

Re-visioning Alfred Russel Wallace

Alan Leyin, Thurrock Local History Society, Grays, Essex. UK

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1 INTRODUCTION

Touching lightly upon the subject, the popular historian, A. N. Wilson, refers to the 'Wallace-Darwin theory' of evolution through natural selection (Wilson, 2002; p225). By switching around the names – in true revisionist mode – the author undoubtedly makes a point, based on his own interpretation of the historical tale.

As Charles Lyell and Joseph Dalton Hooker, two shining lights of the day, considered that Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin '*... may both fairly claim the merit of being original thinkers in this important line of inquiry*' (Lyell & Hooker, 1858), exactly how the scythe of time sliced down Wallace is a matter of debate (see Beccaloni, 2008). But whatever the reason for giving Wallace's name primacy (on which the author is silent), the gravitational pull of Darwin ensures that Wilson's particular piece of historical revisionism is unlikely take hold. It does, however, illustrate a point: historical revisionism – disturbing the historical landscape from under our feet – can't but fail to draw our attention. It shakes up the story that we had taken for granted; a story that we thought we knew so well.

The pull of revisionism

Revisionism features not only in popular writings but also in more scholarly works; with James McPherson, president of the American Historical Association, seeing it as '*... the lifeblood of historical scholarship*' (McPherson, 2003). By challenging the orthodox view, revisionism – portrayed, in its more sensationalist form, as 'myth-busting' – can bring its rewards; the more sensational the revision, the greater the potential kudos.

Revisions can be insightful, guiding us toward a greater understanding of the subject; they can also, of course, be absolute nonsense. But hold revisionism in mind for just a short while; and let's move onto another aspect of scholarship within historical studies.

Hagiography

In an invited guest posting, historian of science, John van Wyhe (2013), is critical of the way in which he sees Wallace being portrayed: '*In the hands of admiring amateurs, Wallace has evolved into a heroic but forgotten genius ...*' van Wyhe's criticism extends to the 2013, BBC two-part series, *Bill Bailey's Jungle Hero*,¹ with his contending that '*The title ... – Bill Bailey's Jungle Hero – says it all*' (van Wyhe, 2013). Although it doesn't quite say it all, it does give us a clue as to the nature of the historian's concerns. As the series was generally well-received,² apart from a small number of minor slips, what exactly is the problem? In a thread from van Wyhe's posting, Rebekah Higgitt (2013), also an historian of science, lets us into the debate: '*... historians REALLY dislike lone hero myths, especially historians of science, because science is always a collaborative and social business.*' (Higgitt's emphasis indicates the strength of this view).

¹: *Alfred Russel Wallace*. BBC Natural History Unit/Glassbox productions. 2013.

² *Bill Bailey's Jungle Hero: Wallace in the Spice Islands* won the 'Best Writing' category in the prestigious international Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival. The mini-series won the Royal Television Society West of England Award 2014 for best 'Specialist Factual Programme' and best 'Special Effects & Graphics'; it was one of four programmes nominated for the Wildscreen Film Festival Script Award 2014; and it received an enthusiastic review by Peter Raby (2013), fellow emeritus of Homerton College, Cambridge, author of a widely acclaimed biography of Wallace.

With the tide of historical research flowing in that direction, academics may become a little sensitive to any suggestion they have over-egged any eulogising of their subject. Desmond *et al* (2004) remind us that from the 1990s the biographies of Charles Darwin were notable for their '*abandonment of intellectual hagiography*' (hagiography being the treatment of the subject with undue reverence). In their own biographical sketch, the authors note that within the current framework of historical interpretation, '*Scholars now concern themselves less with Darwin as a heroic thinker than as a Victorian gentleman-naturalist who had the time, income, and nerve to touch the untouchable and make evolution culturally acceptable.*' Not being an historian, I have no idea whether the social and cultural aspects of the historical tale had earlier been ignored; but suffice to say that no analysis would be complete without reference to such factors. We can't know for sure but it seems unlikely, for instance, that Darwin would ever have formulated the theory for which he is famous had he not been blessed with his social advantage, if he had never been invited to board the *Beagle* (a vacancy not open to all; it being private arrangement with the ship's captain, a nephew of the duke of Grafton, to find '*a well-educated gentleman*') (Desmond *et al* (2004) or, indeed, had he not lived within the intellectual milieu that earlier spawned Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*.

