Letters of a naturalist

The Wallace Correspondence Project

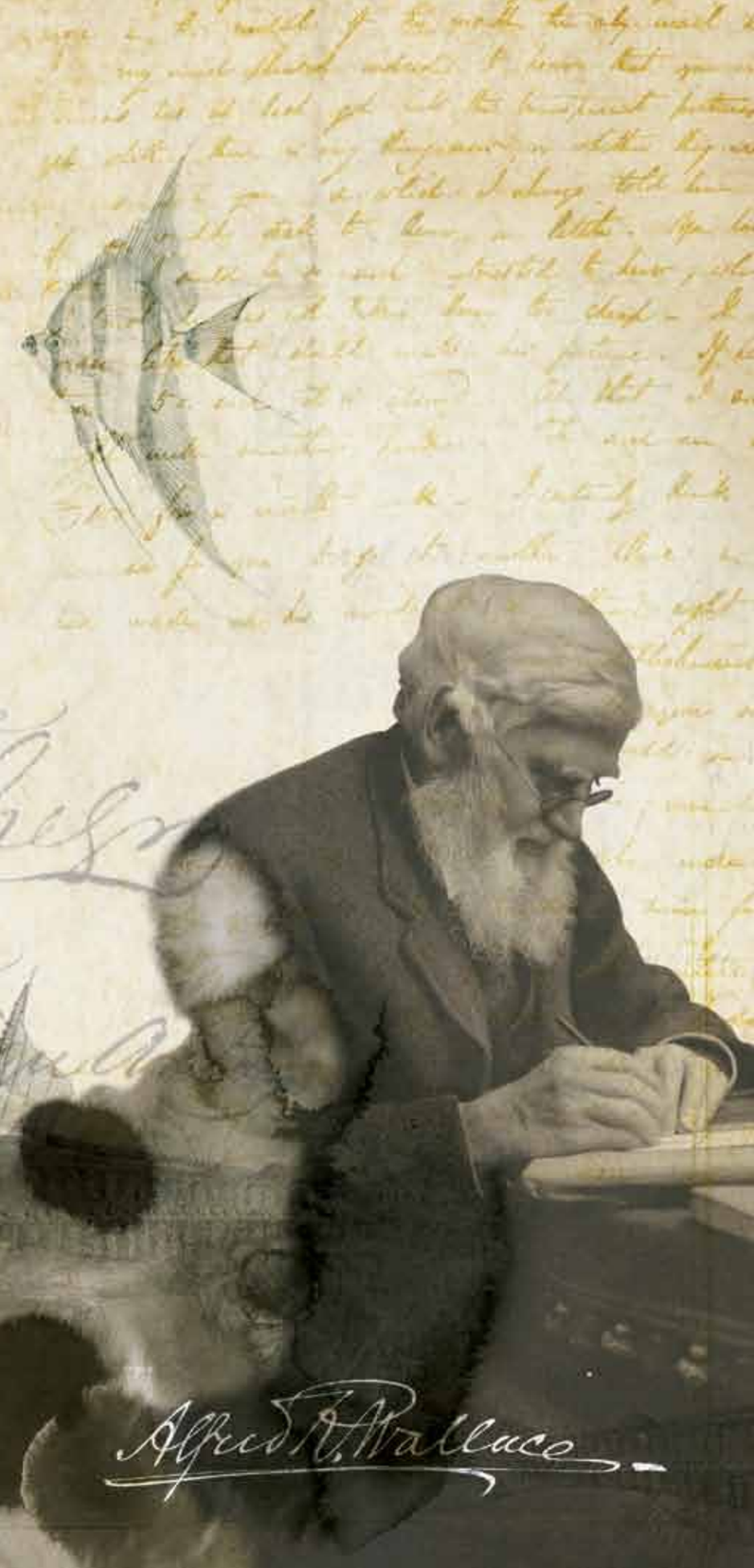
Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) died 100 years ago this year, leaving behind a great scientific and intellectual legacy. Over the past two years a collaborative project has been underway between the Museum's Life Sciences Department and the Library & Archives to unlock part of this legacy by digitising and cataloguing his correspondence. Wallace Correspondence Project archivist **Caroline Catchpole** explains.

