

Foreword

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Alfred Russel Wallace is often depicted as a “forgotten” figure—although he has been rediscovered many times by authors who have contrived to ignore their predecessors’ efforts. He is known to the general public, if at all, as the co-discoverer of natural selection, and several biographers have used this point as a means of trying to undermine Darwin’s reputation, suggesting that Wallace was deliberately marginalized by Darwin’s supporters and by the scientific elite. Despite his achievements in science Wallace is often portrayed as an outsider, someone devoted to eccentric ideas and beliefs including spiritualism, an opposition to vaccination, and a then deeply unfashionable support of socialism. Yet these views should not be dismissed as mere eccentricities. They link Wallace to a broader current of opposition to the materialism of mainstream Victorian culture which is now increasingly acknowledged by historians. His accounts of his expeditions to South America and the Far East were widely praised at the time and still appeal to modern travel writers. Like his political and philosophical works, they reveal his remarkable humanity as well as his love of nature.

Providing alternatives to the triumphalist story of Darwinism is laudable enough in this age of obsessive celebrity-worship, but Wallace deserves better than the routine use of his name by iconoclasts seeking to undermine Darwin’s position in the pantheon of science. He deserves our attention for two very different reasons. First, he made major contributions to evolutionary biology, probing the logic of the Darwinian theory and extending the range of its applications in areas such as the explanation of the geographical distribution of species and the evolution of animal coloration. Second, he can be seen, not as an outsider, but as an original thinker who questioned many of the assumptions on which the ideologies of Victorian progressionism and scientific naturalism were based. His apparent eccentricities followed from his efforts to create an alternative philosophy of life, and we owe it to him to rediscover the core of his vision. This book will go a long way to providing the sympathetic but sophisticated reassessment of his life we so badly need.

In science, Wallace became one of Darwin’s staunchest supporters—yet also one of the few who could be trusted to understand and evaluate the theory’s structure and implications. He differed from Darwin on several key issues, never accepting the analogy between artificial and natural selection, and remaining suspicious of the extension of the model into the area of sexual selection. Even here, their

debates helped both of them to refine their thinking, while in other areas Wallace's knowledge of distribution and the complexities of adaptation allowed him to explore the theory in ways which considerably extended its range. His work on animal coloration and on geographical speciation was of major significance to the debate. Equally significant was the project which led to the publication of his two-volume survey *The Geographical Distribution of Animals* in 1876. Here Wallace did, for once, interact with the scientific community in a coordinated way as he gathered information on the distribution of species. And this book, along with his *Island Life*, seems to have triggered an explosion of research into historical biogeography in the later nineteenth century.

Outside of science—yet in many ways there is no separation—we are beginning to see how Wallace's so-called eccentricities fitted together to make a coherent philosophy of life. His much commented-on rejection of the material origins of the human mind, linked to his growing enthusiasm for spiritualism, identify him with a major strand of Victorian thought which resisted the rise of scientific naturalism. His socialism—along with his various other campaigns on social issues—marks him out also as a member of a small but ultimately influential body of opinion critical of the rush into free-enterprise capitalism. Here was a man who saw the world as a whole with a spiritual purpose, and for all his endorsement of natural selection we should remember that his last book, *The World of Life* of 1911, depicted the whole sweep of evolution as the unfolding of a divine plan. This book explores many aspects of Wallace's work, including his views on the possibility of extraterrestrial life, and his adventures into a wide range of cultural and social debates ranging from spiritualism to land nationalization. It reveals that behind the apparent diversity lies a unified world view, a view with which many will want to sympathize.