One can see the sense in the historians' approach. Whilst not wishing to diminish the importance of individual achievements, these should be placed in the context of time, place and circumstances – and, of course, alongside the work of others. It is within this context, we now understand why some scholars might be a bit sniffy about the title of BBC Wallace programme, *Bill Bailey's Jungle Hero*, as it suggests the very 'lone-hero' scenario likely to get them a bit prickly. (But it was only a *title* of a prime-time television programme; a pithy statement intended to draw in a general audience, not one specifically designed to attract the attention of anyone completing their post-graduate thesis on Victorian naturalists and the nation-state.)

The intriguing case of Wallace

But one of the more intriguing aspects of the Wallace story is precisely that related to the historically contextualised Darwin as a socially advantaged, Victorian gentleman-naturalist with the time and income to pursue his passion. Within that context, Wallace *did* break the mould; without Darwin's social advantages or intellectual network, he arrived at the same destination, with his revelations indeed coming out of the blue, hitting Darwin '*... like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky!*' (Wallace, 1908; p6). Any admiration of the younger naturalist's endurance, achievement and character may, of course, be dismissed as mere hagiography, although to do so would be disingenuous and misguided. But against the backdrop of Higgitt's (2013) dislike for lone-hero myths, one can readily see how the Wallace story might become a prime target for anyone with a strong revisionist agenda, determined to construe (and dismiss) any admiration for the naturalist as hagiography.

2 ENTER THE REVISIONIST ...

'... historiographical myths and legends'

John van Wyhe states that as an historian of science his 'agenda' (his usage of the term) has long been to correct '*... historiographical myths and legends*' (van Wyhe, 2013b). In promoting his book on Wallace, van Wyhe apprises his readers that over the past few decades, '*... the story of Wallace has gradually departed further and further away from the way it was told by Wallace and his contemporaries*' (van Wyhe, 2013b); a state of affairs that he attributes variously to 'Wallace enthusiasts', admirers', or 'fans' (van Wyhe 2013/2013b/2013c). The author entices potential readers into his own narrative: '*The vast gap between the popular view of Wallace and the Wallace revealed by the historical evidence allowed me to radically re-write the story*' (van Wyhe, 2013b), suggesting that the new sources on which he draws '*... have shown us that every substantive claim in the popular narrative about Wallace turns out to be incorrect*' (van Wyhe, 2013c). Now that *is* exciting revisionist stuff – every substantive claim in the popular narrative turns out to be incorrect; who could fail to be drawn in? But with our pulse having lowered, we discover that the author doesn't actually mean what

he says; he only refutes certain aspects of his own construction (a version that should not go uncontested) of the popular view.

The pull of revisionism can prove irresistible. But can its siren call tempt the unwary (and not so unwary) to push the boundaries just a little, perhaps? How can we, the non-specialists, tell when those boundaries – between sense and nonsense – are being tested? John van Wyhe provides us with some useful pointers to guide our critical thinking: ‘... *it is only through contemporary sources and historically informed and contextually sensitive investigation that we can find [the real Wallace]*’ (van Wyhe, 2013b). Surely this is excellent guidance: historically accurate, primary source material that is interpreted within the broader historical context (rather than mere speculation and unsubstantiated opinion) sets the compass for those non-specialists who might wish navigate their way through the literature.

Wallace’s fame – fact of hagiography?

van Wyhe has taken particular exception to Wallace being described as being ‘... *among the most famous Victorian scientists during his lifetime or at his death*’ (in van Wyhe 2013e), suggesting that that such an accolade is a fabrication of ‘Wallace admirers’. This obviously exposes an interesting rift in the interpretation of the historical record: is the extent of Wallace’s fame at the time of his death, fact or hagiography? That question provides us – the non-specialist – with a great opportunity to use van Wyhe’s guidance to help make our own judgment. Let’s see how we get on ...

