

ALFRED RUSSEL
WALLACE

A REDISCOVERED LIFE

MICHAEL A. FLANNERY

Description

Alfred Russel Wallace: A Rediscovered Life is a new biography of the co-discoverer of the theory of evolution by natural selection and one of the nineteenth century's most intriguing scientists. Its provocative thesis is that Wallace, in developing his unique brand of evolution, presaged modern intelligent design theory. Wallace's devotion to discovering the truths of nature brought him through a lifetime of research to see genuine design in the natural world. This was Wallace's ultimate heresy, a heresy that exposed the metaphysical underpinnings of the emerging Darwinian paradigm. Biographer Michael A. Flannery is Professor and Associate Director for Historical Collections at the Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and editor of *Alfred Russel Wallace's Theory of Intelligent Evolution* (2008).

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NEW THOUGHTS ON EVOLUTION

*BEING THE VIEWS OF DR. ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE, O.M., F.R.S.
AS GATHERED IN AN INTERVIEW BY HAROLD BEGBIE. REPRINTED FROM
"THE DAILY CHRONICLE" BY KIND PERMISSION OF AUTHOR AND EDITOR,
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by Harold Begbie with Alfred Russel Wallace

Introduction by Michael Flannery

This interview presents one of the clearest representations of Wallace's mature thought on the origin of life, evolutionary biology, and cosmology. Replete with suggestions of a designed and guided universe, Wallace's exchange with Begbie is at once a bold declaration for intelligent evolution and a scathing indictment of materialism.

I.

ON THE beautiful and lonely road between Poole Harbour and Broadstone, a matter of three miles, I passed at different times eight or nine tramps the sorriest and most depressing specimens of the human race imaginable; some men, some women, two of them the merest boys.

At the end of my journey I found Professor Alfred Russel Wallace in his study, surrounded by all the pleasant signs of a scholar's ceaseless activity. He is 87 years of age. His eyes shine with intelligence, his movements are quick and active, there is vigour, force, and power in his voice. Tall and spare, with a face of ivory and hair as white as snow, this greatest living representative of the Victorians, the friend and contemporary of Darwin, and with Darwin the simultaneous formulator of the evolution hypothesis, advertises to the world, at the age of 87, the blessings of work and the satisfaction of unresting aspiration. To give has been the gospel

of his life—to give himself to the pursuit of truth and to give to mankind the full harvest of his toil. And the result is an old age overflowing with happiness, an intelligence extraordinarily acute, senses unimpaired, and 50 wide and catholic a delight in human life that he is able to sympathise with the youngest of our dreams and to follow the political progress of humanity with enthusiasm only bridled by amusement at our old-fashioned delays and hesitations.

It is perhaps necessary to say at the beginning of this article that there are people in the world who maintain that the hypothesis of evolution has explained everything, that the universe is self-contained and self-sufficient, that the law called Uniformity of Nature makes a controlling God unthinkable and impossible, that there has never been a creation, that there has never been a scheme, and that there is no purpose in anything. All is accident, chance, and meaningless haphazard. “The world is a condensation of primeval gas, a congeries of stones and meteors.” These people are not Agnostics; Agnostics only say that they do not know how and why things have come to pass; and they are not Monists; no, they are Materialists, the fighting force of a polite and hesitating scepticism, the definite challengers and onslaughters of anything in the nature of Idealism; and instead of saying that they do not know this or that, they claim very emphatically, with gallant Prince Haeckel at their head, to know all. And their all is nothing.

But how did life begin upon this planet?

In its home this earth of ours was part of the sun. Now, the sun is very hot. A kettle of boiling water or a cauldron of liquid lead would be icy even to the outmost fringe of its enveloping flames. We have no idea how hot is the heart of the sun, out of which our earth leaped some millions of aeons ago, and set up as a colony on its own account, only attached to the mother-land by the sentimental tie of gravitation. For no one knows how many cycles this emigrant earth was a flaming and roaring ball of conflagration, then for thousands of years it was hotter than anything we can imagine, and when it settled down into its stride it was about as habitable as the lava of Mount Vesuvius. More millions of

years (as many as you please) and the surface of the earth cooled, cooled at last so wonderfully that plants were able to grow, creatures to appear, and finally we get Esquimaux shivering in furs and the indomitable Dr. Cook taking off his hat to the North Pole.

Now, I have never been able to understand how the germ of life managed to exist in our molten earth. How did it endure that unthinkable heat? If I drop seeds into the fire, or boil them in a kettle, they either disappear or refuse to grow. But they were once part and parcel of a blazing furnace, they were contained in a condensation of primeval gas, they existed in the sun. Miracle of miracles! The Agnostic tells me he does not know. The Materialist says it is only a little more difficult than that ancient problem, Which came first, the hen or the egg? But I do not know the answer to that highly important riddle, and the Materialist does not tell me anything I can comprehend on the matter. All my ignorance on this subject I laid humbly at the feet of Professor Wallace, Father of Evolution and most open-minded of observers.

