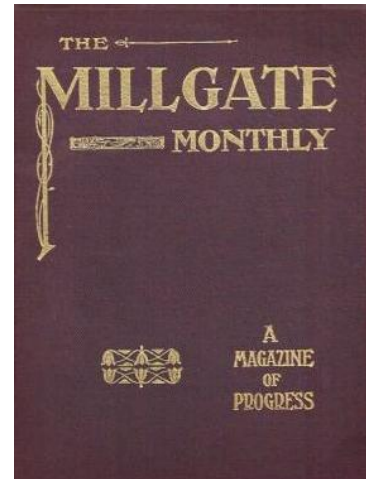


The Last of the Great Victorians

Special interview with Dr Alfred Russel Wallace

Frederick Rockell, *The Millgate Monthly*, July 1912

(...) I asked Dr. Wallace concerning his latest book, in which he has sought to show from the wealth of his scientific experience, and indeed has demonstrated to the satisfaction of many, that evolution has been purposive, and not the outcome of chance--that the universe shows not merely design but intention. With some diffidence I gave expression to the thought that had often come to me, that the endless manifestations of beauty that the world affords, are beautiful by reason of the intention that they should serve for man's æsthetic delight. With the Lamarckian view in my mind, I went on to suggest that evolution was caused by the inherent life force in each cell, plant, or animal pushing outwards towards a development and satisfaction of its own needs.



"You are on the right lines," said Dr. Wallace, "but there is something more than that. The push is there, but it has an intention behind it--that intention being to spread life out in an infinite variety for the development to the utmost fulness of the mind of man. But for this intention towards infinite variety, the world would present a monotonous sameness in no wise conducive to mental development." I thought of Herbert Spencer's definition of evolution being a progression from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, as Dr. Wallace continued to develop this line of thought.

"In certain parts of the tropics, you will, in the space of a few yards, find a hundred or more plants of different species, getting nourishment out of the same air and the same soil. And out of this same soil, each of these different plants not only develop different aspects of the beautiful, but yield a wide variety of quite different chemical products. In exactly the same environment these widely differing plants have evolved in widely different directions, because of the underlying intention that they should evolve in such bewildering, but purposive diversity."

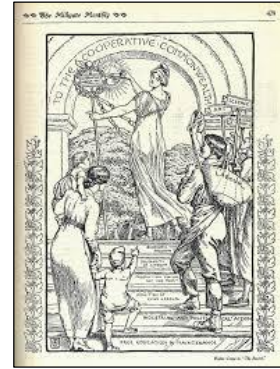
"It was a fortunate fate that took you to the Amazons," I remarked.

"Yes, but you do not need to go to the tropics to see evidences of this wonderful variety; for not even in England will you find two square yards of ground exactly alike. Look at any hedgerow, and you cannot fail to be struck by its wonderful diversity of form and colour. A botanist clergyman in the north of England," Mr. Wallace went on to say, "has made this subject a matter of careful investigation. He has botanically examined different meadows all yielding this diverse result; and, even in pasture land, where, through cultivation, there is a man-made limit to variety, each square yard of meadow is found to yield different proportions of the grasses or clovers that are cultivated."

"But not only is this wonderful variety displayed on this earth, but our planet is different from all others--an orderly and purposive variety being the keynote of the universe."

"And the object of all this heterogeneity?" I asked.

"The purpose of it is to provide for the development of man in endless diversity, not of body, but of mind. So far as bodily structure is concerned, man's evolution is finished. Man's physical structure stopped evolving when he began to use outside aids to express his individuality. When man discovered fire and its uses; when he made weapons and invented traps; when he began to use tools; when he developed speech; when he commenced to conquer nature; then further evolution was shifted from the physical to the mental plane."



