

The Alfred Russel Wallace Correspondence Project and Wallace Letters Online

Alfred Russel Wallace OM, LLD, DCL, FRS, FLS (1823–1913) was one of the 19th century's most remarkable polymaths. Not only was he the co-discoverer with Charles Darwin of evolution by natural selection, but he made many other notable contributions to science; not just to biology, but also to fields such as glaciology, anthropology, epidemiology, and astrobiology. His pioneering work on evolutionary biogeography led to him becoming regarded as the 'father' of that discipline, and Wallace's Line, the boundary he proposed between the faunas of the Oriental and Australasian regions, is even familiar to non-specialists. Beyond this, Wallace was one of the most highly regarded collectors and field biologists of tropical regions of the 19th century and his book *The Malay Archipelago* is one of the most celebrated travel writings of that century and has never been out of print. Wallace was also a vocal supporter of a variety of controversial non-scientific subjects, such as spiritualism, socialism, land reform, and women's rights, but this didn't turn the scientific community against him as some have supposed. Instead he received some of science's most prestigious honors and awards, including: the Darwin–Wallace and Linnean Gold Medals of the Linnean Society of London; the Copley, Darwin and Royal Medals of the Royal Society; and the Order of Merit (which is awarded by the ruling monarch as the highest civilian honor

of Great Britain). Historian of science Sherrie Lyons recently remarked that "...Wallace has to be one of the most interesting people in the history of science." (Lyons, 2011)—a sentiment shared by many who have studied his life and work.

Research on Wallace has unfortunately often been hampered by the difficulty of obtaining copies of his surviving letters, since (perhaps surprisingly) no serious attempt has ever been made to compile and publish them. Approximately 4800 letters to and from Wallace are known, but these are scattered amongst the collections of over 150 institutions in several countries and no catalogue of them has been published. In 2009 funds were sought to set-up the Wallace Correspondence Project (WCP) at the Natural History Museum, London, and in July 2010 we secured a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation of £200,730 over a three-year period, to fund phase 1 of the project. This phase aims to locate, catalogue, and summarize Wallace's letters and make the information available free of charge via an easy to use website. Phase 2, which will be more costly, will focus on producing scholarly annotated transcripts of the letters, plus a number of 'popular' and academic publications such as a Calendar of Correspondence.

Work on the WCP officially began in October 2010 and Wallace Letters Online (WLO) was formally launched on 24 January 2013, with around 95%

of Wallace's known surviving correspondence in the digital archive; the remainder of which will be added to in the coming months. WLO brings together all surviving letters to and from Wallace, both personal and academic, for the first time and this new resource offers unprecedented insight into his life and work. Highlights from WLO include the fascinating letters he wrote and received during his epic trip to the Malay Archipelago between 1854 and 1862, and his complete correspondence with Charles Darwin, which has never been published in full before, complete with transcriptions so the letters can be read more easily. Two of his collecting notebooks from the Malay Archipelago which are owned by the Natural History Museum have also been digitized and are included in the digital archive.

Collating, transcribing and making this material freely available online marks a huge advance in understanding Wallace and presents a wealth of new information for those interested in Wallace's life, work and beliefs.

Some key letters from WLO are:

WCP346: Wallace to Henry Walter Bates, 28th December 1845. Wallace discusses his views of the book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*—the work which convinced him of the reality of evolution and started him on his quest to discover the mechanism which drives it.

Wallace, cont.

WCP348: Wallace to Bates, 11th October 1847. This letter contains his famous statement “I begin to feel rather dissatisfied with a mere local collection—little is to be learnt by it. I sh[oul]d like to take some one family, to study thoroughly—principally with a view to the theory of the origin of species. By that means I am strongly of [the] opinion that some definite results might be arrived at.” This was the prelude to Wallace suggesting to Bates that they go on an expedition to Brazil to collect birds, butterflies and beetles in order to try to discover what drives the evolution of new species.

