

The New Criterion

Books

November 2001

A folklorish giant

by [Guy Davenport](#)

Alfred Russel Wallace, heroic naturalist, anthropologist, and evolutionary theorist, began his ninety years in a Welsh cottage as so unpromising a new-born that the family performed a make-do “half-baptism” until the vicar could do a proper one at Llanbadoc five weeks later, on 16 February 1823. He went through his life being the short half of great enterprises. He and Darwin discovered the mechanics of evolution neck-and-neck. He and Henry Walter Bates explored the Amazon together, but Bates’s *Naturalist on the River Amazons* remains the classic account. In the great foment of Victorian geology, etymology, and botany he was—until his last decade—looked down on as the lower-class boy from the Welsh hills who didn’t quite fit in with the gentlemen at the Royal Society.

Wallace was also accident prone. All in one day in the Brazilian jungle he infuriated a swarm of bees, lost his glasses, and mistook a live alligator for a dead one. The ship bringing him and his specimens to England, a veritable natural history museum in hundreds of crates and cages, caught fire and sank. The crew escaped in an open long boat. Wallace swore an oath that he would never set foot on a ship again. Almost immediately, however, he set out for the Malay Straits where from 1854 to 1862 he endured the bone-wracking adventures recounted in his most readable book, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-utan and the Bird of Paradise: A Narrative of Travel with Studies of Man and Nature* (1869).

Dover, the most intelligent and educated of American publishers, keeps this book in print. I hope they will add Wallace’s *Island Life* and his epochal *The Geographical Distribution of Animals, with a Study of the Relations of Living and Extinct Faunas as Elucidating the Past Changes of the Earth’s Surface* (1876); they serve as a kind of Brahms’s First to the Beethoven’s Ninth of Darwin’s *Origin and Descent*. “Wallace’s Line” still snakes across maps of Southeast Asia in zoology texts: *these* animals (e.g., tigers) above it; *these* (e.g., kangaroos) below it.

Except for the young Wallace’s reading every book he could lay hand on, he had only a spotty primary education. His older brother John taught him surveying, an activity that was an education in itself. Moreover it made him curious about geology and botany. At age fourteen he was probably more knowledgeable than a Harvard or Yale senior of the moment. It was books of travel (von Humboldt, Bonpland) that made an explorer of him. A shilling pamphlet published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge led him to John Claudius Loudon’s *Encyclopedia of Plants* and set him on his way to being one of the world’s greatest botanists. Genius invents itself. Mungo Park educated himself as a child while pushing the arm of a grist mill, holding a book open with his thumbs, around and around. Hugh Miller, disgusted by his third-grade teacher, took his cap from its peg, and walked out, never to return.

Wallace published twenty-two “major works” and countless scientific, political, and batty articles (he became a spiritualist during the latter half of his life, an eager customer of mediums, table-floaters, and alphabetic rappers). In 1866 he married the twenty-two-year-old daughter of the pharmacist William Mitten. In his autobiography, he says that she was eighteen (Victorian maidens fibbed). The marriage was a happy one of Alpine botanizing, Ice Age geology, children, socialist idealism, and building house after house, each planned as the perfect home (paradigmatic orchards, gardens, beautiful rooms) and each abandoned every few years for a better one.

Wallace became a Shavian stereotype, with a Shavian bouquet of causes: anti-vaccination, anti-exotic-bird-feathers in women’s hats, anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism. He travelled (crossing the United States by stagecoach and train), theorized (“Language is all onomatopoeics”), and embarrassed Darwin by perceiving a guiding intelligence in nature (i.e., God). The more crotchety he became, the more the scientific community rained honors on his head, from medals (Linnaean Society, Royal Society) to the Order of Merit (for which he ducked the investiture at Buckingham Palace, refusing to don court dress—the king’s equerry brought it to him). He lectured on land reform, government ownership of railways, workers’ rights, moral progress through democracy. The English adore and honor eighty-year-old eccentrics, the more crackpot the better.

Despite his consistent refusal to be the co-discoverer of the theory of Natural Selection, the Linnaean Society has always accorded him that honor (and in 1998 hung a full-length portrait of him beside one of Darwin). Last year (15 April 2000) Wallace’s grave at Bournemouth became a lease *in perpetuum* to the Linnaean Society, and Wallace’s great-great-grandson set a spray of flowers on it.

There have been many previous biographers of Wallace, and among historians of science there is the ongoing debate as to whether evolution is Wallace’s or Darwin’s discovery. This amounts to something of a parlor game. It is well known that Darwin was not planning to rush into print with his theory when, out of the blue, came a letter from Wallace succinctly outlining the theory. Darwin was appalled. He asked his colleagues for guidance and advice. The ethical thing to do, everyone agreed, was to present the theory to the Linnaean Society (on 1 July 1858) as by the two. Neither was present: Darwin was at the funeral of an infant son; Wallace was in Malaysia.

In an age of white-coated, grant-seeking scientists secure in foundations and universities, their Victorian forebears look like folklorish giants. Peter Raby’s life of Wallace catches the charm, daring, and high seriousness of the age, while scrupulously measuring Wallace’s distinction as a man and a scientist.

Guy Davenport

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 20 November 2001, on page 79

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/A-folklorish-giant-2108>