"Physical dissemblances between men are as nothing compared with their wide mental differences. In the various gradations between the ordinary man and the genius, what wonderful variety! And between men of genius these differences are even more striking. The products of their genius alone show this. What infinite variety of thought and emotion in the music of Beethoven, the plays of Shakespeare, the philosophy of Spencer, the theories of Newton, the art of Michelangelo! But cui bono?"

Now, as is well-known, Dr. Wallace has for a number of years past expressed his lively conviction of the truth of spiritualism, so that in following his view of what happens after death, we leave the realm of tangible evidence and stand on the threshold of regions of investigation which the ordinary man may not care to enter.

But whatever may be the grounds of his faith, it was impossible to hear Dr. Wallace talk on the subject for five minutes without perceiving that to him spiritualism was no mere working hypothesis, nor a question of speculation, but a conviction settled beyond cavil or dispute. I did not, therefore, question him as to the evidences of his belief. I was more interested to learn what that belief had taught him as to man's destiny--what was man's state after death?

"We gather from people who have passed over that man goes on developing in the spiritual world towards that infinite variety which is the object of life on earth (...) The earth life is necessary in order, as it were, to get a point of departure for the individual spirit."

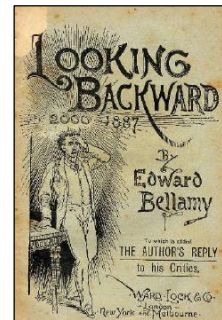
"Is there any birth, then, in the spiritual world?"

"As far as can be ascertained, no! Although there appears to be a continuous condition of ecstatic union on the spiritual plane; but knowledge on that point is vague."

A volume of poetry of Thomas Lake Harris lay on the table. Dr. Wallace picked it up and handed it to me. "You will find more spiritual discernment in the writings of Lake Harris than in any other modern writer." I opened the book at random, and read "Fear is the insanity of the soul." "That is a great thought, the soul that is in perfect health knows no fear, because it realises that it is part of the divine order (...) But, speaking of insanity I am of the opinion that we shall never learn how to cure it until we go back to the discarded view that insanity is possession--possession by evil spirits. On the material side, of course, there may be a lesion in the brain tissues or some destruction or degeneration of brain cells by a poisonous disease or by alcoholism, permitting the entrance of some alien evil spirit."

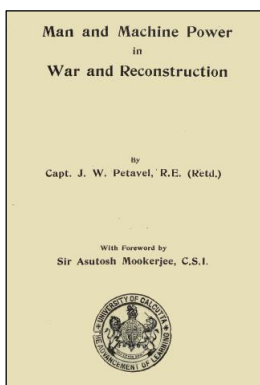
Dr. Wallace, however, is a many-sided man, and he next began to talk of Socialism. I sat facing a portrait of Herbert Spencer, and, pointing to it, asked my host how he got over Spencer's well-known arguments against militarising industry under the State.

"In his objections to Socialism Herbert Spencer is illogical, as he is also on the land question, upon which he changed his views. To the individualist, the great bugbear is the State. But it is such a bugbear, largely because people cannot free their minds from a conception of the State based on its existing organisation from above downwards; with its tenacious clinging to established caste and class privileges. Socialism, on the contrary, implies government from the people upwards, based on the idea of mutual love and service; whereas the individualist idea of Government is akin to the view of Hobbes that the State is a leviathan which presses from the top downwards."



It was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* that converted Dr. Wallace to Socialism, or, shall we say, to Communism, for in the ideal state envisaged by Dr. Wallace, there is no inequality of reward, no paying of big salaries to highly placed officials, but a real community of interest.

"The existing division of society into rich and poor is preposterous. That there should be some who are rich beyond the dreams of avarice, while others starve in the midst of plenty, is an evil that cries loudly for redress."

