

Transcription (from hardcopy), July 2014:

Daily Telegraph (London) no. 18268 (8 Nov. 1913): 13a (anon.).

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‘Two Great Scientists’

By a melancholy coincidence, the past two days have seen the death of two of the supreme figures in the world of British science. Yesterday, in his 91st year, died Alfred Russel Wallace, who shared with Darwin the glory of giving to humanity the most profoundly stirring idea that has moved men’s minds since the discovery of the Americas. On the preceding day one of the foundation-layers of civilised life as we know it was taken from us in Sir William Preece, of whom it could be said that a large part of what electricity means to the ordinary citizen was brought into our common experience through his devoted labour. The two men represented, in their very dissimilar sorts of eminence, the two classes into which men of science are roughly divisible. Wallace’s was the department of speculative activity, in which the spirit of inquiry, winged with imagination, ranges over a vast array of patiently accumulated data till the conception is struck out that explains the harmonious all. Preece’s was the supreme devising mind; he was of those whose function is to turn to the material benefit of mankind the conquests made in the realm of theory by the thinkers. In the one, spiritual was dominant; in the other, the practical. The charm of adventurous investigation in far lands made Wallace the great observer of Nature that he was, and led to the production of those volumes of travel on the Amazon and in the Malay Archipelago which would have survived for their literary merit alone if they had been of less importance to learning. Preece found fascination more than enough in the laboratories of the Royal Institute. As a boy, the lectures of Faraday on “A Candle” contained for him, as he afterwards wrote, “more of romance than all the operas, plays, and other books that I had been allowed to read”; and all the long list of his writings was of a severely technical character. Wallace’s remained a roving intellect. Besides his independent discovery of the principle of natural selection as the mainspring of the evolution of living things; besides those works of observation and theory which were of great and acknowledged value to science, he wrote elaborately in defence of doctrines not generally regarded with seriousness in the learned world. The “neglect of phrenology” was one of his complaints against his contemporaries; vaccination was for him a “delusion”; and spiritualism he declared to be “the only sure foundation for a true philosophy, a pure religion.” He argued that our world is the true centre of the created universe, for which all else exists. No such divagations disturbed the career or reduced the reputation of Preece, who gave all his life to electrical engineering, and the greater part of it to the building up of the telegraph and telephone services of the General Post Office.

The great episode of Wallace’s life, his enunciation of the theory of natural selection at the very time when Darwin also proclaimed it to the world, was the occasion of one of those contests in generosity between great spirits which enrich the experience of mankind. Darwin, who had laboured at his point for twenty years before he deemed his idea ripe for publication, found that Wallace had actually anticipated him in sending a paper to the Linnæan Society¹ setting forth precisely the same theory. Only with difficulty was Darwin persuaded to submit his own paper to the same meeting, vastly more profound though his own investigations had been; had not his friends insisted, he would have abandoned the credit of priority to his unconscious rival. The scientific world judged rightly in treating the voluminous work done by Darwin as the true basis of the theory of natural selection, and in hailing him as its founder; but

for many years it did far less than justice to the brilliance and intrepidity of thought which had led Wallace to its independent discovery. That neglect, however, cast no shadow on his life; he saw no injustice—as he told the Linnæan Society when it honoured his genius fifty years later—in a preference extended to one who had spent twenty years upon his theory as against one who had given to his no more than a week. The story is one to be remembered when we hear, as we often may in a world somewhat satiated with its victories over Nature, scornful things said of the temperament of the man of science. In fineness of character, as well as in magnitude of mind, there are none who stand higher than the chief figures of the great age of British science; and those who carry on their torch are not less worthy to bear it. The legend of the soulless savant, in whom human feeling has been stifled and all richness of nature dried up, is as fanciful as the fable of the basilisk. A not dissimilar example of generosity of spirit is recorded of Sir William Preece. There was no littleness of nature about the man who welcomed and championed in Marconi the solver of a problem of applied science which had occupied his own mind before the young Italian inventor was born, and which he had come very near to mastering. Preece and Wallace were more than a great electrician and a great biologist. They were, in their very different ways, great exemplars of the magnitude of human nature; and—as with every sort of hero—it is as much for what they were as for what they did that they are honoured and lamented.

¹ [Editor's note: Wallace did no such thing. He sent an unintended-for-publication manuscript to Darwin for relaying to Charles Lyell, and Darwin, Lyell and Joseph Hooker had the paper read at the next meeting of the Linnean Society, without getting Wallace's permission first.]

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