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### IN A PLACE OF MANY WORLDS

Review of: Alfred Russel Wallace 1869. *The Malay Archipelago*. Vol. 1-2.

London: Macmillan 638 pp.

Tenth edition reprinted 1962 by Dover, New York. Available online from Project Gutenberg or at <http://wallace-online.org/>.

[Thirty-first in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

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Recall that Henry Walter Bates, whose *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* was treated in the last issue, went to the Amazon with his friend Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913). Wallace returned after four years, while Bates stayed on. Wallace's notes were lost in a shipboard fire, so that his own book about Brazil (1853) the book had to be composed from memory and not on the same level as Bates's.

Wallace soon left on a new expedition, this time to what are now Malaysia and Indonesia, where he wandered extensively, visiting some islands several times. As in the Amazon, his aim was to make natural-history observations while collecting specimens. He returned to England in 1862 and worked until 1868 on curating his collections, including about 110,000 insects.

*The Malay Archipelago* is a long book, the 40 chapters arranged into sections by island group. The 51 illustrations include 10 maps. An appendix gives the counterparts of 117 English words in 33 languages.

Reading such a book then and now are quite different experiences. Wallace was writing mainly for Europeans who would never visit such far-off places. Since then, the places that have become much more accessible are much altered from their original character.

In his wanderings, Wallace often set off for a destination with little advance information about its condition or biota. Unlike Bates, he was not out of "civilization" for long periods. He spent much more time around towns and on the whole worked in more comfortable conditions than in the Amazon.

Although Wallace did not suffer hardships on the scale that finally drove Bates from the Amazon, there were difficult times. Remarking on a trip to Ternate, "My first crew ran away; two men were lost for a month on a desert island; we were ten times aground on coral reefs; we lost four anchors; the sails were devoured by rats; the small boat was lost astern; we were thirty-eight days on the voyage home, which should have taken twelve; we were many times short of food and water; and to crown all, during the whole of our voyages from Goran by Ceram to Waigiou, and from Waigiou to Ternate, occupying in all seventy-eight days ... we had *not one single day of fair wind*."

Natural-history writing can be lyrical, even voluptuous. On Aru Wallace found

*Ornithoptera poseidon*, one of the celebrated birdwing butterflies and among the world's most magnificent insects. "I trembled with excitement as I saw it coming toward me, and could hardly believe I had really succeeded in my stroke till I had taken it out of the net and was gazing, lost in admiration, at the velvet black and brilliant green of its wings, seven inches across, its golden body, and crimson breast."

There is also dry humour. As he prepared specimens of an evening in Lombok, one of the watching local men remarked on the scarcity of ghosts thereabouts. In Borneo, he noted, one did not dare walk in the night past where a murder had occurred, on account of the terrible noises from the victim's ghost. Wallace's Malay assistant agreed that nothing of the sort happened locally. "And so it was settled that ghosts were very scarce, if not altogether unknown in Lombok. I would observe, however, that as the evidence was purely negative we should be wanting in scientific caution if we accepted this fact as sufficiently well established."

In Borneo, a couple was to be executed for adultery by being tied back to back and tossed into the sea to the crocodiles. Wallace took a long walk to avoid the scene, "thus missing the opportunity of having a horrible narrative to enliven my somewhat tedious story."

Aside from insects, Wallace had two special foci: the orang-utan in Borneo and birds-of-paradise in New Guinea. He spent much time observing the former, remarking that "It is a singular and very interesting sight to watch [an orang-utan] making its way leisurely through the forest. He walks deliberately along some of the larger branches in the semi-erect attitude which the great length of his arms and the shortness of his legs cause him naturally to assume .... He seems always to choose those branches which intermingle with an adjoining tree, on approaching which he stretches out his long arms and, seizing both the opposing boughs, grasps them together with both hands, seems to try his strength, and then deliberately swings himself across to the next branch, on which he walks along as before."

Wallace's success in New Guinea fell far short of expectations. He bought birds-of-paradise from hunters, but a foot injury kept him housebound for weeks, while the islands' magnificent biotic riches lay out of reach all around him.