WCP349: Wallace to Richard Spruce, 19th September 1852. “On Friday the 6th of August... about 9 o’clock in the morning just after breakfast the Captain (who was the owner of the vessel) came into the cabin & said “I am afraid the ship’s on fire. Come & see what you think of it”“. Twenty-six days into the voyage, in the mid-Atlantic, the ship had caught fire and sank, taking his specimens down with it. Wallace and the crew took to the lifeboats and, miraculously, were rescued 10 days later.

WCP1703: Wallace to his agent Samuel Stevens, 21st August 1856. This letter is the first mention of Wallace’s famous discovery of what was later named the Wallace Line—the invisible boundary between the animals of Asia and the Australian region.

WCP609: Charles Darwin to Wallace, 23rd February 1867. Darwin and Wallace became good friends. In this letter Darwin writes “On Monday evening I called on Bates & put a difficulty before him, which he could not answer, & as on some former similar occasion, his first suggestion was, “you had better ask Wallace”. My difficulty is, why are caterpillars sometimes so beautifully & artistically coloured?” Darwin was puzzled because his theory of sexual selection (where females choose their mates based on how attractive they are) would not apply to caterpillars since they are immature.

Wallace replied the next day (**WCP4083**) with the suggestion that since some caterpillars “... are protected by a disagreeable taste or odour, it would be a positive advantage to them never to be mistaken for any of the palatable caterpillars, because a slight wound such as would be caused by a peck of a bird’s bill almost always I believe kills a growing caterpillar. Any gaudy & conspicuous colour therefore, that would plainly distinguish them from the brown & green eatable caterpillars, would enable birds to recognise them easily as at a kind not fit for food, & thus they would escape seizure which is as bad as being eaten.”

Thus the concept of warning or aposematic colouration in animals was born.

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 extent of the Natural History Museum correspondence is such that it 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 from all the key figures in the history of nineteenth century science such as Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, Henry Walter Bates, Charles Lyell, Alfred Newton, John Lubbock and Asa Gray to name but a few represented in the catalogue, it reads like a who’s who of the era’s most important and influential scientific figures, reflecting the reach of Wallace’s interests.

Wallace Letters Online can be accessed at www.nhm.ac.uk/wallacelettersonline

Please note that the WCP is always on the lookout for letters we do not know about e.g. ones in private collections. If you know of any then we would be very grateful if you could contact us. We are also looking for volunteers to help transcribe letters—especially volunteers who already have experience of transcribing sometimes difficult Victorian handwriting and who also have an

Wallace, cont.

Internet connection. Volunteers will be sent batches of letters as jpg images, which we need to have transcribed as word processor files and emailed back to us. Full credit will be given for all transcriptions. If you would like to volunteer please contact the WCP Archivist Caroline Catchpole: email c.catchpole@nhm.ac.uk

The museum is also co-ordinating Wallace100, a celebration of the life and legacy of Wallace this year, the centenary of his death. More information can be found about this at www.nhm.ac.uk/wallace100

Reference

Lyons, S. 2011. Review: Natural Selection & Beyond: The Intellectual Legacy of Alfred Russel Wallace. *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*, 31.5: 7.1 - 7.3 (available online at <http://reports.ncse.com/index.php/rncse/article/view/66/57>)

D. Kim Foundation for the History of Science and Technology in East Asia



From left to right: Shigehisa Kuriyama, Christopher Cullen, Dong-Won Kim, Angela K. Leung, Stuart W. Leslie and Takehiko Hashimoto.

The D. Kim Foundation for the History of Science and Technology in East Asia is pleased to offer several annual fellowship awards and grants for 2014. Established in 2008 the D. Kim Foundation is dedicated to furthering the study of the history of science and technology in East Asia since the beginning of the 20th century.

The Foundation provides fellowships and grants to encourage and support graduate students and young scholars in the field. Comparative studies of East Asia and the West as well as studies in related fields (mathematics, medicine and public health) are also welcome.

For more information, see www.dkimfoundation.org