



Palgrave Entry on Alfred Russel Wallace

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ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE

by Mason Gaffney

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) discovered independently the principle of natural selection which he and Charles Darwin co-published in 1858. Wallace's specialty was zoogeography, consonant with his early work as a surveyor and his later on land policy. "Wallace's Line" through the Makassar Straits dividing Indo-Malayan from Austro-Malayan fauna is an enduring, if modified monument. His Geographical Distribution of Animals (1876) has dominated the field.

The acclaim given to natural selection gave new authority to the natural scientist, shaping ideas of social conduct based on new insights into man and nature. For Wallace it was land, man and nature. He was influenced by the young Herbert Spencer of Social Statics (1850) who wrote then of equal rights to land.

"Survival of the fittest" (Spencer's apothegm) lent itself easily to legitimize predation among humans, reinforcing the dismal doctrines of Malthus. "Social Darwinism" as articulated by the later Spencer, T.H. Huxley, W.G. Sumner and others became a materialistic, evolution-minded elitism. But Wallace saw mental, social and spiritual factors guiding human evolution. He put his scientist's prestige on the popular side of social issues.

Land policy was aflame with strife. Wallace was outraged by the clearances of the times, and past enclosures, and Irish landlordism, and slums where evictees huddled. In The Malay Archipelago (1869) he digressed from natural science to laud primitives as civilized, and score Britain as barbaric. John Stuart Mill sought Wallace out to join the Land Tenure Reform Association which occupied Mill's last years, 1871-73.

Mill's object was to nationalize future increments of land value (or perhaps of rent). Wallace deferred, but later grew more radical, moved by the Irish land agitation. In 1880 he criticized Parnell's program for Irish peasant proprietorship as not abolishing privilege, but merely reshuffling some titles.

In 1881 The Land Nationalization Society was formed on Wallace's lines, with him as president. In Land Nationalization (1882) he laid out his program. The state was to assume title to

all land, compensating holders with an annuity for the duration of lives in being, based on the same net income from the land derived before nationalization. All men could now lease parcels for use, consummating the natural relation of man to nature, alternating between industry and agriculture.

Land nationalization was not collectivist. Lessees were to have secure tenure and tenant-rights to improvements. Rents to the state would be based on the assessed "inherent value", dependent only on natural conditions. As a surveyor and a biogeographer Wallace readily distinguished inherent value from man's improvements to land, which he saw as transitory.

Present holders would lose the right to sell; to bequeath; and to let land. They could only hold what they occupied and used themselves. Wallace saw land inheritance as a dysgenic factor in human evolution, giving an artificial advantage to unfit heirs both individually and in their collective power to control social evolution.

Wallace held that man's mind overrode the action of natural selection on his body. The mind understood and controlled natural forces. Without inheritance natural selection would be based on individual merit. Universal education would delay marriage; social reform would reduce male death rates, and female choice would replace Malthusian frightfulness as the engine of selection to improve the race.

Wallace's view was kindred in spirit to Henry George's Progress and Poverty (1879), although Wallace had less regard for the market. Both saw man as needing land. Their mutual disapproval of Parnellism brought them together, and both submerged methodological differences to further their common concept. Wallace gave him a platform when George toured Britain. Wallace cast George as a theorist who confirmed Wallace's inductive argument, perhaps underrating George's journalistic background. For many years single tax and land nationalization were closely linked by friend and foe. To Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith they were two arms of a pincers, driven together by valuation: "Tax or Buy" was his slogan.

In later years Wallace went socialist, but continued to support single tax which from 1895 to 1914 dominated land reform efforts in Britain. But land reform which it came in the Town and Country Planning Act (1947), although neither would have owned it, evinced more Wallace than George.

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MASON GAFFNEY

See also GEORGE, HENRY.

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