

Of heretics and heroes

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The Heretic in Darwin's Court: The Life of Alfred Russel Wallace
by Ross A. Slotten
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Long ago and far away, there lived a humble collector of birds and insects who, during a bout of malaria, had a flash of insight that helped to change the world. That man was Alfred Russel Wallace

(1823–1913), and the insight was the nature of the force for biological change known as natural selection. Excited by his discovery, he dashed off an essay on the idea and sent it to a man he hardly knew, Charles Darwin, who he hoped might think it worthy of forwarding to a then even more prominent naturalist, the geologist Charles Lyell, who Wallace felt might find the subject interesting. Little did he know that Darwin had entertained similar ideas for some 20 years, although he had not yet put his thoughts in print. Darwin was dumbstruck: a major threat to his priority now loomed. He appealed to Lyell and another of his naturalist friends, the botanist Joseph Hooker, for advice on what to do. They intervened on his behalf, attaching a couple of Darwin's unpublished descriptions of natural selection to Wallace's manuscript, and presented the lot at the next meeting of the Linnean Society of London, UK, on 1 July 1858.

The story of Wallace's subsequent upstaging has been complicated by unproven claims of intellectual theft on the part of Darwin and his circle by conspiracy theorists, but all can agree that Darwin clearly got the better end of this bargain in a historical sense. In recent years, however, Wallace has been slowly emerging from the shadows. What people have discovered is a man with an intellect and creative impulse quite the equal of Darwin's; furthermore, his personal story is more involving, and his commitments were of wider range and

greater interest, than those of the more famous man. More interesting still, Wallace has been so neglected over the years that no one can yet state with any confidence just how his world-view evolved, fits together, or even remains applicable to current directions of study in the several fields to which he gave his attention. Natural selection aside, Wallace has also been recognized as the 'father' of modern biogeography, perhaps history's greatest field biologist and all-round tropical regions naturalist (and thus a key figure in the history of biodiversity studies), and one of the first important astrobiologists. In addition, he made important and significant contributions to at least a dozen other fields of knowledge.

Ross Slotten's biography, *The Heretic in Darwin's Court: The Life of Alfred Russel Wallace*, touches on most of these matters, on the whole quite successfully. Slotten is a true-blue Wallace enthusiast who has personally visited many of the same places that Wallace visited, and is authentic in his historical recreations. Furthermore, he is both a good writer and, although an amateur investigator, turns out to be a fair researcher, having delved into many primary sources, especially correspondence, that bear on his subject. The most valuable service he has provided is the way in which he dwells on Wallace's activities over the lengthy period of his life—more than 55 years—after his discovery of natural selection in 1858. It is abundantly clear from the large portion of the book (nearly two-thirds) that is devoted to this period that Wallace's work was far from over when he stepped off the ship that returned him to English soil in 1862.

As good as the book is in most other respects, however, a biography of Wallace that does not focus on his intellectual compass—the main driving force for all these involvements—cannot be more than a Wallace diorama, which is pretty much what we have here. Slotten is able to shed precious little light, unfortunately, on what it was that made Wallace tick. He even distracts readers from appreciating this matter by supplying 'poor Wallace' chapter titles such as 'Origins of a heretic', 'The Olympian heights and the beginning of the fall' and 'The descent of Wallace', which perpetuate a view of the man as someone we should in the first instance feel sorry for, instead of examining more carefully.

The degree to which this is a problem can best be viewed in Slotten's treatment of the period of Wallace's adoption of

spiritualism (*circa* 1864–1867), which is wholly inadequate. He advances the idea that Wallace's conversion was precipitated in the immediate sense by simple emotional stress brought on by the break-off of his engagement in October 1864. Had Slotten more rigorously investigated the pattern of Wallace's intellectual and professional social involvements during this period instead of relying on dubious inferences derived from personal letters, he would have discovered that not only do none of the chronologies of events make any sense with this hypothesis, but that Wallace had concurrently produced a series of writings that suggest his thought process was already moving inexorably in that direction throughout the 1864–1865 period. Also, there is no evidence that Wallace ever involved himself with any religious or social institutions that were connected to spiritualism, which one would anticipate had he converted for reasons of seeking solace.

Slotten also errs in his chronology of events surrounding Wallace's first writings on spiritualism, in 1866, and his attempts to communicate them to his circle of friends and acquaintances. Furthermore, he appears to believe that Wallace's conversion, beginning around July 1865, took place all at once. The evidence clearly indicates otherwise; certainly, it was in July 1865 that he started his serious investigation into spiritualism, but it was not until late 1866 that he became a full believer, and even then he waited a couple of years for the right opportunity to fully express his views.

It has often been suggested that Wallace's spiritualism was the main cause of his breach with Darwin over certain elements of the evolution of humankind, but it is more consistent with the facts that Wallace's thought processes had been moving in this direction long before he even came to recognize the principle of natural selection. It will be necessary to do a good deal more investigation into the details of Wallace's life to clear up this matter once and for all, but *The Heretic in Darwin's Court* can, at the very least, be viewed as doing a largely excellent job of profiling the man's life in a way that sets the stage for such efforts.

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