“Of course,” he said, with a smile, “there is no reasonable answer possible to Materialism. Life could not have existed on the red-hot planet. No life at all, not the lowest and obscurest forms. Materialists know this. Some of them get out of the difficulty by saying that life was rained upon the earth in meteors! That is a theory more amusing than ridiculous. We need not discuss it.”

“But what is the answer?”

“Well, it is the very simple, plain, and old-fashioned one, that there was at some stage in the history of the earth, after the cooling process, a definite act of creation. Something came from the outside. Power was exercised from without. In a word, life was given to the earth. All the errors of those who have distorted the thesis of evolution into something called, inappropriately enough, Darwinism, have arisen from the supposition that life is a consequence of organisation. This is unthinkable. Life, as Huxley admitted, is the cause and not the consequence of organisation. Admit life, and the hypothesis of evolution is sufficient and unanswerable. Postulate organisation first, and make it the origin and

cause of life, and you lose yourself in a maze of madness. An honest and unswerving scrutiny of nature forces upon the mind this certain truth, that at some period of the earth's history there was an act of creation, a giving to the earth of something which before it had not possessed; and from that gift, the gift of life, has come the infinite and wonderful population of living forms. Then, as you know, I hold that there was a subsequent act of creation, a giving to man, when he had emerged from his ape-like ancestry, of a spirit or soul. Nothing in evolution can account for the soul of man. The difference between man and the other animals is unbridgeable. Mathematics is alone sufficient to prove in man the possession of a faculty unexistent in other creatures. Then you have music and the artistic faculty. No, the soul was a separate creation."

"But are these the only two instances of interference from outside?"

"Ah, we come to a great question. I deal with it in a book which Chapman and Hall are to publish this winter. In some ways this book will be my final contribution to the philosophic side of evolution. It concerns itself with the great question of Purpose. Is there guidance and control, or is everything the result of chance? Are we solitary in the cosmos, and without meaning to the rest of the universe; or are we one in 'a stair of creatures,' a hierarchy of beings? Now, you may approach this matter along the metaphysical path, or, as a man of exact science, by observation of the physical globe and reflection upon visible and tangible objects. My contribution is made as a man of science, as a naturalist, as a man who studies his surroundings to see where he is. And the conclusion I reach in my book is this: That everywhere, not here and there, but everywhere, and in the very smallest operations of nature to which human observation has penetrated, there is Purpose and a continual Guidance and Control."

II.

IT WOULD not be right for me, and it might be dangerous, to attempt anything in the nature of a summary of Professor Wallace's argument as it will appear in book form; but exercising great care and with as good

a memory as I can command, I will here mention just one or two instances as quoted by the author, in the ease and carelessness of unstudied conversation, to justify his thesis that there is a continual guidance and control all through this mystery of terrestrial existence. The reader, I hope, will be just enough to form in his mind rather a determination to read the book when it appears than to pass any judgment on the author's argument in this place.

"There seems to me," said Professor Wallace, "unmistakable evidence of guidance and control in the physical apparatus of every living creature. Consider for a moment the question of nourishment. Men of various races eat different foods; men of the same race may follow diets as separate and distinct as chalk from cheese. But in all cases the main result is the same. The food is converted into blood. That is interesting enough, marvelous enough, baffling enough; but mark what follows. This blood circulating through the body becomes at one point hair and at another nail; here it transforms itself into bone and there into tissue; at the same moment that it changes into skin it changes into nerve; it is at once the bone in my finger and the eye in my head. Materialism forges such words as secretion, but no word signifying unconscious and accidental action can explain this mystery.

"Just reflect upon it. The blood in our veins becomes at one point a finger-nail; it becomes hard and horn-like substance, with a recognisable and distinct surface-texture and character. And it becomes, also, the hair on our heads. How does the same fluid, unconsciously and without intelligence, perform these very diverse and marvellous duties? Remember, this activity of the blood is incessant; it continues to the moment of death. The busiest thing on the earth is this mysterious liquid which we call blood. It is building up the horns and hides of animals, the feathers and beaks of birds, the scales and bones of reptiles, the wings and eyes of insects, the brains of poets and the muscles of workmen. It is digesting the food of all of us, repairing our wasted tissues, restoring our energies, making us and remaking us at every hour of the day. Now, is it not a madness to say that blood can do all these quite marvellous and

diverse things of itself, that without consciousness and without direction it flows to a finger-tip and accidentally becomes nail, or mounts to the skull and fortuitously becomes hair? Is it more consonant with reason to say that the blood does its work by itself and without meaning to do it, or that it is intelligently controlled to its purpose by a conscious direction? Which is the saner theory?"

I asked my host if he had formulated any opinion as to the nature and character of the guidance which superintends the management of our bodies.

