

Biography of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913)

A British naturalist and explorer, Alfred Russel Wallace (January 8, 1823 to November 7, 1913) is most remembered as co-originator with Charles Darwin of the natural selection theory of evolution. It was on July 1, 1858 that the joint Darwin-Wallace paper was read to The Linnean Society of London, a forum for discussions on genetics, natural history, systematics, biology, and the history of plant and animal taxonomy.

Wallace's conclusions concerning natural selection were arrived at independently of Darwin after years of travel in wilderness areas, including the Amazon and the Malay Archipelago. During 1855, he wrote an essay, *On the Law Which Has Regulated the Introduction of New Species*, which, in effect, stated a belief in evolution. That paper came to Darwin's attention, but he apparently gave it little heed. However, sometime shortly thereafter, Wallace began corresponding with Darwin. Then, in February 1858, while suffering from malaria on a remote island in Indonesia, Wallace linked up some ideas of Thomas Malthus on the limits of population growth with his observations on organic change. He put his ideas into an essay and sent them off to Darwin, asking him to share them with others in the field and to provide feedback.

As the story goes, Darwin saw Wallace as a threat to his preeminence in the field and immediately discussed the dilemma with two close friends, both of whom encouraged the presentation of Wallace's essay along with some of Darwin's writings at that July 1 meeting of the Linnean Society. Wallace did not learn of the presentation until after the fact.

According to one biographer, by the turn of the century, Wallace was very likely Britain's

best known naturalist and one of the world's most recognized names, as he lectured extensively on *Darwinism*. He was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Dublin (LL.D) and Oxford University (D.C.L.).



Perhaps the reason that Darwin is much more remembered than Wallace is that the whole concept of biological evolution was brought to the general public's attention the following year, 1859, by a book, *On the Origin of Species*, authored solely by Darwin. But a contributing factor may be that Wallace was generally thought to have undergone a "change of mind" during the 1860s relative to some of the ideas he shared with Darwin. It was during that decade that Wallace became interested in a fairly new quasi-religious movement called Spiritualism, which was based on communication purportedly from the spirit world transmitted through human sensitives called mediums. It was a philosophy that clearly seemed to conflict with that of materialism, the emerging "enlightened" philosophy of the scientists and scholars of the day.

"I am well aware that my scientific friends are somewhat puzzled to account for what they consider to be my delusion, and believe that it has injuriously affected whatever power I may have once possessed of dealing with the philosophy of Natural History," Wallace wrote, going on to say that his views on Spiritualism were in no way inconsistent with "a thorough acceptance of the grand doctrine of Evolution, through natural selection..."¹

Wallace became interested in psychic phenomena around 1843 when he first heard of mesmerism (hypnotism) and its application to painless surgery. After attending a lecture on the subject, he experimented with it and found that he could mesmerize others with varying degrees of success. "I thus learnt my first great lesson in the inquiry into these obscure fields of knowledge, never to accept the disbelief of great men, or their accusations of imposture or of imbecility, as of any weight when opposed to the repeated observation of facts by other men admittedly sane and honest," Wallace wrote.²

It was in September 1865, some 17 years after the "craze" began in a small village outside Rochester, New York, that Wallace was introduced to mediumship. After being told by a friend of his having witnessed wonderful phenomena, Wallace decided to investigate. "...I began a series of visits to Mrs. Marshall, generally accompanied by a friend – a good chemist and mechanic, and of a thoroughly skeptical mind. What we witnessed may be divided into two classes of phenomena – physical and mental. Both were very numerous and varied..."³ He went on to describe a table levitation and a floating guitar, both witnessed in bright gaslight, and, in bright daylight, the levitation of a person sitting in a chair, three times, after which the chair became fixed to the floor. Wallace stressed the fact that he closely inspected the room and furniture beforehand and that there was no possibility of trick or deception.

He also witnessed impressive evidential communication, with names, places, and dates being spelled out with accuracy. A popular theory at the time was that the communicating raps were being produced by the cracking of joints in some part of the medium's body, but Wallace marveled at the credulity of those who accepted such an "absurd and inadequate" explanation, challenging the skeptic to find someone capable of making such raps while also providing evidential information.