The digital archive Wallace Letters Online (WLO), launched earlier this year, allows unrivalled access to the communications of one of the greatest scientific figures of the nineteenth century. Letters to and from naturalists, botanists, geologists, biologists, spiritualists, social and literary figures, and politicians, all feature in this veritable treasure trove of correspondence, which will help us study Wallace's life and work in a completely new way.

FORGOTTEN HERO

Wallace was one of the late nineteenth century's most interesting and important intellectuals. His link to Darwin as the co-discoverer of the principle of evolution by natural selection would alone have secured him a place in history, but he went on to complete work entitling him to recognition as the father of evolutionary biogeography – the study of how plants and animals are distributed – and as an important contributor to subjects as far-ranging as astrobiology, glaciology, land reform, anthropology, ethnography and epidemiology.

Beyond this, Wallace is regarded as the pre-eminent field biologist, collector and naturalist of tropical regions of the nineteenth century. Add to that the fact that he was a vocal supporter of spiritualism, socialism and the rights of the ordinary person, and it quickly becomes apparent that he was a man with an extraordinary breadth of interests. He was actively engaged with many of the big questions and important issues of his day and by the time of his death >



Right A letter written by Wallace to Frederick Bates (brother of Henry Walter Bates) from Ternate on 2 March 1858 (WCP367). Wallace describes the many different beetle species he has been collecting and studying, and compares the Coleoptera found in the Archipelago with that of the Amazon. He concludes that southeast Asia is the better of the two regions for the volume of insects collected. An illustration of a fish species drawn by Wallace while in the Amazon (1848–1852).
Next page A map from *The Malay Archipelago* (1874) by Alfred Russel Wallace.

was one of the most famous scientists in the world. Since then he has slid into relative obscurity.

HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

The project has been underway for more than two years now, but its roots go back to 1998 when Dr George Beccaloni, curator of orthopteroid insects at the Museum and Director of the project, visited Wallace's grave in Broadstone, Dorset. Finding it in a poor state of repair he established the Wallace Memorial Fund, which raised money to restore the grave, install a new plaque and extend the lease of the grave by 100 years.

This initiative led George to meet Wallace's two grandsons, Richard and John. They had an extensive archive of Wallace's papers and his personal library, plus a small collection of his insect specimens. Although happy to receive Wallace historians and scholars to view the papers, the grandsons thought the collection would be better served in a public institution. George, along with Wallace biographer Peter Raby, met with members of the Museum's library team and suggested the possibility of the Museum purchasing the papers and library from the family. A successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund saw the collection of more than 5,000 items added to the Museum in 2002, where it has been catalogued and preserved and is available for public consultation in the Library's reading room.

Six years later, in 2008, George once again met with members of the library team and proposed the idea of the Wallace Correspondence Project. Funding was awarded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation for a three-year project to locate, digitise, catalogue and make available online all known surviving letters to and from Wallace. This was a major undertaking with more than 4,000 known letters scattered around the world in over 100 institutions and private collections.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT

Wallace was one of life's great polymaths – a quick browse through WLO will testify to this. His formidable intellect coupled with the ability to argue points in a clear and consistent fashion allows for some fascinating reading. The Museum's correspondence represents an important primary resource, not only for historians of science but also for historians of the wider Victorian period. The letters provide an insight into a broad spectrum of subjects. We know Wallace first and foremost as being a great scientist, but perhaps less-well known is the divergence of his interests over time. With correspondents such as Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, Henry Walter Bates, Charles Lyell, Rudyard Kipling and William Gladstone represented in the catalogue, it reads like a who's who of the era's most important and influential scientific, literary and political figures, reflecting the diverse nature of Wallace's interests.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LETTERS