With reference to the use of contemporary sources as our touchstone, conveniently much of the groundwork has already been done. Charles H. Smith (2014) has collated over 50 contemporaneous sources attesting to Wallace’s fame at time of death. The evidence is impressive: the extent of Wallace’s fame at the time of his death is not fiction, it’s not hagiography; it’s fact.³

The month following the publication of Smith’s evidence, John van Wyhe was to be found addressing an audience at the UK’s Hay Festival, promoting his books on Wallace. During his presentation, the author was still asserting that any allusion to Wallace’s fame was mere hagiography (van Wyhe, 2014). Unfortunately the evidence on which he drew wasn’t as explicit as Smith’s. Although van Wyhe assured his audience that he could refute the claims of the ‘Wallace fans’ if he had more time, the clock was against him. The author may be marshalling a scholarly riposte, using contemporaneous sources, but until that is published, the Hay audience (and, indeed, all of us) have no option other than to rely on the evidence provided by Smith (2014) rather than the opinion of the speaker.

During his promotional talk, the author went on to list what he described as other ‘*Wallace Hagiographies*’ enounced by the ‘Wallace fans’, including the naturalist being described as ‘*the father of biogeography*’ and ‘*the greatest collector of the 19 century*’. Again, the author contended that he could refute all of those points if time were available (van Wyhe, 2014); which it was not. With more time, we now have the opportunity to take a more leisurely stroll.

The father of biogeography – fact or hagiography?

Personally, I have no idea whether it is reasonable to describe Wallace as the ‘*the father of biogeography*’. But I do know it is wrong to imply that such a title is bestowed upon Wallace by only those people that van Wyhe describes as ‘admirers’.

A Google search (entering “the father of biogeography”) produces more hits than even the most ardent ‘Wallace enthusiast’ – or, even, scholar – would ever wish to analyse. But looking through the first 100

³ Smith (2014) augmented the contemporaneous sources with the findings of an on-line search of 60 of the best-known scientists (active between 1900 and 1914), as well as Wallace’s record of publications. On a similar tack – looking for hard evidence, rather than relying on opinion – Beccaloni (2013b), used an analysis based on Google’s Ngram Viewer which, essentially, substantiated Smith’s findings.

hits, the overwhelming majority (96 of them) associate the phrase with Wallace. Of the four remaining, one was a light-hearted reference (but crediting Wallace), two were unclear; and *only one* asserted that it was unjustified to link the phrase Wallace – and that one (you’ve guessed it) was from John van Wyhe. So, however incorrect it might be to associate the phrase with Wallace; associated with him it undoubtedly is. To imply that this is a delusion held only by ‘Wallace admirers’ is grossly misleading.

But *is* the title justified? Well, even Darwin, whilst not actually using the phrase ‘*father of biogeography*’, came pretty close by judging Wallace’s book, *Geographical Distribution of Animals*, to be ‘... a grand and memorable work, which will last for years as the foundation for all treatises on *Geographical Distribution*’, and crediting Wallace with having ‘... laid a broad and safe foundation for all future work on *Distribution*.’ (Darwin to Wallace, 1876). With such effusive contemporaneous praise from Darwin it is not surprising that some people refer to Wallace as ‘*the father of biogeography*’ (not forgetting, of course, that Wallace is remembered eponymously, through the ‘Wallace Line’). Many learned scientific associations also refer to Wallace as such.⁴ Indeed, an editorial in the discipline’s own specialist journal – *The Journal of Biogeography* – highlighting Wallace’s legacy, acknowledges that Wallace is ‘... widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of biogeography’ (Whittaker *et al*, 2013).

From this, my reading is that it wouldn’t be far off the mark to describe Wallace, at least, as *one* of the fathers of the study. But that’s not the main point ... being quick to deride ‘Wallace admirers’ for referring to Wallace as such, whilst remaining silent with regard to the overwhelming majority of others guilty of the same alleged crime, is unjustifiably prejudicial toward a group that van Wyhe has constructed.

