

Transcription, January 2023:

*The Globe and Traveller* (London) No. 17298 (19 Dec. 1853): 1d (anon.).

[p. 1]

‘Literature.’

*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 magnificent valley of the Amazon—the grandest, the most fertile, and the richest in vegetable production in the world—is yet almost unknown to us. few adventurous travellers have penetrated its sublime forests here and there, and traced the course of its great artery and numerous and beautiful tributary rivers; but the vast region, upwards of 2,000 miles in length and 1,700 in breadth, still remains comparatively unexplored. Mr. Wallace, one of the latest sojourners in this interesting country, has brought much valuable information home to add to our store. Four years spent by a man of taste, activity, and scientific zeal, in wandering from Para to the source of the Marañon, up the Solimoes, the Rio Negro, the Uaupes, and the Tocantins, visiting towns and villages, penetrating the dense virgin forests, studying the modes of life of the various Indian inhabitants, collecting specimens of the wonderful creatures, insects, birds, beasts, and reptiles, examining the geological structure and the vegetable productions, could not fail to bring forth a rich harvest of intelligence. Unluckily, however, for Mr. Wallace, and for us, a sad accident befell him on his return home with the spoils of his long and laborious exploration. The ship in which he sailed took fire and was totally consumed; and all his collection and the notes taken during two years were lost, and after tossing about on the Atlantic for nine days in an open boat, he and his companions in misfortune were barely rescued from death. Who will not sympathise with the ill-fated naturalist and wearied wayfarer when he bewails this irreparable disaster?

“With what pleasure had I looked upon every race and curious insect I had added to my collection! How many times, when almost overcome by the ague, had I crawled into the forest and been rewarded by some unknown and beautiful species! How many places which no European foot but my own had trodden, would have been recalled to my memory by the rare birds and insects they had furnished to my collection! How many weary days and weeks had I passed, upheld only by the fond hope of bringing home many new and beautiful forms from those wild regions; every one which would be endeared to me by the recollections they would call up—which should prove that I had not wasted the advantages I had enjoyed, and would give me occupation and amusement for years to come! And now everything was gone, and I had not one specimen to illustrate the unknown lands I had trod, or to call back the recollection of the wild scenes I had beheld!”

But although Mr. Wallace thus lost a great part of the materials gathered during his wanderings in the valley of the Amazon, he had previously secured the memoranda made during the other two years, which, with the aid of memory, furnishes the instructive volume before us. The peculiar features of the country, the manners of the town population, and of the Indian tribes scattered throughout this immense territory, the zoology, the vegetation, and the mineralogy are described with minuteness. Mr. Wallace on more than one occasion expresses his opinion that travellers generally, in their descriptions, exaggerate the brilliant beauty of tropical vegetation as compared with that of temperate climes. He says:—

“There is grandeur and solemnity in the tropical forest, but little of beauty or brilliancy of colour. The huge buttress trees, the fissured trunks, the extraordinary air roots, the twisted and wrinkled climbers, and the elegant palms are what strike the attention and fill the mind with admiration and surprise and awe. But all is gloomy and solemn, and one feels a relief on again seeing the blue sky and feeling the scorching rays of the sun. It is on the road side and on the river’s bank that we see all the beauty of the tropical vegetation. There we find a mass of bushes and shrubs and trees of every height, rising over one another, all exposed to the bright light and the fresh air; and putting forth within reach their flowers and fruit, which in the forest only grow far up on the topmost branches.”

Yet he adds that the loveliest spots where the most gorgeous flowers of the tropics expand, are matched by scenes to be found at home of equal beauty, and exhibiting as large an amount of brilliant colours. Although Mr. Wallace's attention was mainly directed to the investigation of the country, its climate, and its multifarious forms of animal and vegetable life, he, like a true Englishman, kept his eye open to whatever seemed likely to promote commerce, and he has accordingly jotted down many hints which may be useful to his trading countrymen:—

“It seems somewhat extraordinary that the greater part of our timber should be brought from countries where the navigation is stopped nearly half the year by ice, and where the rivers are at all times obstructed by rapids and subject to storms which render the laying down the rafts a business of great danger; where, too, there is little variety of timber, and much of it of such poor quality as only to be used on account of its cheapness. On the other hand, the valley of the Amazon and its countless tributary streams offer a country where the rivers are open all the year, and are for hundreds, even thousands, of miles unobstructed by rapids, and where violent storms at any season seldom occur. The banks of all these streams are clothed with virgin forests, containing timber-trees in inexhaustible quantities, and of such countless varieties that there seems no purpose for which wood is required but one of a fitting quality may be found. In particular, there is cedar, said to be so abundant in some localities that it could be sent to England at a less price than even the Canada white pine.”

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