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SELECTEDWORKS™

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ABSTRACT: To date little attention has been paid to how Alfred Russel Wallace's skill as a writer helped advance his career. Here, a small discovery is reported which contributes to such an understanding: Wallace apparently had a standing arrangement with a London magazine to provide eyes-in-the-field reports when he set out for Singapore in early 1854.

KEY WORDS: naturalists – journalism – *Literary gazette* – field work – bibliography.

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) involved himself in an impressive number of subjects over the span of his long career – associations that have been recognized for a good many years. It may thus come as some surprise that at this late date an additional aspect of Wallace's professional life has just come to light that extends his list of commitments to an entirely new realm.

Wallace's ability to write skillfully in a variety of contexts has frequently been commented on, both in his own time, and since his death. Charles Peirce (1906:160), in a review of Wallace's autobiography *My life* (Wallace 1905), once went so far as to say that he knew "well that Wallace never wrote a dull line in his life, and couldn't if he tried, his very tables and diagrams being as entertaining as they are valuably instructive." Nevertheless, practically no attention has been given to the evolution of this element of Wallace's craft, with the result that until now no one has reported that for some number of years early in his career he was employed – effectively, and possibly formally – as a journalist.

A number of years ago, while readying a bibliography of Wallace's publications for inclusion in an anthology (Smith 1991), I came across a pair of popularly-oriented writings by Wallace prepared while he was collecting specimens in Sarawak. These appeared in London's *Literary gazette* (Wallace 1855a, 1855b). The first article is unsigned, but it discusses in the first person details of his surroundings that clearly match up with Wallace's activities at the time, the best known of which was his preparation of the "Sarawak law" paper (Wallace 1855d)[1]. The second article was signed "A. R. W."; it was later mined in his autobiography, and then reprinted in part by Marchant (1975) (who commented "This letter may have been written for publication"). These works are decidedly in a narrative mode, but I never gave the context much thought, assuming that they were jottings that had simply been "sent home" and printed on a casual basis. Throughout that period many of Wallace's letters to his agent Samuel Stevens, the botanist Sir William Hooker, and the ornithologist P. L. Sclater found their way into print in this manner.

Recently, however, I came upon two further contributions to the *Literary gazette* that shed new light

on the matter. Both works (Wallace 1854a, 1854b) were initialled by him, and the first was preceded by the following editorial statement:

> We have pleasure in presenting to our readers a communication, which we hope is the first of a series, from Mr. Wallace, the South American traveller, author of 'Travels on the Amazon.' Mr. Wallace does not seem to have formed any fixed plan for his wanderings in the East, but will proceed at present wherever he is attracted, as an explorer of scenery, an observer of life and manners, and an enthusiastic naturalist.

Wallace's narrative, about the environs of Singapore, was dated June 1854, which means he and the magazine probably came to this arrangement before he arrived in Singapore in April (the interim period not being long enough to permit back-and-forth letters verifying an agreement).

Since *Literary gazette* carried Wallace stories, might he have contributed to others as well? This seems entirely possible, but it will take time to check for such writings in the several dozen popular serials that were published in Britain during this period.[2] The reason for Wallace's association with *Literary gazette*, at least, seems fairly apparent: it was printed by Lovell Reeve (1814-1865), a conchologist and publisher who supported production of Wallace's first major book, *A narrative of travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, in 1853. Positive reviews of this and his other 1853 book, *Palm trees of the Amazon and their uses*, in fact, appeared in *Literary gazette* late that year (Anonymous 1853a, 1853b), just two months before Wallace departed for Singapore. Wallace's association with the magazine apparently came to an end after his fourth submission appeared in May 1855, perhaps because it became more oriented towards fine arts.[3]

The question arises as to why Wallace, busy as he must have been with his collecting activities and writing to family, friends, and professional contacts, would have committed himself to journalism besides. Several reasons seem plausible. First, he may simply have enjoyed the role of writing for the public. In *My life* he reported that as far back as the early 1840s he had produced some essays intended for general public consumption (Wallace 1905, 1:199-222); some of these probably formed the bases for lectures he gave at mechanics institutes during that period, though others were written for publication. One of the latter (on Welsh farmers) was submitted for publication but rejected, much later surfacing in *My life* to provide a sample of his early literary skills. Another, concerning the organizing of libraries for mechanics institutes, was included in a history of Kington (Wallace 1845).

More to the point, such efforts would have contributed to his professional studies in several respects. Certainly, they would have helped make his name generally better known in Britain during his absence overseas, likely widening his future opportunities. Perhaps, however, a more immediate concern dominated: money. As he was not being supported by either private or public funds, the money for supplies had to come from somewhere. His collections were selling, but there was no telling how long he would be able to keep earning a living from them. A little extra income might thus have proved extremely helpful. Alternately, perhaps the in-the-field pieces simply provided barter for free copies of the many magazines he was sent from home.[4]

Wallace's forays into journalism during his earlier years are interesting both on account of the way they further round out our picture of the man, and for independent historical reasons. Those of his personal letters to family and close friends that have been published are in the main quiet, intimate and specific; those to professional acquaintances, respectful, informative, and to the point. The writing in his books and articles features a lot of detail, but is invariably supplied toward the end of argument, toward making a point. Not so, these early in-the-field articles, which are more "homely" narratives – "eyes and ears in the field" – which ramble on and sometimes play to sentimentality or even judgmental stereotyping (in one of the articles discussed earlier [Wallace 1854a], for example, he refers to some of the Chinese residents of Singapore as "bloodthirsty" and "cowards").

