has been derived more from Shakespearean plays and good historical novels than from anything I learned at school.” So far as books made the man, his were: “Mungo Park,” “Robinson Crusoe,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” and, later, Lyell’s “Geology,” Darwin’s “Journal of a Naturalist,” Humboldt’s “Personal Narrative,” “The Vestiges of Creation,” Lawrence’s “Lectures on Man,” and, above all, Malthus’s “Principles of Population.” His parents intended him to be a land surveyor and architect;¹ Nature had designed him for a traveller and naturalist, and, as usual, Nature had her way. He and his eldest brother,

William, practised surveying for some time in the Midlands and in Wales. Next he obtained employment in Leicester as drawing master at the Collegiate School, and there he made the acquaintanceship of Henry Walter Bates, and this was a turning point in his career. Bates was a naturalist, and he and Wallace decided to go to the tropics to study animal life and form collections. They sailed from London in 1848. Four and a half years Wallace spent in South America in regions that were very little known, and amid a wealth of animated nature nowhere surpassed.

In Nature's University.

Those years in Nature's University formed the introduction to tropical life and scenery, on the study of which his future reputation was to rest. His return home in 1852 was disastrous. The ship took fire, all on board had a narrow escape, and the naturalist's collections were totally lost. But disaster is often the watchword of success. Wallace published his "Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro," and then made up his mind for another tropical adventure. From the Far West he went to the Far East. From 1854 onwards for eight years he was lost amid the Malay Islands, then practically little known to naturalists. The traveller sees and discovers that which he brings the capacity to see and discover. Peter Bell saw a yellow primrose on the river's brim—that was all; to Alfred Russel Wallace the yellow primrose might have been a revelation. To a wonderful Eastern archipelago—with its marvellous tropical vegetation, its strangely diversified life, its primitive races, its ceaseless earthquake shocks—Wallace took a competent knowledge of plants and animals, and, what was of equal moment, of the questions of the day that were waiting for solution. Those eight years made the man. His "Malay Archipelago" is a classic, and all that is best in his "Tropical Nature," "Geographical Distribution of Animals," "Darwinism," and "Island Life" goes back to the wanderings and voyages amid those "green islands of glittering seas."

As Author.

Wallace possessed the rare serviceable gift of writing on the sciences that he understood so as to make them understood by others. His "Island Life" is one of the most charming expositions of the relations of islands to continents, of the lessons they teach regarding the spread of animal and plant life in past ages, of the probable causes and effects of the glacial epoch, and of the principles on which the age of the world should be reckoned from geological data. Wallace pointed out what many able reasoners had omitted to take into account, when computing the earth's antiquity, that while denudation extends over a whole continent, deposition goes on over only a narrow margin of sea coast. Rains and rivers that lower a continental area an inch might raise the neighbouring sea-floor a foot. In this way he came to the conviction that about twenty-eight million years would suffice for the known geological formations—instead of the two hundred millions that some authorities demanded. These views prevail generally now. Professor Sollas, at the meeting of the British Association in 1900, deduced from various lines of computation twenty-five and a half million years as the probable age of mother earth since her seas and lakes first began to collect sedimentary deposits, and the crumpling of her surface to raise the eternal hills. But the subject is still a problem, for radium has modified all arguments, and the geologists may have, so far as the cooling of the globe is concerned, as many millions as they like.

The Great Discovery.

A fortunate illness laid Wallace aside in 1858 in Ternate. While suffering from an attack of tropical fever or ague the old problem came back to him, how did all the marvellous variety of animal life come

about, and what caused the succession which we find in the rocks. Three years earlier he had written on the subject, but he was not satisfied. Then the idea of Malthus suddenly occurred to him that Nature provided positive checks which tended to restrict the growth of communities, and must act even more effectively on the lower animals. That was Natural Selection.

There suddenly flashed on me (he afterwards wrote) the idea of the survival of the fittest, and in the two hours that elapsed before the ague fit was over I had thought out the whole of the theory.

Wallace knew Darwin; they were both fellows at the Linæan Society,² and so he sat down and sent off a letter by the next post to explain his views. He had no idea that nearly twenty years before that date Darwin, who was fourteen years older than he, had come to the same conclusions as to “survival of the fittest,” and had been making an enormous collection of facts to prove the theory.

The older naturalist was astounded. He wrote to Sir Charles Lyell, who knew his views:

I never saw a more striking coincidence. If Wallace had my manuscript sketch written out in 1842, he could not have made a better short abstract...[concluding portion of obituary missing.]

¹[Editor’s note: I’m not sure there is any evidence to support this statement.]

²[Editor’s note: Actually, Wallace was not elected to the Linnean Society until the 1870s, and as of 1858 his only contacts with Darwin had been a very brief meeting before he left for the East, and a couple of letters.]

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2014.