

Rediscovering Wallace

By Peder Anker

Peter Raby, *Alfred Russel Wallace: A Life*.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
Pp. xi + 349. US\$26.95 HB.

Alfred Russel Wallace,
The Alfred Russel Wallace Reader. Jane R. Camerini (ed.)
and David Quammen (forward). Baltimore:
John Hopkins University Press, 2002.
Pp. xix + 220. US\$18.95 PB.

Among historians of science, Alfred Russel Wallace has long suffered from neglect. He is often portrayed as the natural historian who, apparently out of the blue, wrote an essay about natural selection which shocked Charles Darwin into publishing his revolutionary views. The circumstances which brought Wallace to his theories, and his subsequent life as a scientist in the shadow of Darwin, have largely been ignored. The newly available biography and collection of some of his writings are excellent contributions to a more balanced view on the history of evolutionary biology.

Peter Raby is widely known for his former biographies of Harriet Smithson Berlioz, Oscar Wilde, and Samuel Butler, among others. The result, as in his earlier works, is both solid in terms of evidence and lively in terms of style. He has chosen a heroic portrait of Wallace whose achievements he considers as “spectacular” due to “an astonishing intellectual odyssey” (pp. 2–3). That Wallace was an amazing scholar and personality seems to be the chief intellectual argument of the book, which aims at putting him at the centre stage of nineteenth-century scientific debates. Between the lines one can read a critique arguing that leading historians of the Darwinian revolution, such as Adrian Desmond and James More, should have paid more attention and tribute to the importance of Wallace. Raby sets forth to rescue him from oblivion.

The narrative follows Wallace’s life from birth to death. It is a moving story of how a schoolboy from needy background became interested in

REVIEWS

natural history and managed to train himself in the field. The point of departure is his keen interest in beetles, though Raby quickly points out that Wallace also kept his eyes on more elevated matters such as Thomas Malthus's famous *Essay on the Principle of Population*. The historian Robert Young, among others, has argued that Darwin used Malthus's theory of human population dynamics as a metaphor for his general theory of natural selection. The struggle for existence in nature can, according to this view, be understood as a "bitter satire" (as Engels once put it) about British celebration of economic free trade. Raby provides the reader with two key quotations in support of the argument that Wallace (like Darwin) based his theory of natural selection on Malthus's economic interpretation of British society (pp. 21 and 131). Yet unlike Young's analysis of Darwin, he is not arguing that Wallace's social milieu, class, and views on society played an important role in the formulation of his theoretical work. Instead, he follows Janet Browne (the author of *Voyaging*, Princeton, 1996), and points to the crucial importance of Wallace's expeditions to the forests of Brazil and Indonesia. It was in researching these jungles that Wallace—after calling to mind the work of Malthus—formulated his version of the natural selection theory.

Upon receiving Wallace's essay, Darwin was shocked to see what he regarded as his theory formulated by a stranger. Two weeks after he received the paper in the mail, he presented his own views along with the Wallace piece in London. In discussing this important event, Raby could have used a richer sociology of knowledge to address the issue of why the Wallace and Darwin publications did not result in a priority dispute. That Wallace later referred to the theory of natural selection as *Darwinism* (the title of his book of 1889) may be for reasons beyond his "heroic . . . ideals of co-operation and altruism" in scientific debates (p. 294).

The last part of Raby's book provides insight as to why Wallace sought to disentangle his name from sighting the theory of natural selection. That beetles struggle for existence in the survival of the fittest was unproblematic to Wallace, but he was not willing to jump to the conclusion that humans do the same. As Darwin and Thomas Huxley moved on to explain human history and behaviour from the point of view of evolutionary theory, Wallace sought to spare the mind from such biological reductionism. Raby does an excellent job explaining how and why Wallace's beliefs in spiritualism and socialism conflicted with the views of Darwin and his followers. In the midst of heated and highly visible debates on human dissent, he sought to develop a middle-path theory which explained everything but the human mind in terms of evolution. His research on spiritualism—which raised eyebrows and damaged his reputation in the Darwinian camp—was an attempt to save both the social realm from economic *laissez-faire* and the human mind from biology.

REVIEWS

Jane Camerini has assembled a well-selected collection of Wallace material into a reader which serves as a perfect companion to Raby's book. It includes sections from Wallace's autobiography, his books about his Amazon and Malayan voyages, his theory of natural selection, as well as some of his writings on spiritualism, human evolution and political views. The volume also includes some remembrances of Wallace's children. Camerini has written short and pointed introductions to these writings, placing them in their proper historical and scientific context.

These two volumes are important contributions to current research on the history of evolutionary theory. It will be hard from now on to overlook Wallace in the ever-growing field of Darwinian studies.

Centre for Development and the Environment,
University of Oslo,
Boks 1116 Blindern,
0317 Oslo, Norway.

A Plea for an 'Open Geoscience'

By Bernhard Fritscher

A. M. Celâl Sengör, *Is the Present the Key to the Past or is the Past the Key to the Present? James Hutton and Adam Smith versus Abraham Gottlob Werner and Karl Marx in Interpreting History*. Boulder: Geological Society of America, Special Paper No. 355, 2001. pp. x + 51.
US\$40.95 PB.

Professor Sengör's book is inspired by Karl Popper's concept of an 'open society' and his model of the growth of scientific knowledge by the formulation and falsification of hypotheses. Thus, the main purpose of the book is to show that: