

WALLACE, ALFRED RUSSEL (1823-1913), naturalist and social reformer

Name: Alfred Russel Wallace
Date of birth: 1823
Date of death: 1913
Spouse: Annie Wallace (née Mitten)
Parent: Thomas Vere Wallace
Parent: Mary Anne Wallace (née Greenell)
Gender: Male
Occupation: naturalist and social reformer
Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Science and Mathematics
Author: Richard Elwyn Hughes

Born 8 January, 1823, Kensington Cottage, Usk, Gwent, son of Thomas Vere Wallace and Mary Anne (n. Greenell). When Wallace was three years old the family moved to England where the young Alfred Russel attended school at Hertford. Aged 13 he moved to live with his brother John in London. Some years later he moved to live with his other brother, William, who was already established as a land surveyor. The intention was for Wallace also to become a surveyor. By 1839 the two brothers were at work in Radnorshire, in the Rhaeadr area and then for a short period in Brecknockshire before moving in 1841 to Neath in Glamorganshire. During his period in Radnorshire Wallace produced his first substantial writing 'The best method of conducting the Kington Mechanics' Institution' which was published five years later in *History of Kington* (Richard Parry, 1845). At this stage Wallace started learning Welsh, attending services in local chapels and lodging with Welsh-speaking families.

During his period in the Neath area Wallace's first serious interest in natural history emerged. He studied botany, was appointed joint-curator of the local museum and when a Mechanics' Institute was established in Neath he delivered there lectures in elementary physics. He frequented the nearby Royal Institution at Swansea where there were discussions on topics such as Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of creation*. Whilst there he formulated his theory of evolution, identical with that being developed by Darwin but independent of him. To ensure that Darwin would suffer no loss of priority in the 'evolutionary race' two of Darwin's influential friends (Hooker and Lyell) arranged for the two versions to be presented at the same meeting of the Linnean Society (on July 1 1858).

In 1848, accompanied by his fellow-naturalist Henry Walter Bates, Wallace set out for South America. His four years there resulted in the publication of two significant works - *Palm trees of the Amazon and their uses* (1853) (now an extremely rare book) and *A narrative of travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro* (1853). Wallace spent the period 1854 to 1862 in the Far East in the Malay Archipelago. Whilst there he formulated his theory of evolution, identical with that being developed by Darwin but independent of him. To ensure that Darwin would suffer no loss of priority in the 'evolutionary race' two of Darwin's influential friends (Hooker and Lyell) arranged for the two versions to be presented at the same meeting of the Linnean Society (on July 1 1858).

Wallace's other important contribution to biology was his biogeographical work as summarised in his two books, *The geographical distribution of animals* (1876) and *Island Life* (1880). He is sometimes referred to as the 'father of biogeography' and 'Wallace's Line' - the imaginary line described by Wallace to separate 'Australian' species from 'Asiatic' ones is a permanent record of his achievements in this field.

In the second half of his life Wallace's biological interests were, in part, supplanted by social and 'non scientific' ones. He surprised his fellow-scientists by embracing beliefs that were, to the scientific establishment unacceptable or even absurd - socialism, phrenology, spiritualism, antivaccination, anti-militarism and others. He was particularly supportive of the Land Nationalisation Society and for a period presided over its activities. His belief that a Hidden Power presided over the evolutionary process, although consistent with some of his other non-secular beliefs, brought him into mild conflict with Darwin.

A prolific writer, Wallace produced 22 books and over 700 other publications, articles, letters etc. Nevertheless, he failed to secure a permanent appointment of any substance throughout his long life and was forced to depend upon selling biological specimens, lecturing and marking examination papers to obtain a maintenance income. Throughout his life Darwin held Wallace in high respect and it was he who was mainly responsible for persuading the Government to award a small pension to Wallace. His penchant for unorthodox beliefs was probably one reason why Wallace was not elected an FRS until 1893. However, he tended to discount the importance of academic and other awards and from 1889 (when he was awarded an Oxford DCL - he had received an honorary LID from Liverpool in 1882 -) onwards declined all such honours extended by universities, including the offer of an honorary degree from the University of Wales. But he received many medals from various learned societies between 1868 and 1908, and he agreed to accept the award of the OM in 1910, commenting that it was surprising that a 'red-hot Radical, Land Nationaliser, Socialist, Anti-Militant etc' should be so honoured.

His autobiography (*My Life*) published in 1905 reveals the permanency of his Welsh links. He wrote of the virtues of the Welsh language and culture, quoting at length remembered extracts from the *Welsh Bible*. He indicated his support for Welsh Home Rule and favoured the teaching of scientific topics through the medium of Welsh. A few weeks before his death, his physical weakness prompted him to write to the family at Bryn Coch, Neath (the farm where he had lodged sixty years previously), requesting samples of 'sucasn blawd' and 'bara maen' in the hope that traditional Welsh foods would restore him to his customary health.

He married, in 1866, Annie Mitten, the young daughter of his friend William Mitten the bryologist. He died on 7 November 1913 at Broadstone, Dorset. The scientific journal *Nature* referred to 'the death of one of the century's most distinguished biologists' - a judgement which few today would challenge. Wallace was buried locally in Broadstone rather than in Westminster Abbey, and this, according to his widow, in conformity with his own wishes.

Author

Richard Elwyn Hughes

Sources

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Charles H. Smith, *Alfred Russell Wallace an anthology of his shorter writings* (Oxford 1991)

His letters in the British Library and the library of the Linnean Society

Charles H. Smith, account in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

H.Lewis McKinney, account in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York 1976), New York, 1976

Further Reading

Ted Benton, *Alfred Russel Wallace* (Manchester 2013)

[The Alfred Russel Wallace Correspondence Project](#)

NHM: [Wallace Letters Online](#)

[Darwin Correspondence Project: Alfred Russel Wallace](#)

[Wikipedia Article: Alfred Russel Wallace](#)

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