The arrival of the Penny Post in 1840 revolutionised letter writing for the population at the time, opening it up to all social classes and facilitating the increase of both business and personal communications. Wallace was delighted at its introduction, writing a poem on the subject to his brother John on 11 January 1840:

> Hurrah, Hurrah for the Penny Post
> For now we may write like fun
> And not feel a shock when the
> Postmans knock
> Proclaims that a letter is come

Letters can reveal the formation of an idea, views on subjects or professional differences of opinion. However, letters in the nineteenth century were also used to convey information we would now send in a text message or a phone call, providing a fascinating insight into the social life of the author. These letters offer a more holistic view of Wallace, whether that is tea with Darwin on a Wednesday morning or staying with friends overnight due to an engagement in London. They reveal important information about the movements and friendships of the author, helping us to build a more complete picture of the man.

PAPERWORK

There are five main institutions that hold the bulk of Wallace's surviving correspondence – the British Library, the Natural History Museum, the Hope Entomological Library (Oxford University Museum of Natural History), Cambridge University Library and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The rest are scattered around the world, with quite a large number of American institutions holding Wallace letters in their collections.

WLO is still evolving but we estimate that it will be complete by 2018. As of November 2012, the catalogue contained about 95 per cent of Wallace's known surviving correspondence, with records of 4,151 letters.

The original remit of the project has broadened slightly since its inception to include key manuscript items, which lend further insight into Wallace's life and work. For example, the Museum's Library >

collection has two collecting notebooks from Wallace's time in the Malay Archipelago that contain a wealth of information about the specimens of birds, insects and mammals he collected. These have been digitised and included in WLO (with the unique reference numbers WCP4766 and WCP4767). They continue to be relevant to research today with scientists still consulting them to find out more information about Wallace specimens in the Museum's collections.

KEY LETTERS

From Wallace's early life in Neath to corresponding with Henry Walter Bates before their Amazon adventure and the letters written in his final months, 73 years of Wallace's life are represented in the catalogue. The letters eloquently tell the story of every aspect, both professional and private.

A WEALTH OF TOPICS

WLO contains surviving correspondence Wallace wrote and received while he travelled through the Malay Archipelago from 1854 to 1862, the period when he made his most important scientific discoveries. The catalogue shows that Wallace communicated with 19 different people over this eight-year period, yet there may be more correspondents whose letters no longer survive or have yet to be traced.

Ranging from his family to learned men, his letters back to England offer a fascinating mix of scientific discoveries made, to the difficulties and challenges he faced. Some of the most interesting letters are those written to his agent, Samuel Stevens (1817–1899). Stevens established the Natural History Agency at 24 Bloomsbury Street, London, in 1848 and handled the sales of Wallace and Bates' Amazonian specimens. Wallace turned to him once again, to handle business for him during his time in southeast Asia.

Topics touched on include first-hand accounts of the geography of the islands, indigenous people encountered, local trade and political rule. The rule of an island often had an impact on Wallace's ease of travel around the area and between islands and so this would have been a topic he would have taken much interest in. The letters from the East and their wide-ranging content mean they have relevance to many different topics. There is a rich anthropological as well as scientific content to the correspondence.

THE LIFE OF A COLLECTOR

Letters from the Amazon and the Malay Archipelago offer fascinating insights into the life of a scientific collector and demonstrate the lengths they went to in order to advance our understanding of the natural world.

Wallace had his fair share of difficulties in navigating the islands of the archipelago. In eight years, he undertook between 60 and 70 separate journeys, travelling an astounding 14,000 miles. These journeys were often undertaken in small local boats, with considerable luggage, and the letters reveal the personal hardships he endured. But it was not all tales of hardship and strife. Marvels at the natural world are abundant and in a letter dated April 1855 (WCP4261), Wallace seeks to educate entomologists on collecting in the tropics by giving an overview of his working day. The original letter no longer survives, but Stevens sent the letter for publication and it appeared in the August 1855 edition of *The Zoologist* journal. In fact, many of Wallace's letters from the East were published in various scientific journals of the time, such was their richness of content.