‘The greatest collector of the 19 century’ – fact or hagiography?

In a similar vein, by deriding ‘Wallace admirers’ for describing Wallace as ‘*The most prolific collector of the 19th century*’, van Wyhe implies that they were, again, wildly off the mark for doing so. Let’s look at the evidence. Wallace did collect ‘... almost 110,000 insects, 7500 shells, 8050 bird skins, and 410 mammal and reptile specimens, including probably more than 5000 species new to science.’ (Beccaloni & Smith, 2008) – and that’s from his travels in the Malay Archipelago *alone*. So whilst Wallace may or may not have been *the* most prolific collector of the 19th century – again, I simply do not know – one might venture to suggest that he was up there among the top runners.⁵

As van Wyhe keeps us in delightful suspense by not actually disclosing who was ‘*The most prolific collector of the 19th century*’, I turned again to Google to discover (by entering that exact phrase) on whose shoulders that accolade might more appropriately rest.⁶ Only three hits were returned; interestingly *all* three led back to van Wyhe’s own hand (mentioning, although not crediting – in fact, discrediting – Wallace). This is not to suggest that no ‘Wallace admirer’ had ever bestowed the phrase upon Wallace; it’s only that Google can’t find them. Google only associates the ‘unsubstantiated superlative’ with van Wyhe himself. Whilst van Wyhe is not actually stating anything that is technically incorrect – assuming there were collectors more prolific than Wallace – his suggestion that this is a fabrication of ‘Wallace fans’ is, again, misleading.

What might we have gained from this? Well, probably nothing we didn’t already know. As non specialists, we need to be careful of relying on people’s – even scholar’s – interpretations of the historical facts. Best stick with van Wyhe’s guidance of using ‘*contemporary sources and historically informed and contextually sensitive investigation*’. Which brings us to ...

⁴ At least in Zoogeography (one of its two main branches). Associations include, The Linnean Society, Museum of Natural History, Oxford; the National Taiwan Museum (along with many others).

⁵ Whilst in the field, Wallace turned to a number of local people to collect specimens on his behalf, but this would have been the case for most collectors of the time.

⁶ Accessed, 14 December 2014.

3 WHEN REVISIONS BECOME MYTHS

The question of social status

With historians appraising Darwin's achievements within the context of his high social standing and influential networks (in contrast to Wallace having none of these), could anything be gained by attempting to minimise the social distance between Wallace and Darwin? Maybe so ... it would, after all, make good revisionist copy: something like, *'Look, we can finally draw Wallace into the fold; by moulding him in the image of Darwin'*. By informing us that Wallace was *'... a gentleman's son who attended a public school'* (van Wyhe, 2013/2013c), van Wyhe tries to do just that. From such a portrayal it could justifiably (but incorrectly) be inferred that Wallace's background was one of money and privilege, on par with that of Darwin's; a view reinforced by van Wyhe's (2013d) assertion that *'Darwin's family was not so different from the Wallaces in terms of their social class ...'* Let's see how such a case might be constructed.

Portrayal of Wallace as a 'public school boy'

van Wyhe's reference to Wallace as a 'public school boy' (van Wyhe, 2013d) presents a particular trap ready to ensnare the unwary. In the UK, today's reader would undoubtedly associate the term 'public school' with the top few high-status, expensive fee-paying schools (i.e. Eton, Harrow, Rugby, etc) – the educational proving-ground for many of the country's social and political elite.⁷ However, during Wallace's school-days (pre-dating the introduction of State-funded education) the term didn't mean that at all.⁸ Without historically sensitive contextualizing, van Wyhe's portrayal of Wallace as a 'public school boy' serves as much to mislead his readers as does any assertion that the naturalist might have been raised in a shoebox. To have avoided any misinterpretation, it would have been preferable to have avoided the term altogether, or to have explained its use within the historical context. If, however, one wished to add confusion one could, for instance, draw out the phrase 'public school boy' from the text, to have it appear as a sub-heading, type-set in bold ... Oh, I see, someone is ahead of me (van Wyhe, 2013d).

