

Book Proposal:
**Alfred Russel Wallace in North America:
The 1886-1887 Lecture Tour**

Introduction

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) is often regarded as the second most important figure (after Charles Darwin) in the development of the idea of evolution by natural selection, arguably the most important scientific theory. He is also known as the “father” of modern biogeographical studies and history’s front-ranking field and tropical biologist, and as an independent and humanitarian spirit who immersed himself in the various social causes of his time. He is further remembered, though not so generally, as an important contributor to the literature of physical geography and glaciology, anthropology and ethnography, and even astronomy. His book *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) is considered one of the best scientific travel studies ever written, and remains the single most famous work on its subject. A number of years ago a semi-formal survey ranked him as the ninth most important figure in the history of biology.

Being in the shadow of Darwin, however, Wallace is still rather under-studied – partly because of the vast range of his interests and their complex interrelations, but also because of his somewhat maverick nature, and apparent unwillingness to compete for priority of attention. Nevertheless, interest in him continues to grow. Between 2001 and 2004 four major biographies appeared¹ (there have been several other monographic studies over the past ten years as well, including three of my own), and there are now two extensive websites (including my own, opened in 1998) devoted to Wallace studies, plus two current large-scale, well-funded, projects that will make his correspondence, manuscripts, and writings publicly available as pdf files on the internet by 2013.

My role in this process has been a bibliographic, historical, and philosophical one, and I am now regarded as a central figure in this renaissance of attention. Over the years my historical research has unearthed (or rediscovered, if you will) some six hundred published writings of Wallace’s that had slipped out of the collective awareness, and I continue to make new discoveries at a steady rate. (I also investigate writings *on* him and his work.) I have put most of this material up online in transcribed full-text, now extending to nearly a thousand files.

I have also been involved in re-interpreting Wallace’s intellectual evolution, and how his understanding of natural selection differs from Darwin’s in ways that could contribute to an improved (scientific) research agenda on the subject.² This has led to some dozen published papers (plus another dozen on purely historical subjects), and seven or eight invitations to speak internationally at conferences (some of which I have acceded to, when funding was available). I have been working on Wallace for about thirty years now, so bring a considerable amount of experience to the table at this point.

The Book Project

This new project is an effort to produce an “enhanced transcription” of the journal/diary Wallace kept during his ten-month North American lecture tour of 1886-1887. Wallace’s tour extended across the entire U. S. (he visited twenty-five or twenty-six different states) and a small portion of Canada. By that point in his life (several years after the death of Darwin) he was, judging from contemporary reports, the most famous naturalist in the world. The journal itself is not a literary diary; it more resembles (not surprisingly) a naturalist’s field book. Still, it is filled with interesting impressions, notes, and even a few sketches.

I have been able to secure a DVD copy of the journal from its keeper, the Linnean Society of London, and have finished the transcription *per se*. My collaborator (see below) and I are now in the process of working up the “enhancements.” These will include a route map, Introduction, general editorial notes on the text, fifty or more period photos, selections from newspaper and other coverage of the tour, excerpts from letters Wallace wrote and works he published during the trip, insertion of elaborations on the trip made in his autobiography *My Life* (1905), separate lists of plants he saw/collected and places he visited, and a sizable biographical appendix (Wallace identifies over 135 people he met for whom entries are even now to be found in major biographical compendia such as the *DSB*, *Who Was Who*, and the *American National Biography*). More than five-sixths of this additional work is complete at this point.

Over the past couple of years I have had time to contact many dozens of libraries and other institutions to retrieve needed (and usually very obscure) materials. With grant support in the late summer of 2011 I visited London for five weeks, and dove into related archival materials available at the Natural History Museum, Royal Geographical Society, and British Library.

I expect the entire work to run to about 260 to 300 pages in print, of which about 175 pages will be the journal itself (plus text notes), and the rest the various appendices. We should be able to provide camera-ready text. Ideally, the book should be published by May 2013, when there are plans for a conference in England celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of Wallace’s death. At least two other such conferences are being planned internationally for 2013, and my colleague George Beccaloni at the Natural History Museum (London), another Wallace investigator, informs me he knows of at least six other books that are in preparation that are connected with the centennial.

As the main directing figure, I am first editor on this project; my co-editor is Megan Derr, a former student assistant of mine. Ms. Derr, a Communication and IT graduate (two bachelor degrees) who now works for a biotech firm, has already contributed to the transcription process in a number of fundamental ways, and has taken over the technical portion (text formatting etc.) of the manuscript and graphical images preparation now that the text is largely completed and all the figures chosen/designed.

At least three main audiences for this work seem evident. First, historians and students of late nineteenth century America: Wallace was a famous field observer (some would argue the *most* famous field observer), and his comments on landscapes, people, and institutions of the period are informative. (Further, it appears that published observations of this type on late nineteenth century America are not very numerous.) Second, students of biodiversity: Wallace lists many of the plant species he encountered on a number of “botanizing” jaunts he undertook during the trip, and their presence might be checked against current circumstances (several years back another of his journals, recording Amazon River system fishes, was done up in similar fashion for publication). Third, students of Wallace himself: for any major figure, journals of their experiences provide substantial insights.

A synopsis of my own background may be found at: <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/index.html> I have released five books (including two for Oxford University Press), several dozen articles (and about forty book reviews), and maintain a dozen “informational” websites on a range of natural history and music subjects. I have published writings in both *Science* and *Nature*, and had writings of mine reviewed in each. I currently belong to several professional societies, including the Linnean Society of London (by independent nomination, and then election), generally regarded as the world’s most prestigious biological sciences professional society. My websites have won several notable awards, including one of Scientific American’s “five best science history/biography sites of the year” notices for my *Alfred Russel Wallace Page*. I have been honored with a *Wikipedia* page, appear in five *Marquis Who’s Who* editions, and am currently on the final short-list for a University distinguished professorship here. A different kind of look at my efforts may also be gathered by googling: “charles h. smith” AND wku (or, as more directly related to this proposal: “charles h. smith” AND “alfred russel wallace”).

We have not settled on a title yet. I can provide names of prospective reviewers on request, as well as further text excerpts.

Notes

1. Peter Raby, *Alfred Russel Wallace A Life* (2001); Michael Shermer, *In Darwin’s Shadow* (2002); Martin Fichman, *An Elusive Victorian* (2003); Ross Slotten, *The Heretic in Darwin’s Court* (2004).

2. Although the theory of natural selection is accepted by all life scientists but fringe elements (and many laypeople with no real knowledge of the subject), the exact manner in which it operates has been under constant discussion ever since its inception. Wallace’s version of natural selection differs considerably from Darwin’s, a fact that is both troubling, and suggestive of possible new directions.

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