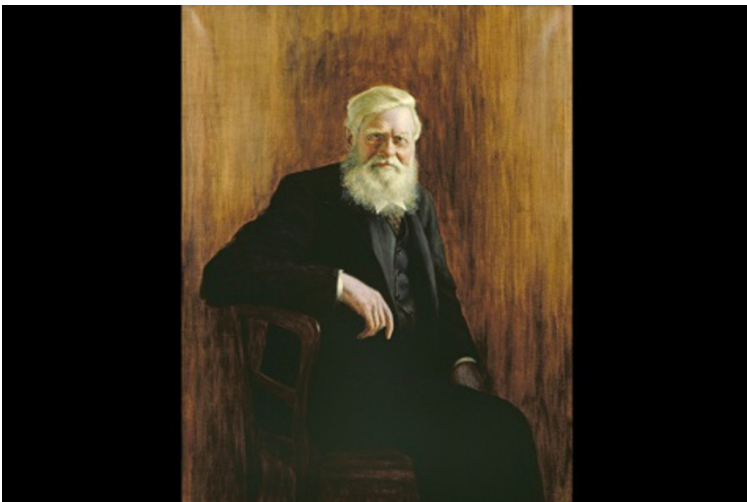


Letters of Alfred Russel Wallace go online

Near-complete archive allows overlooked naturalist to emerge from Darwin's shadow.

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This portrait of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) was painted in 1923 by J. W. Beaufort. The Natural History Museum in London took it out of storage and unveiled it on 24 January to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the great naturalist's death.

Natural History Museum

Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace are credited for co-discovering evolution by natural selection in early 1858. But on one morning back in the summer of 1852, as Wallace had just finished his breakfast, evolution nearly went up in smoke.

Wallace was on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, relaxing in his cabin, when the captain strolled in and announced, perhaps too calmly: "I am afraid the ship's on fire. Come and see what you think of it."

Within a few hours, the vessel was on its side, engulfed in flames. Sitting in a small lifeboat 1,100 kilometres from land, with minimal supplies, Wallace almost fell victim to the very process he would later uncover — what we would today call survival of the fittest.

Thankfully, after ten days, Wallace was rescued by the *Jordeson*, a brig running between the West Indies and London. On arriving back home, he was overjoyed, writing to a friend: "Oh! Glorious day! ... Beef steaks and damson tart, a paradise for hungry sinners."

This episode is just one of many to emerge from [Wallace Letters Online](#), launched today on the website of the Natural History Museum in London. It is a project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation based in New York city to track down and digitize Wallace's correspondence.

So far, the open-access database contains nearly 4,000 letters sent to and from the famous naturalist, or about 95% of his known surviving correspondence. The database is fully searchable and includes transcripts as well as scans of many of the letters. The launch of this database is part of [Wallace100](#), a series of events celebrating Wallace's life and work during the centenary of his death.

Darwin is so strongly associated with natural selection that Wallace is sometimes forgotten. However, with the launch of this database, scientists and historians can better understand the personal and scientific relationship between these two men. "This is the first time that all of the Darwin and Wallace correspondence has been published in full," says George Beccaloni, director of the project.

Shortly after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, scientific debate turned to the problem of animal coloration: could natural selection explain the bright pigments observed in so many species? "It was the test case of the new theory," says Beccaloni.

Letters in the database address this, as well as topics as diverse as biogeography, socialism and phrenology. Currently, 60% of the letters have viewable images and 36% have transcripts. Over the next three years, the Natural History Museum intends to complete the transcripts, hiring two professional historians to produce scholarly annotations. "The hope is that Wallace Letters Online will lead to a renaissance in research about Wallace," says Beccaloni.

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