

Transcription (from *Trove*), July 2014:

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[p. 4c]

‘Current Literature. Alfred Russel Wallace.’

Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace was born at Usk, Monmouthshire, on January 8, 1823, so that his autobiography—“My Life: A record of events and opinions” (George Bell and Sons)—may be said to be happily timed. When he left Hertford Grammar School in his early ’teens, with his education finished, as the saying goes, he could little have expected that he would one day be regarded as a notable authority on his own subjects in literary and social circles. There was not too much money at home, and he, like his brothers and sisters, was soon set to work to earn his living. Before doing so, however, he spent a few months in London with a brother, and here, though he was only 14 years of age, he, unconsciously to a certain extent, began to acquire the knowledge of men and of their conditions, which was afterwards to help him so much in the work of his life. It was at this time that he became acquainted with the doctrines of the secularists, listening to the debates on religious subjects, in which the more intelligent of the workmen engaged, and reading for himself. But he had soon to leave all this and engage in the work of life as a land surveyor. Gradually the truths and beauties of geology were made the subject of his earnest study. He also read much radical literature. After a short experience of life as a shopboy and watch-maker, young Wallace went back to his surveying, which he found most interesting. Looking back upon this period afterwards he seems surprised that his profession did not lead him earlier to the principles of land nationalisation, of which he was later to be a foremost preacher. Not that he was not in the habit of generalising on things and persons that came under his notice; but the only thing that struck him about the enclosure of commons was that there must be some good reason for the practice. The turning-point of his life came when, there being little surveying work to do, he took up in earnest the study of botany. He says:—

It must be remembered that my ignorance of plants at this time was extreme. I knew the wild rose, bramble, hawthorn, poppy, daisy, and foxglove, and a very few others equally common and popular, and this was all. I knew nothing whatever as to genera and species, nor of the large numbers of distinct forms related to each other and grouped into natural orders. My delight, therefore, was great when I was now able to identify the charming little eyebright, the strange-looking cow-wheat and louse-wort, the handsome mullein and the pretty creeping toad-flax, and to find that all of them, as well as the lordly fox-glove, formed parts of one great natural order, and that under all their superficial diversity of form there was a similarity of structure which, when once clearly understood, enabled me to locate each fresh species with greater ease. The Crucifers, the Pea tribe, the Umbelliferae, the Compositae, and the Labiates offered great difficulties, and it was only after repeated efforts that I was able to name with certainty a few of the species, after which each additional discovery became a little less difficult, though the time I gave to the study before I left England was not sufficient for me to acquaint myself with more than a moderate proportion of the names of the species I collected.

Now, when Mr. Wallace recognised in his determination to study botany the turning point of his life, he is careful to define his position; and the definition is interesting as showing the developments of his religious belief. First of all, he put everything down to mere chance, but of late years he was inclined to Hamlet’s belief that “there’s a divinity that shapes our ends.” Not, he goes on to say, that each man’s life

in all its details is guided by the Deity for His special ends—which would mean that human beings are automata, puppets in the hands of destiny. But he goes on:

I have good reasons for the belief that, just as our own personal influence and expressed or unseen guidance is a factor in the life and conduct of our children, and even of some of our friends and acquaintances, so we are surrounded by a host of unseen friends and relatives who have gone before us, and who have certain limited powers of influencing, and even, in particular cases, almost of determining, the actions of living persons, and may thus in a great variety of indirect ways modify the circumstances and character of any one or most individuals in whom they are specially interested. But a great number of these occurrences in everyone's life are apparently what we term chance, and even if all are so, the conclusion I wish to lay stress upon is not affected. It is, that many of the conditions and circumstances that constitute our environment, though at the time they may seem unfortunate, or even unjust, yet are often more truly beneficial than those which we should consider more favourable. Sometimes they only aid in the formation of character, sometimes they also lead to action which gives scope for the use of what might have been dormant or unused faculties.