Wallace is regarded as the founder of biogeography, and the distribution of plants and animals is a major theme. Perhaps his most striking result had to do with Bali and Lombok, just east of Java. Looking at a map, it seems out of the question that the Lesser Sunda Islands, the close chain of physically similar islands stretching from Java to Timor, should show any biotic differences. However, Wallace found a relatively abrupt change in passing between Bali and Lombok.

Sulawesi (Celebes) is at the center of the archipelago, so that one might expect it to be especially species-rich but with little that is distinctive. In fact, exactly the opposite is true. Species richness is low, yet this is the most distinctive of the archipelago's major islands.

The reason for this pattern is now well known. Borneo, Sumatra and Java all lie on the Sunda Continental Shelf, while New Guinea is on the Sahul Shelf. During the ice ages, with lower sea levels, these islands were all connected to Asia or Australia, while Sulawesi and the Lesser Sundas from Lombok eastward remained islands throughout.

Wallace found himself in a much more stratified class society than in the Amazon, with rajahs and other aristocrats. Malays and Papuans were the two main racial-ethnic groups, and he had a special affinity for the Dayaks -- the Malay people native to Borneo -- whom he deemed especially pleasant, honest and lively in their intelligence.

In dealing with Europeans, Wallace spoke English or French, and with natives mostly the lingua franca, Malay. He visited places where foreigners were practically unknown. In one Sulawesi village, hardly anyone spoke more than a few words of Malay, and most had evidently never seen a European before, so that his arrival caused a sensation. "Wherever I went, dogs barked, children screamed, women ran away, and men stared as though I were some strange and terrible criminal monster. Even the pack-horses on the roads and paths would start aside when I appeared and rush into the jungle."

Wallace saw the Aru Islands off the western end of New Guinea as South Asia's ends of the Earth. All that was needed to explore them was the "courage to trust oneself for a thousand miles' voyage in a Bugis prau, and for six or seven months among lawless traders and ferocious savages". And so he set off, beyond the bounds of civilization, feeling like a schoolboy on a grand adventure. The crew of the ship consisted of about 50 "wild, half-savage-looking fellows, and few of them feeling any of the restraints of morality or education". He got on well with this fine company.

One habit of note in the archipelago was "amok". This Malay verb, equivalent to the English "run amok", is quite different from going berserk. The berserks, or berserkers, were Viking warriors whose battle rage made them careless of their own safety and thus especially dangerous. An amok -- the term can also apply to the person -- is dangerous for the same reason, but it is a personal matter, not part of organized warfare. It arises when humiliation and a hopeless social situation drive one to murderous despair. Someone with nothing to lose might as well go out in dramatic fashion. Amokking still occurs in that part of the world, almost exclusively as a male phenomenon.

Both Bates and Wallace were immersed for years in native society, but they were not of it. Although liberals, they remained Victorian men who did not question the social superiority of some peoples over others. Of the two main races in the archipelago, "the Malay is undoubtedly the most important ..., as it is the one which is the most civilized, which has come most into contact with Europeans, and which alone has any place in history."

Wallace had a generally favourable view of Dutch colonizing efforts and assumed that missionaries had a civilizing, uplifting effect, on the whole. Furthermore, he expected the condition of women to be improved through western contact. Still, he was skeptical of some effects. "Natives of tropical

climates have few wants, and when these are supplied, are disinclined to work for superficialities without some strong excitement." He saw liquor and opium, introduced by European traders, as introducing addiction and thus a new strong want.

Wallace ends with a disquisition on progress toward individual freedom. "It is very remarkable that among people in a very low state of civilization we find some approach to such a perfect social state." In South America and South Asia among "savages" unconstrained except by public opinion he found equality and respect for the rights of others, concluding that modern humans have progressed intellectually, but not morally, beyond the savage state.

There is a curious omission from Wallace's account. In February 1858 he formulated a theory of evolution identical to that of Charles Darwin. He described this in a letter to Darwin, and the two published a joint paper later that year, so that on his return to England Wallace found himself well known in scientific circles. This turning point of his life is not mentioned in *The Malay Archipelago*.

#### Reference

Wallace, A.R. 1853. *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*. London: Reeve 541 pp.

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