But it is here where the author's guidance of *'historically informed and contextually sensitive investigation'*, can help clear up any misunderstanding. If Wallace's family was *'not so different ... in terms of their social class'* (van Wyhe, 2013d) to that of Darwin's, why might Wallace had considered himself *'... quite unused to good society'* (Wallace, 1905; p433). Would he not have been comfortable in such a setting had his upbringing been similar to Darwin's? That's the kind of contextual information we need to discover the real Wallace.

And whilst not incorrect, reference to Wallace's father as a 'gentleman' (van Wyhe notes that this is recorded on Wallace's birth certificate) does – rightly or wrongly (wrongly in the case of Wallace) – conjure an image of social status and wealth. Wallace was no pauper, but family finances were tight. For instance, although the young Wallace attended a fee-paying school (before state education), owing to the family's financial difficulties, in his final years of formal education his school fees were remitted on condition that he assisted in the school with the teaching of the younger pupils (Wallace,

⁷ Even today in the UK, a disproportionately high number of pupils who have received such an education end up in the Government's Cabinet or in the judiciary.

⁸ Many aspects of the public school system in the UK (as we know it today) were introduced under the Public Schools Act 1868 (way after the naturalists-to-be had left school). Under that Act, less than ten schools were identified as such: Darwin's old school (Shrewsbury) was; Wallace's (Hertford Grammar) wasn't. The respective status of the two schools' remains today; with Darwin's Shrewsbury, remaining one of the UK's top independent schools, and Wallace's Hertford school remaining a Grammar school (a State school, with selection based on academic ability) until 1967 when it became a comprehensive school (a State school, open to all ability levels). The school acquired academy status (a State school, open to all ability levels, having greater managerial autonomy) in 2013.

1905; p58) – Wallace was allowed to remain in the school only if he worked his passage. By the time Darwin had completed his formal education at Christ's College, Cambridge,⁹ Wallace, at a comparable age, had been out, traipsing the countryside, from the age of 14 years, earning his own living for almost eight years. This is not to suggest that Wallace had no education following his leaving school; but it was not of the formal sort that one might ordinarily associate with that of a '*public school boy*' – a 'gentleman's' son whose family's social class, as asserted by van Wyhe, was '*not so different*' from Darwin's. Wallace's secondary education was not to be furthered in the hallowed halls of academe. For him, owing to declining family funds, it was to be found in the rather more informal settings of working men's Mechanics' Institutes, public lectures and the shelves of subscription libraries. For these reasons, genealogists are generally cautious of reading too much into the term 'gentlemen': any assumptions about family circumstances may be wildly off the mark. For us, it's better to stick with the historical facts, rather than being seduced into making inferences.

4 ENTER VOODOO HISTORIOGRAPHY

From here, things get a bit voodoo. For instance, even though Wallace credits Malthus's earlier work as one of the intellectual staging posts on the road to his own theory, van Wyhe (2014b) posits that this may not have been the case. Based on his assertion that '*historians have learned that recollections are extremely unreliable*' (van Wyhe, 2014b), the author – providing us with no evidence, whatsoever – suggests that we cannot know if Wallace had fabricated the Malthus connection, with the revisionist asking, '*How can we know ... We can't.*' (van Wyhe, 2014b).

