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[p. 4c]

‘Men and Movements of the Day. [Number III.] Alfred Russell Wallace, LL.D., and Land Nationalisation.’

The dreamy, quiet, little town of Usk, in Monmouthshire, claims a great discoverer and scientist for its own. Alfred Russell Wallace, who is the co-discoverer with Darwin of natural selection as being the main agent in the evolution of species, was born at Usk on January 8th, 1823. Dr. Wallace has played many parts during his career, having written books of travels, philosophical and systematical natural history, works proposing the nationalisation of the land, and dealing with the cause of depression in trade, a treatise defending belief in miracles, and in modern spiritualism, and another attacking vaccination. The subject of this sketch was educated at Hertford Grammar School. From 1835 to 1848, he resided with an elder brother and land surveyor and architect, and lived in various parts of England and Wales. It was during these years that he gained a love for travel and acquired a knowledge of agriculture and of the condition of the working classes. In 1840, while living in South Wales, he first turned his attention to the study of natural history, and he became an eager collector of “specimens,” and an industrious reader of books of travel. He was residing in Leicester in 1844, as an English master at the Collegiate School, and there he made the acquaintance of Mr. H. W. Bates, an entomologist. Later, Wallace conceived a desire to visit tropical lands to collect facts “towards solving the problem of the origin of species.”

He proposed a joint expedition to the Amazon, and the two left Liverpool in a small trading vessel on the 20th April, 1848. They reached the mouth of the Amazon a month later. What he did and saw is related in a delightful style in his volume, “A Narrative of Travel on the Amazon and Rio Negro.” On his return, the ship was burnt at sea, and he spent ten terrible days in an open boat, having lost all his valuable specimens. But he was not to be daunted by this misfortune. In July of 1854 he arrived in Singapore, and proceeded to the tropical region of the Malay Archipelago. In these journeys Mr. Wallace proved how thoroughly scientific a student he was, for during his travels he collected a wonderful number of facts and details on butterflies, birds of paradise, and the Malay and Papuan races of surprising and intense interest, and which he gave to a curious and wondering world in a series of volumes. He wrote to Charles Darwin about his experiences, and many letters passed between these two scientists, who were working at the same great problem of evolution. Darwin wrote on January 25th, 1859:—“Most cordially do I wish you health, and entire success in all your pursuits, and, God knows, if admirable zeal and energy deserve success, most amply do you deserve it.” His many-sided views and interests led him to make a careful examination of spiritualism, which left him a firm believer in it. But let us pass on to his work in connection with the problem of poverty—Land Nationalisation.

In his early days he gained a knowledge of the condition of the people who lived by tilling the ground, and, as usual, his love of knowledge and facts sent him enquiring into the whole system of land tenure and landlordism. In after years this developed into a firm conviction that there was only one way of relieving the poverty of the labourer on the land and the evils resulting from landlordism, and that was by adopting a guarded system of occupying ownership, with the State as owner. He elaborated his views on this question in his work “Land Nationalisation: Its Necessity and Its Aims,” published in 1882. This led to the establishment of the Land Nationalisation Society, of which he became president. Wallace found,

like the late Cardinal Manning, that “The land question means hunger, thirst, nakedness, notice to quit, labour spent in vain, the toil of years seized upon, the breaking up of homes, the misery, sickness, deaths of parents, children, wives, the despair and wildness which spring up in the hearts of the poor when legal force, like a sharp harrow, goes over the most sensitive and vital rights of mankind. All this is contained in the Land Question.”

The Land Nationalisation Society is not so well understood as it deserves to be. It does not propose in its programme the wholesale confiscation of property, but it is so moderate and practical in all its aims and methods, and such a due regard has been paid to equity, that its proposals might well be introduced into a programme of practical politics. Many, indeed, are in favour of the ends which the society seek without being aware of the fact. The Land Nationalisation Society declares the monopoly of the land to be the great evil of the age, a statement which is pretty generally accepted as true. Their remedy is not to substitute State control for private enterprise, but to set private enterprise free, “by forcing open to use the locked-up resources of the country.” A conference of rural labourers, held in London some time ago, emphasised the fact again that landlordism is divorcing the labourer from the soil, and that sooner or later the problem will have to be faced of getting back the labourer to the land. The Allotments’ and Hiring Clauses of the Parish Councils Act will do something to relieve the difficulty, but it is only touching the fringe of the great question. The Land Nationalisation Society demands that Local Bodies, locally elected, be established throughout the country, with power to take land from time to time on behalf of the State for Small Holdings, in such quantities and situations as the number and kinds of applications for it generally may indicate. The land is to be taken over absolutely and not merely hired, “fair compensation” being given to the landlord, payable in State Bonds, which are transferable. Such land is never to be alienated, but let out in limited areas, with fixity of tenure; right to value of improvements if occupier wishes to retire; at reasonable rents. The Society has made considerable progress during the dozen years of its existence, and it has many of the foremost thinkers of the day in active sympathy with its work. The Society carries on a vigorous propaganda, and issues a large number pamphlets and leaflets yearly.

Alfred Russell Wallace, its president, has done much good work in a multiplicity of directions, and he has not gone altogether without the rewards of the world. In 1868 the Royal Society awarded him its Royal Medal for his many contributions to theoretical and practical zoology; in 1870 he received the Gold Medal of the *Société de Géographié* of Paris; in 1876 he was president of the Biological Section of the British Association; in 1881 he was awarded a Civil List pension of £200 year in recognition of his scientific work; and in the year following the honorary degree of LL.D. was conferred upon him by the University of Dublin. His name as a scientist will ever be linked with that of Darwin, while social reformers will look upon him as the champion by voice and pen of Land Nationalisation and the cause of the poor.

Samuel C. Fox.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2017.