

# The Distmaker

BY KATH PENNAVARIA



**CHARLES SMITH IS A COLLECTOR. AS A KID, HE COLLECTED COINS AND BASEBALL CARDS; TODAY, HE COLLECTS (AMONG OTHER THINGS) COPIES OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED BY ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE, A MAJOR NINETEENTH-CENTURY FIGURE IN THE HISTORY OF BIOLOGY.**

As WKU's Science Librarian since 1995, Smith has spent much of his academic library career reconstructing Wallace's published work in biology and philosophy, and has made over seven-hundred Wallace writings available in HTML full-text. In fact, his collecting efforts on behalf of Wallace's legacy have made him an international leader in the field of Wallace studies.

He first encountered Wallace in 1972, while a senior at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. A few years later, while seeking a master's degree in

biogeography at Indiana University, Smith encountered Wallace again, and this time the connection stuck. "Wallace was the father of biogeography," says Smith, "but I realized that the bibliographic coverage of him was poor. So I started investigating him." Soon Smith was finding a plethora of un-cited and un-indexed articles by Wallace. "Only one bibliography was created after he died, and that had around 400 items. Since I started finding more, the number has risen to 920." So Smith has single-handedly more than doubled the indexed articles published by this early theorist.

Wallace published so much, in fact, that Smith decided early on to exclude unpublished writings and correspondence from his bibliographic work. "You've got to draw the line somewhere," he says. "Wallace published in more than 300

different serial titles — just finding his published work is enough of a challenge." He notes, however, that other researchers have undertaken to find and categorize Wallace's unpublished writings.

For Smith, it is not enough merely to find out the name and bibliographic information about an article. He obtains actual copies and then transcribes everything into digital format. "I've done several hundred articles this way, either entered manually or scanned with OCR [Optical Character Recognition] software." These digitized Wallace articles are freely available at [www.wku.edu/~smithch](http://www.wku.edu/~smithch).

"I put everything that I can online," Smith says, "but I keep finding more stuff. In fact," he adds, "after thirty years of looking, I'm finding things at an accelerated rate." Though this increased rate of discovery seems counter-intuitive, Smith notes that nineteenth-century publications are increasingly becoming available through digitization projects going on throughout the world. He has also continued to refine his search strategies over the years.

To supplement the primary writings, Smith investigates as well what others have written about Wallace, and collects historical information about him at the main Wallace site. A second site, called "The Once and Future Wallace," contains explorations and discussions of Wallace's philosophy. "My goal for all of this is to make Wallace better known," Smith says.

In addition to the web sites, Smith has published four books and



numerous articles, all of which have contributed to bringing Wallace to the attention of modern scholars. "I'm not the only person working on him," Smith notes, "but in terms of pure mass, I am the largest contributor to Wallace scholarship." His research data has been used in biographies of Wallace and many writings on the biological sciences published in the last ten years. "I get about one email a day asking for information or, sometimes, for an interview," he notes.

Recently, Smith received grant money to annotate, edit, and publish the journal Wallace kept on a North American lecture tour he took from 1886 to 1887. Wallace went across the country from Boston to California, giving talks and exploring the land. He didn't make much money at his speaking engagements, but the journal he kept confirms his reputation as a superior field observer, Smith says. "In fact, he may well have been the greatest field naturalist in history."

Wallace also met countless American scientists and other dignitaries on his trip, and noted their names in his journal. For Smith the science historian, the names have been a gold-mine: "The listmaker in me has been clicking into gear," he says laughingly. Right now he has about 125 names of people Wallace met who are in some major biographical reference source. "That's a good enough reason alone for doing something with this," he says.

His defense of Wallace has succeeded in making room for this historical figure in any discussion of major contributors to the science

of evolutionary biology. As is well-known today, as a young man Wallace drew conclusions from his own research which echoed the same thoughts being mulled over by the more mature scientist Charles Darwin after his voyage on the HMS Beagle. In 1858 Wallace wrote

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an essay outlining his ideas about evolution and natural selection, but instead of publishing it, he sent it to Darwin for comment. Darwin, though recognizing that his own original ideas might seem derivative if Wallace's saw publication, nevertheless had the article made public — but then hurriedly brought out his book *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Wallace never seriously sought to gain recognition for himself.

Through his own research, Smith has uncovered a fuller picture of Wallace's interests. In addition to his fascination with evolution and natural selection, says Smith, "Wallace was a vocal spiritualist, and very interested in social problems." Wallace published articles on land planning, legal reform, economics, and (against) eugenics. He was an early advocate of women's voting rights, fair pay for overtime work, and a vegetarian diet. He believed passionately that if women could vote and earn money to support themselves, they would not be forced to marry just for economic reasons.

If they could marry out of free choice alone, he thought, they would more often choose better mates, and society would benefit. Smith notes that Wallace's ideas on this subject have some problems, but his interest is in making Wallace's published work available so a debate can take place about those ideas.

Perhaps by now you think Charles Smith does nothing but think about Alfred Russel Wallace. Nothing could be further from the truth. His research interests have spanned a wide range, and today he maintains a total of eleven research-based web sites. In addition to the two on Wallace, he has five sites focusing on biogeography and natural history, three focusing on music (primarily classical and folk), and one on Australia's exploration history.

But the Wallace work remains a primary focus, and he recently returned from an invited, all-expenses-paid presentation at a Darwin conference held at a Brazilian university. "I was the token Wallace person," he says with a smile. ■