There seems to be a growing trend for voodoo historiography. We are already aware of van Wyhe's guidance on helping us through our critical analysis for testing the boundary between sense and nonsense. But here another set of criteria for the acceptance of a historical revision appears to have been introduced. This seems to run something like ... (1) we can't be sure about the reliability of a person's recollections (true); (2) therefore other interpretations are permissible (somewhat suspect, depending on the reliability of source material); (3) the new interpretation should be accepted on the basis that it *might* have happened (a slip in the fabric of reality). The logic seems to fall at the first hurdle; although we cannot be *sure* of a person's recollections, we all have to work on the basis of probability (most of us only get out of bed in the morning based on the probability that we won't get electrocuted by the toaster). We make a reasonable judgment of the probability of something being correct, based on what we know of the person and the circumstances. Just because we can't be (absolutely) sure of a person's recollections doesn't mean that their account should be disregarded in favour of something (for which there is no evidence) that *might* have happened. But that seem to be the sole basis, in this instance, of van Wyhe's revision. Not being an historian, I wouldn't know, but my best guess is that part of a scholarly interpretation would be to make a judgement on the reliability of the source material with which one is working; sorting out the historical wheat from the chaff. There may be occasions when the source material is suspect; but to construct a whole new narrative of what *might* have happened when there is absolutely no reason to doubt the veracity of the source, seems to be dragging historiography into some very murky waters.

We can all be confident that the one about Darwin's gay relationship with Wallace (yes, it's out there) is a send-up.¹⁰ But, hang on ... using van Wyhe's historiography – where we are able to construct a narrative based on the supposition that it *might* have happened – '*How can we know ... We can't.*' At least the Darwin-Wallace relationship story was written as a spoof.

And it goes on ... the latest casualty of rabid revisionism is Henry Walter Bates, with van Wyhe's suggesting that the naturalist modified the reference to the search for a solution to the origin of species to promote his own reputation (van Wyhe, 2014c). Beccaloni (2014) and Smith (2014) have

⁹ After attending Edinburgh University.

¹⁰ *World News Daily Report* (2014).

effectively dispatched that one; but once such a myth gets out there, there's no knowing where it will end up.

Not all rules of voodoo historiography can, of course, be known to those outside the priesthood. I still can't work out why, for instance, van Wyhe should challenge Wallace's recollection of his reading Malthus on the sole basis that '*... recollections are extremely unreliable*', whilst tacitly accepting Darwin's recollection (Darwin, 1876b; p83). As both the naturalists' references to Malthus are recollections, everyday logic suggests they should be afforded the same status. There are obviously other rules of voodoo historiography at work, known only to the higher orders of the priestcraft.

5 SO, WHO EXACTLY ARE THE MYTH-MAKERS?

It strikes me that there are inherent dangers in adopting an overt myth-busting agenda. If when researching your subject you stumble upon that rare nugget that allows the story to be re-written, all well and good. But to travel with the express intention '*... to correct historiographical myths and legends*' (van Wyhe, 2013b), might create its own problems: it might become a little addictive; and in a revisionist frenzy one might find oneself tilting at windmills, constructing myths that are not really there.

For instance, van Wyhe's assertion that Wallace was '*... not working class*' is curious (2013/2013c), as most reputable biographical sketches do not suggest Wallace was from such roots. His background is usually described as (albeit downwardly mobile) middle-class (Smith, 2004; Beccaloni & Smith, 2008; Berry, 2013) – a position also taken by popular sketchers (Uhlig, 2010; p190) – or lower middle-class (Stott, 2012; p 275). And even if his working class origins had, at one time, been a bit of a myth, the matter seems to have been competently dealt with by Wallace scholar, Andrew Berry back in 2002: Wallace '*was not ... working class*' (Berry, 2002).¹¹ Undoubtedly, van Wyhe can find an outlier (and he has) suggesting otherwise; but to elevate that to the status of a widely held myth that needs busting, gives it greater credence than it deserves, and itself generates a myth. Would it not have been more helpful to acknowledge the consensus, and place any outliers in perspective? From his present assertion one may infer (wrongly, one suspects) that van Wyhe is out of touch with the mainstream consensus on this matter.

In the re-telling of a story, simple errors are bound to occur; these are unfortunate but excusable. What is more difficult to excuse (and unravel) is voodoo historiography, that either explicitly or implicitly beckons the unwary down the wrong path, leaving them completely disorientated in some dark place where the light of reality rarely penetrates. van Wyhe is quick to criticise the 'Wallace admirers' for departing from the story as '*... told by Wallace and his contemporaries*' (van Wyhe, 2013b) but even quicker to jettison Wallace's own accounts in favour of his own departures based on mere speculation (similarly, with respect to Bates's own account). Fortunately, a few specialists are on to it, and up to the job (for instance, Beccaloni 2014; Smith 2014; Costa, & Beccaloni, 2014).