However this may be, and whatever the value of Mr. Wallace's theory, the fact remains that, if it had not been for the circumstances which induced him to study botany, he would never have made his journeys to the Amazon, and afterwards to Singapore, and the Malay Archipelago; never have opened his correspondence with Sir Charles Lyell, or become acquainted with the great scientific and literary giants who were proud to call him friend. There is much in "My Life" about some of those giants. Mr. Wallace had an enviable knack of making friends and disarming enemies. Not that he was by any means an invertebrate being, ready at all times to change what he is pleased to call his opinions in deference to popular cries, or to strongly expressed views. On the contrary, he was—is, fortunately—one of those men who take much trouble in forming opinions, and display equal pertinacity in upholding them. Some of his warmest friends were people whom he had briskly attacked, who had as warmly replied to his attacks, and who maintained their opinions throughout. But the mere difference in views was not strong enough to prevent the formation of durable personal ties. Amongst these friends were Darwin, Huxley, and Tyndall; St. George Mivart, that curious combination of science and superstition; John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Sir Richard Owen, and Aug. Mongredien. So many-sided was Wallace in different stages of his life that he could appreciate each of those men, and be recognised by them as a fellow-worker. It was John Stuart Mill who first invited him to take active part in the reform of land tenure, and that was as long ago as 1870. Here, of course, he had the benefit of working with Herbert Spencer, who, as he says, "was the first eminent Englishman of science to establish the doctrine of land nationalisation upon the firm basis of social justice." Thenceforth Mr. Wallace devoted himself earnestly to the preaching of the new gospel, and if this gospel has not been universally accepted by now, it is assuredly not the fault of its chief English apostle. From land nationalisation Mr. Wallace proceeded by easy grades to socialism, just as, having taken up the study of mesmerism, he graduated into spiritualism. The latter part of the second volume of "My Life" is full of descriptions of various spiritualistic phenomena. The author, of course, knew that in attaching himself to the spiritualistic cause he was entering into a sort of alliance with the rogues who play upon the fears or the natural affections of silly persons; but he braved all this because he believed in spiritualism. At the same time, he is tolerant of scepticism, and for good reason. In one place, after describing certain occurrences at seances, he goes on:—

The majority of people to-day have been brought up to the belief that miracles, ghosts, and the whole series of strange phenomena here described cannot exist; that they are contrary to the laws of nature; that

they are the superstitions of a bygone age; and that therefore they are necessarily either impostures or delusions. There is no place in the fabric of their thought into which such facts can be fitted. When I first began this enquiry it was the same with myself. The facts did not fit into my then existing fabric of thought. All my preconceptions, all my knowledge, all my belief in the supremacy of science and of natural law were against the possibility of such phenomena. And even when, one by one, the facts were forced upon me without possibility of escape from them, still, as Sir David Brewster declared, after being at first astounded by the phenomena he saw with Mr. Home, “spirit was the last thing I could give in to.” Every other possible solution was tried and rejected. Unknown laws of nature were found to be of no avail when there was always an unknown intelligence behind the phenomena—an intelligence that showed a human character and individuality, and an individuality which almost invariably claimed to be that of some person who had lived on earth, and who, in many cases, was able to prove his or her identity. Thus, little by little, a place was made in my fabric of thought, first for all such well-attested facts, and then, but more slowly, for the spiritualistic interpretation of them.

And at this latest development of a wonderfully interesting career, we may well leave Mr. Wallace. The two big volumes in which he has recorded his experiences and his opinions are full of “meat.” There is nothing left in uncertainty. The author believed this at a certain stage of his career and believed another thing later on. We have the reasons that influenced him in his change—his progress, as he would call it. We may have no more belief in land nationalisation as a regenerator of mankind than we have in spiritualism. That is of no moment. What is of moment is that we have the life-history—including, as all real life-histories must include, the mind-history—of a remarkable man, written by himself.

A copy of this book comes to us also from Mr. William Dymock.

[\[Return\]](#)

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