"I believe it to be," he said, "the guidance of beings superior to us in power and intelligence. Call them spirits, angels, gods, what you will; the name is of no importance. I find this control in the lowest cell; the wonderful activity of cells convinces me that it is guided by intelligence and consciousness. I cannot comprehend how any just and unprejudiced mind, fully aware of this amazing activity, can persuade itself to believe that the whole thing is a blind and unintelligent accident. It may not be possible for us to say how the guidance is exercised, and by exactly what powers; but for those who have eyes to see and minds accustomed to reflect, in the minutest cells, in the blood, in the whole earth, and throughout the stellar universe—our own little universe, as one may call it—there is intelligent and conscious direction; in, a word, there is Mind."

"Myers suggested that our normal consciousness is only a fragment of our total soul, that a greater part of us is at work on the body, managing all the wonderful and complex machinery of the organism, and influencing us without our knowledge."

"Yes, that may or may not be true. But we must enlarge our vision. We must see more beings in the universe than ourselves. I think we have got to recognise that between man and the Ultimate God there is an almost infinite multitude of beings working in the universe at tasks as definite and important as any that we have to perform on the earth. I imagine that the universe is peopled with spirits—that is to say, with intelligent beings, with powers and duties akin to our own, but vaster, infinitely vaster. I think there is a gradual ascent from man upwards and

onwards, through an almost endless legion of these beings, to the First Cause, of whom it is impossible for us to speak. Through Him these endless beings act and achieve, but He Himself may have no actual contact with our earth."

"Sometimes this management of our bodies breaks down."

"That is true. I do not mean that the control is absolute or that it is of the nature of interference. The control is evidently bound by laws as absolute and irrefragable as those which govern man and his universe. It is certainly dependent on us in a very large measure for its success. I believe we are influenced, not interfered with, and that the management of our bodies is at least as difficult, for those charged with it, as, let us say, the cultivation of this planet for us."

"But, in any case, you believe that there is purpose in creation?"

"It meets me everywhere I turn. I cannot examine the smallest or the commonest living thing without finding my reason uplifted and amazed by the miracle, by the beauty, the power, and the wisdom of its creation. Have you ever examined the feather of a bird? I almost think a feather is the masterpiece of nature. No man in the world could make such a thing, or anything in the very slightest degree resembling it. Someone has said that a single feather from a heron's wing is composed of over a million parts! The quill is socketed, held together by little contrivances in the nature of hooks and eyes; it is of a material so light that a finger can twist it out of shape, but if it gets pierced or separated by any slight blow it becomes quickly reunited and restored. Watch a bird sailing high above the earth in a gale of wind, and then remind yourself of the lightness of its feathers. And those feathers are airtight and waterproof, the perfectest vesture imaginable!

"Have you ever thought of this, too? The loveliest and most graceful thing on the earth is unquestionably a bird. I suppose everybody has felt that. One cannot watch the flight of the least of birds or study the wonders of their plumage, without feeling a quite intense admiration. They are exquisite creations. Well, all the beauty is in the feathers. Strip a bird of its plumage, and what was the perfectest thing becomes at once the

most ugly and comical. A young bird makes us laugh. When its feathers have grown, the same bird makes Shelley write an immortal ode. Such is the wonder of feathers. And how do they grow? Evolution can explain a great deal; but the origin of a feather, and its growth, this is beyond our comprehension, certainly beyond the power of accident to achieve."

He shook his head and smiled amiably upon the hot-headedness of Darwinians. "The scales on the wing of a moth," he said, quietly, "have no explanation in evolution. They belong to Beauty, arid Beauty is a spiritual mystery. Even Huxley was puzzled by the beauty of his environment. What is the origin of Beauty? Evolution cannot explain."

"Nevertheless, of course, evolution is a sound hypothesis?"

"Every fresh discovery in nature fortifies that original hypothesis. But this is the sane and honest evolution, which does not concern itself at all with beginnings, and merely follows a few links in a fairly obvious chain. As for the chain itself, evolution has nothing to say. For my own part, I am convinced that at one period in the earth's history there was a definite act of creation, that from that moment evolution has been at work, guidance has been exercised. The more deeply men reflect upon what they are able to observe, the more they will be brought to see that Materialism is a most gigantic foolishness. And I think it will soon pass from the mind. At first there was some excuse. Into the authoritative nonsense and superstitions of Clericalism, evolution threw a bomb of the most deadly power. Those whose intelligence had been outraged and irritated by this absurd priestcraft rushed to the conclusion that religion was destroyed, that a little chain of reasoning had explained the whole infinite universe, that in mud was the origin of mind, and in dust its end. That was an opinion which could not last. Materialism is as dead as priestcraft for all intelligent minds. There are laws of nature, but they are purposeful. Everywhere we look we are confronted by power and intelligence. The future will be full of wonder reverence, and a calm faith worthy of our place in the scheme of things."

"And greater knowledge?"

"Oh, yes, we are only at the beginning of the puzzle."