Much entertainment – or frustration, depending on how seriously you take his constructions – may be had in immersing oneself in some of the myths van Wyhe creates. For instance, we find that on the basis pure supposition, the author suggests that '*... tiger beetles would become the unsung inspiration for Wallace's evolutionary breakthrough [...] equivalent of Darwin's legendary finches*', sparking the '*... greatest breakthrough of his life*' (van Wyhe, 2013d; p135/186/186). Such constructions are possible only in a discourse that requires little or no evidence. Wallace himself didn't mention this revelation; but under van Wyhe's assumed criteria for a revision's acceptance that doesn't, of course; matter; it *might* have happened – and that's good enough. (Sure, Wallace mentions tiger beetles but not as the revelatory insight sparking his theory.) It is here where the implications of van Wyhe's historiography starts to get seriously weird; if Wallace *had* recollected that the tiger beetles provided the key to his own theory, the revisionist could have then *dismissed* the naturalist's account on the basis that

¹¹ Either way, one has to acknowledge that Wallace had to earn his living from the age of 14 years.

'historians have learned that recollections are extremely unreliable'. That's the value of working with the laws of voodoo historiography, revisionists can play it either way.

But, however untrue van Wyhe's compass might have been pointing, it looks as though it may have been re-set with the author's subsequent sober reflection and part retraction: '*... So did tiger beetles prompt Wallace to think of natural selection? Maybe. Again we can't be sure*' (van Wyhe, 2014b). Unfortunately, it is likely that more people will read the author's unequivocal revisionist myth than the part retraction, perpetuating a newly developed myth.

6 WHEN WORDS FAIL

During the Hay Festival, van Wyhe (2014) claimed that he was being attacked by '*Wallace fans for – what they think is – attacking their hero*'. The construction is convenient: by labelling people such (in a way that is patently designed to be disparaging), one can dismiss the 'Wallace fans' without having to spend too much time or effort actually addressing their arguments. I suspect that what the author construes as attacks are more windmills; in reality rather straightforward attempts to right the historical record; correcting errors he has made (see Costa & Beccaloni (2014), for instance), or expressions of broader frustrations over voodoo historiography.

It is equally misguided to accuse those who admire Wallace of hagiography. Whilst giving undue reverence to one's subject seems a rather pointless pursuit, any fitting recognition (and indeed the honouring) of individuals who have broadened our intellectual horizon seems an aspect of our cultural heritage that's worth preserving. The *recognition* of, and admiration for, achievement *is not* hagiography – it only become such if there is evidence that a person's attributes have been too liberally gilded or that circumstances have been massaged in some way to promote a particular view. And just because one scholar suggests that a bunch of 'Wallace admirers' have spent their leisure hours idly engaged in Wallace hagiography, doesn't necessarily mean that it's true.

But it is here where van Wyhe has one great advantage over those people he describes as 'Wallace fans'. Whilst the word 'hagiography' provides academic respectability to the treating of one's subject with undue reverence, there is no recognised antonym having similar gravitas. So people who spot what might be best described as the derogation of the subject, are instantly on the back foot as they have no academically-sanctioned word to describe it. But things will change; things will sort themselves out; and history will come down hard on faux revisionisms, once a suitable label has been coined for the process.

In the meantime, we all need to proceed with caution. Fortunately, the non-specialist has a vast array of information on which to base his or her own judgement. Along with Charles H. Smith (The Alfred Russel Wallace Page) < <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/index1.htm> >, George Beccaloni (The Alfred Russel Wallace website) < <http://wallacefund.info/> >, and the Natural History Museum (The Wallace Correspondence Project) < <http://wallaceletters.info/content/homepage> >, John van Wyhe (Wallace-online website) < <http://wallace-online.org/> > has contributed greatly to the public access of Wallace-related material. We should all be making full use of these superb resources.

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