A WARM FRIENDSHIP

Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin could not have come from more different backgrounds – Darwin had a degree from Cambridge, while Wallace was self-taught. Yet they are forever united by their independent discoveries of natural selection, a theory they jointly published in 1858.

> Letters to and from naturalists, botanists, geologists… all feature in this veritable treasure trove of correspondence, which will facilitate study into Wallace's life and work in a completely new way

What began as a professional acquaintance developed into a warm friendship, which can be traced through their letters they exchanged. These span from 1856 to a few months before Darwin's death in November 1881, and reveal a strong intellectual bond and mutual respect for one another. Unfortunately the letter and essay Wallace sent to Darwin in 1858 that spurred the publication of their theory no longer survives.

Wallace was very much Darwin's intellectual match, as evidenced by their often in-depth scientific discourse. Professional discussion is interwoven with tales of family life and poor health, allowing an intimate picture of the two men to emerge.

BROADENING INTERESTS

Wallace writes to Alfred Newton in 1885, 'I have now almost wholly given up Nat. Hist.[sic] for political and social science' (WCP4063). While not strictly true as he continued to publish on natural history beyond 1885, this statement does demonstrate Wallace had broadened his horizons. He was against militarism, vivisection, compulsory vaccination and for women's suffrage. He became president of the Land Nationalisation Society in 1881, a post held for more than 30 years. He was also an ardent spiritualist and WLO is full of accounts of séances and musings about the spiritual world, which he regarded as being part of the natural world and subject to scientific observation.

What is clear by reading his correspondence is that whatever topic he wrote on, he did so with clarity, poise and passion. Although some have argued his divergence into other topics – particularly spiritualism – detracted from his scientific credibility, it actually reveals so much about his character and morals. He wasn't afraid to speak out on controversial subjects and always did so with clear, intelligent arguments and sometimes statistical analysis, in the case of his anti-vaccination campaign. Wallace should be celebrated for his contributions to so many contemporary issues and for how he became a well-respected authority in many diverse fields.

USING THE DATABASE

Every letter in the digital archive has been individually catalogued and given its own unique reference number. Each one may consist of several different items, for example, an envelope, an enclosure sent with the letter, such as a newspaper clipping or photograph, or a reference to a publication the letter appeared in.

Images and transcripts, where available, can be viewed side by side, making the often unreadable Victorian scrawl intelligible and a PDF of the transcription can be downloaded for private study. Select letters can be added to a personal list, essentially a virtual basket where you can hold records you are interested in. Users can restrict searches to correspondence between two people, date range, item type or owner of the letter or simply search using a keyword.

WLO demonstrates the value of archive collections to the scholarly researcher and amateur historian alike and will hopefully bring the science and exploration of the nineteenth century into the digital age.

With thanks to Dr George Beccaloni, Director of the Wallace Correspondence Project for his help with this article.

The Wallace Correspondence Project has located, digitised and catalogued all known surviving correspondence to and from Wallace and made it available on the Museum's website. Find Wallace Letters Online at **www.nhm.ac.uk/wallacelettersonline**

Go explore

Wallace undertook two important scientific expeditions as a young man, inspired by accounts of earlier travelling naturalists. He journeyed to the Amazon with Henry Walter Bates in April 1848, basing himself in the middle of the Amazon and Rio Negro, and collected specimens both for his private collection and to sell in order to fund his trip. He used his land surveying skills to draft an extremely detailed map of the Rio Negro and Vaupes rivers, which was published by the Royal Geographical Society and became the standard map of the region for many years.

He returned to England in 1852, and in 1854 he travelled east to the Malay Archipelago, where he spent eight years collecting specimens and studying the islands. The book of his travels *The Malay Archipelago* has never been out of print and was apparently Joseph Conrad's favourite bedtime reading.