Beyond this, the details of his involvement provide further historical context. For example, I am not aware that it has been revealed how Wallace found out about the paper on polarity by Edward Forbes (1854) that prompted him to write his "Sarawak law" essay. Forbes presented his thesis at the Royal Institution on 28 April 1854, when Wallace was already in Singapore. Possibly he obtained a copy of the Institution's proceedings that contained Forbes's work (according to Slotten [2004:116] this was published in October 1854), or, possibly again, he saw it in some other professional venue.[5] Most likely, however, he first happened on the essay in the *Literary gazette* issue of 19 August 1854 – where it was printed *in toto* just two pages after his own first contribution to the magazine (Wallace 1854a). Here too was a likely place he could have first learned of the death of Forbes, reported in the 25 November 1854 issue.[6]

Wallace's still increasing list of early scientific and popular publications casts some doubt on the commonly held opinion that he was largely unknown when he contacted Darwin in the summer of 1858. Attention should be drawn to another recently noticed item, by William J. Hamilton, President of the Geological Society of London (1855 – 1856), who ended his lengthy anniversary speech (Hamilton 1856:cxviii) with the following mention:

> . . . I must direct your attention to a paper published by Mr. Alfred Wallace on the law which has regulated the introduction of new species. Mr. Wallace is a naturalist of no ordinary calibre. His travels in South America and elsewhere are a sufficient guarantee of his high merits; he now writes from Sarawak, Borneo. From a careful examination of the actual distribution of existing forms of animal life, and the gradual but complete renewal of forms of life in successive geological epochs, he has deduced the following law: —*Every species has come into existence coincident both in space and time with a pre-existing closely allied species*. The question is one of great importance, and deserving the careful investigation of every geologist . . .

Perhaps, therefore, at the time Darwin received Wallace's Ternate essay he was relatively more highly thought of than has usually been assumed. This, of course, would have given Darwin all the more reason for concern.

So far, no writings by Wallace in this early "journalistic" style have turned up in the several year period after 1857. This is probably not so surprising, as by then his efforts were sustaining both financial and professional successes, and further distractions from his main purpose would no longer have been necessary.

NOTES

1. The location, on Bukit Serambu 20 miles up the Sarawak River, was also described in detail in Wallace (1962:64 – 65) and Slotten (2004:123) (the latter description originating in a source other than Wallace). According to *My life* and *The Malay archipelago*, Wallace arrived in Sarawak on 1 November 1854: "The first four months of my visit were spent in various parts of the Sarawak River, from Santubong at its mouth up to the picturesque limestone mountains and Chinese gold-fields of Bow and Bedé" (Wallace 1962:27). The publication date of the *Literary gazette* item was 9 June 1855, three months before "On the law..." was printed. Lord Cranbrook (pers. comm. 17 December 2007) has pointed out that the first entry on mammals in Wallace's "Species Registry Notebook 3" (original ms in the Natural History Museum, London: Zoology Library NHM Z MSS 89,0 WAL) is "*Macacus cynomulgus*," from "Serambo Mountain, Sarawak…Nov. 1854" (the current name is Macaca fascicularis (Raffles, 1821), the crab-eating macaque). St. John (1879:274 – 275), also placed Wallace at this location during this general period.

2. In the bibliography of Wallace's writings (Smith 1991), I recognize two unsigned articles printed in *Chambers's journal* as having been written by Wallace (1856a, 1857), but despite several lines of evidence by association it cannot be stated with any confidence that he actually wrote either of them. Further, there are three or four more unsigned pieces in that periodical that he may have written during the same period. Wallace spent a good deal of time with Sir James (Rajah) Brooke during his stay in Sarawak (November 1854 – January 1856), and became a great admirer. The Rajah in turn had benefited from the friendship and considerable moral support supplied by William and Robert Chambers, editors and publishers of *Chambers's journal*, when some of Brooke's governance methods had come under serious attack in England a few years earlier (see, for example, Chambers (1850)). Further, by 1856 most people strongly suspected that Robert Chambers had been the author of the anonymously-published *Vestiges of the natural history of creation* ([Chambers] 1844; see Secord 2000), a book that had inspired Wallace's evolutionary studies, giving him a reason to travel to the Malay archipelago to begin with. According to Slotten (2004:112), Brooke had a copy of *Vestiges* in his library at Sarawak. Wallace likely would have been delighted to work with Chambers had the opportunity presented itself.

3. Another Wallace letter, dated 10 October 1854, just two weeks after the second one that appeared in *Literary gazette* (Wallace 1854b), was printed in Sir William Jackson Hooker's magazine the *Journal of botany* (Wallace 1855c). This rather long piece described his trip to Mount Ophir, closely continuing the narrative started in the earlier letter. Whether this letter was written to Hooker directly or reached him through some intermediary is not clear because the original has not been traced; it is not among Hooker's correspondence in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Hooker's *Journal* was published by Lovell Reeve, and as the two men had close connections they may have shared Wallace's letters.

4. In September 1854, after spending a week or two in the field, Wallace wrote (1905, 1:341): "On returning to Malacca I found the accumulation of two or three posts – a dozen letters, and about fifty newspapers…"

5. Wallace was also receiving *The Athenæum* around that time (Wallace 1892), but that magazine did not carry the full text of the paper.

6. A note was added to "On the law..." before it was published in September 1855 stating: "Since the above was written, the author has heard with sincere regret of the death of this eminent naturalist, from whom so much important work was expected." Wallace had originally dated the essay February 1855, so at that point he apparently had not yet heard the news.

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