

On Alfred Russel Wallace

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Alfred Russel Wallace, the courageous and unconventional explorer and naturalist who hit upon the theory of evolution by natural selection independently of Darwin, was a man of extraordinarily diverse pursuits. Naïve, reticent and self-effacing, he has been described as the model for the scientist by Charles Kingsley: “the simplest, pleasantest, honestest, kindest old Dominie Sampson of a giant that ever turned the world upside down without intending it.”

Wallace certainly made big waves in the scientific circles of his day. Yet, equally important, his life and work offer to us a clear mirror in which to behold the image of a beautiful human being--a person who embodied that rare quality we call *jouissance*, a rapt engagement with life, as well as an inspiring confidence that mankind's future will be “glorious.”

Along with his very considerable contributions to various branches of scientific research, such as geography and anthropology, Wallace's co-discovery of the theory of evolution by natural selection should have earned him recognition as one of the nineteenth century's greatest scientists. For a variety of reasons, this did not occur. As Darwin rose to world prominence, Wallace receded into obscurity. It is only in recent years that interest in this remarkable gentleman has been revived, as his

prophetic insights into a number of hotly debated contemporary issues are assuming fresh relevance.

To examine Wallace's status as a scientist, we first need to ask what precisely was meant by 'science' in his own time. Modern historians suggest that whatever counts as 'science' at any given time is invariably the outcome of controversy, competition and negotiations among star players in the 'This is Science' drama of the moment. Because of his modest, non-aristocratic background, Wallace never qualified as a 'star player.'

Circa 1831, when members of the newly established British Association for the Advancement of Science assumed the title of 'scientists', they limited their research within narrowly defined areas of 'material nature', taking care not to trespass into the sacrosanct domain of the theologians. Study of cosmogenesis, or the nature of mind, was quite out of the question.

Outside this 'respectable' scientific forum, many fringe, or 'counter-sciences,' began to emerge. Ironically, the foundations of a number of subsequent scientific theories of merit had their origin in this fringe and 'quite unacceptable' movement.

Against this background, Wallace, the land surveyor and self-educated naturalist with an insatiable appetite for novelty and experimentation, eagerly became involved in the new 'little sciences' such as mesmerism

and phrenology, to which his lifelong belief in unseen ‘forces’ and ‘energies’ could arguably be traced: indubitably, it informed and directed the course of all his later initiatives.

An interesting contradiction in Wallace’s life remains in the fact that along with ideas of ‘unseen forces’, and drawing on an anonymous plebeian publication, he had fervently espoused the concept of evolution, damned as heretical by the Anglican scientific orthodoxy. Unlike Darwin, a discreet ‘closet evolutionist’ long before his *Origin of Species* was published, Wallace was intrepid in disseminating his ideas without regard for consequences to his reputation. Darwin’s expedition on the *Beagle* in 1838 was as a gentleman companion to the captain of the vessel; Wallace sailed to South America in 1848 in search of a ‘theory of the origin of species’.

The face of science had changed dramatically, however, by the time of Wallace’s return to London from the Far East in 1862. Darwin had safely emerged out of his closet; and natural selection had become the gospel of a new breed of avant-garde young scientists. Natural law now was believed to apply to the entirety of existence. Everything, it was thought, was ultimately explicable through purely material processes. The Anglican traditionalists of the old British Association were clearly on the defensive.

As a co-discoverer of ‘the theory’ with Darwin, Wallace joined the ranks of the new scientific elite, though sadly, not for long.

Not only had Wallace espoused natural selection, but he confidently took it further than Darwin dared to, in applying it to 'man' as well. Wallace was not a man of half measures, and that included his radicalism: until, that is, he turned the entire theory on its head and declared that natural selection was operative only up to the emergence of the human mind, after which only 'the higher qualities' determined mankind's progress.

Subsequently, he went further in suggesting that biological evolution alone could not account for certain physical characteristics of human beings.. Pointing out that the brain of a 'savage' was too highly developed for the savage's immediate needs, Wallace proposed that the brain had been designed *prospectively* for advanced civilization, under the guidance of 'Higher Intelligences'.

Such a postulate was clearly anathema to enthusiastic young Darwinians. They were fanatical in their adoption of natural selection, not least because it freed the world from obsolete 'religious superstition'.

Why did Wallace suddenly choose to step outside the boundaries of the Darwinian consensus? We could hark back to his early interests in mesmerism that suggested external, 'supernatural' influences on the brain. Wallace went even further outside the circle by becoming involved in spiritualism - the new Victorian vogue - and, moreover, became utterly convinced that he could prove 'scientifically' the authenticity of a variety

of parlour manifestations of spirits which he had apparently witnessed under 'strictly controlled conditions'.

The scene was soon set for conflict between Wallace and the new radicals, with the fierce young Thomas Huxley as chief protagonist. This was clearly a battle of scientific boundaries, with several warring factions anxious to mark their cherished territories: the Anglicans, whose science opposed natural selection, the Darwinians, whose science *excluded* non-material realities, and Wallace, whose science postulated and *included* the investigation of 'supernatural' phenomena.

The matter was settled in a magistrate's court through the exposure of a fraudulent Yankee medium. Wallace walked out disgraced, never again to be counted among science's 'elect'.

Closing the case on Wallace over a matter of mediumistic dispute would be an affront to a man whose entire life was dedicated to the service of his fellow humans in the most practical of ways. Unburdened by prejudice through the freedom afforded to him by his modest social background, he had easily and eagerly crossed social, cultural and racial boundaries to experience the harsh realities of the underprivileged at first hand. He championed their cause in a variety of campaigns, challenging Victorian materialist and divisive attitudes, thus incurring bitter enmities among parties whose interests were threatened by his philosophy.

A fitting tribute for this great man is offered by Peter Raby: “There is, finally, something heroic about a man who independently constructs a theory of natural selection, which can be written, in its simplest form, as the accidental survival of the fittest, and spends the rest of his life proclaiming the ideals of co-operation and altruism as the way to hasten the perfecting of the human.”

The enigma of Wallace’s life may never be solved; yet his was a life well lived.