Wallace further witnessed apports with a Miss Nichol. "Often flowers or fruits asked for are brought," he wrote. "A friend of mine asked for a sunflower, and one six feet high fell upon the table, having a large mass of earth about its roots."⁴

Communicating through a medium, Mrs. Guppy, Wallace's mother told him that she would appear on a photographic plate if she could. On March 14, 1874, Wallace went to a professional photographer with Mrs. Guppy. Three photographs were taken. "The third plate exhibited a female figure standing close in front of me, so that the drapery covers the lower part of my body," Wallace recorded. "I saw all the plates developed, and in each case the additional figure started out the moment the developing fluid was poured on, while my portrait did not become visible till, perhaps, twenty seconds later. I recognized none of these figures in the negatives; but the moment I got the proofs, the first glance showed me that the third contained an unmistakable portrait of my mother – like her both in features and expression; not such a likeness as a portrait taken during life, but a somewhat pensive, idealized likeness – yet still, to me, an unmistakable likeness."⁵

Trickery was not possible in this case, Wallace concluded. For one, Mrs. Guppy was a personal friend and he was certain that she would not engage in such foolishness. "Even if [the photographer] had by some means obtained possession of all the photographs ever taken of my mother, they would not have been of the slightest

use to him in the manufacture of these pictures," Wallace wrote. "I see no escape from the conclusion that some spiritual being, acquainted with my mother's various aspects during life, produced these recognizable impressions on the plate. That she herself still lives and produced these figures may not be proved; but it is a more simple and natural explanation to think that she did so, than to suppose that we are surrounded by beings who carry out an elaborate series of impostures for no other apparent purpose than to dupe us into a belief in a continued existence after death."⁶

Wallace also challenged the popular theory that the medium's "secondary personality" was posing as a spirit control. "But is this so-called explanation any real explanation, or anything more than a juggle of words which creates more difficulties than it solves?" he asked. "The conception of such a double personality in each of us, a second-self, which in most cases remains unknown to us all our lives, which is said to live an independent mental life, to have means of acquiring knowledge our normal self does not possess, to exhibit all the characteristics of a distinct individuality with a different character from our own, is surely a conception more ponderously difficult, more truly supernatural than that of a spirit world, composed of beings who have lived, and learned, and suffered on earth, and whose mental nature still subsists after its separation from the earthly body. On the second-self theory, we have to suppose that this recondite but worsen half of ourselves, while possessing some knowledge we have not, does not know that it is part of us, or, if it knows, is a persistent liar, for in most cases it adopts a distinct name, and persists in speaking of us, its better half, in the third person."⁷

Wallace studied many other mediums, including D. D. Home, whom he observed at the house of William Crookes, the famous chemist and physicist. He came to the conclusion that there were genuine mediums and that spirits

were communicating through them. "My position, therefore, is that the phenomena of Spiritualism in their entirety do not require further confirmation," he offered. "They are proved quite as well as any facts are proved in other sciences."⁸

Wallace traveled around the world lecturing on both Darwinism and Spiritualism, seeing no conflict between the two. "Considerable acquaintance with the history and literature of [Spiritualism] – in which I have myself taken part for twenty years – has failed to show me one single case in which any man who, after careful inquiry, has become convinced of the truth and reality of the spiritual phenomena, has afterwards discredited it or regarded it as a base imposture or delusion," he stated in a lecture in San Francisco during 1887.⁹ He went on to say that the phenomena of Spiritualism were produced under the action of the general laws which determine the inter-relations of the spiritual and material worlds, and are therefore in accord with natural law.



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¹ Wallace, Alfred Russel, *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*, George Redway, London, 1896, p. vi.

² _____, p. x.

³ _____, p. 135.

⁴ _____, p. 171.

⁵ _____, p. 197.

⁶ _____, p. 198.

⁷ _____, p. 262.

⁸ _____, p. 211 .

⁹ Smith, Charles,
<http://www.wku.edu/~smithch/index1.htm>.