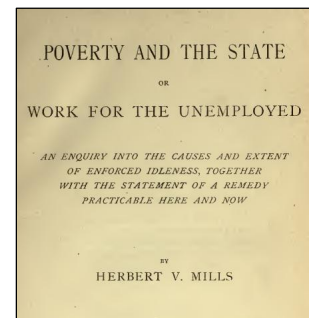


Dr. Wallace has written voluminously on social questions, but not only is he the quintessence of modesty with regard to his own writings, but he is ungrudging of praise to others. He went on to speak in high terms of the social schemes of Captain Petavel and Herbert V. Mills for providing work for all. *"An economist and statistician of the highest repute in America has shown that under modern economic organisation, a surprisingly small number of men are required to produce the necessaries of life for all. As a result of the great ease with which wealth can be produced, we get the phenomenon of unemployment, that economic lever which raises profits at one end of the beam, and depresses wages at the other. What we have got to do is to drain off the*

unemployed into self-supporting colonies like those established by Captain Petavel and advocated by Herbert V. Mills (...) Now there is a right way and a wrong way of doing this. The Salvation Army has adopted the wrong way. In their colonies they have proceeded on the plan of growing things for the general market, confining their attentions to a few saleable commodities. What is the result? Their produce enters an already overstocked market, where sellers compete with one another to reduce prices. Moreover, the sellers have to pay all the costs of marketing their crops, including railway freights, market dues, middlemen's profits, and other charges. The money return to the colonists is therefore far below the real value of the commodities produced. Nor is this all. When the colonists have got the money, they have to buy food, clothing, and household necessaries at retail price, i.e., at the cost of production plus railway freights, and middlemen's profits, both wholesale and retail. Or, to put the matter in a nutshell, they sell cheap and buy dear. Can it be wondered at that colonies so managed struggle on and finally fail?"

"On the Mills and Petavel plan, however, production is carried on for use. Mr. Mills has gone into the question in a scientific manner, showing on a given acreage of land what are the exact proportions of various crops and stock to secure an economic dovetailing of industries that will

make each colony practically self-supporting and independent of markets and middlemen. On a given acreage, with a given population, so much space would be devoted to growing corn as would provide sufficient bread for the needs of the colony; so much space for pasture to provide enough milk and meat for the colonists, and enough wool for their clothing, and hides for tanning into leather. Skilfully organised, such a colony would be practically self-supporting. And each person would be taught two or more trades. Each worker would become proficient in an indoor and an outdoor occupation, so that there would be variety instead of monotony of employment, and no time run to waste when conditions were unsuitable for either indoor or outdoor work. Such a colony would get for itself the full value of the work done, because the mechanism of exchange would not absorb half the value of the wealth produced, as is the case now. A few fruit trees on such a colony would provide fresh fruit or preserves all the year round for the colonists; whereas if railed to a big town, the freights and middlemen's profits might absorb all the money return, as sometimes actually happens to fruit-growers when a glut forces prices down to a low point. As for the few necessaries or luxuries not actually produced on the colony, these could be purchased by the sale of whatever crops were grown in excess of their own actual requirements, a full and varied life being thus secured."



Dr. Wallace next referred to an educational system that has been proposed, and which has his enthusiastic support. This system starts on the assumption that all class distinctions are to be abolished. An education Act would be passed, under which the children of the slums, the children of the artisans, of agricultural labourers, of the middle-classes, and of the aristocracy would go to school together from infancy. These schools would be day-schools, and on entering in the morning, all the children would be undressed and bathed. They would then be dressed again, but not in their own clothes, for uniforms would be provided so that the class distinction of dress, as expounded by Carlyle in his philosophy of clothes, would no longer operate. The advantage claimed for this system, by Dr. Wallace, is that it would break down the caste that arises from differences of education; nor would harm come to the children of the upper classes, for all would tend to approximate to the highest type by force of example. Dr. Wallace did not appear to think there was any danger of the lower morals or manners of the slum children contaminating the others, and went on to say that these schools would be entirely supported by the State, and that school-time would extend to the age of twenty-five. Seeing a look of surprise on my face, he went on to say that this would involve no economic loss to the community, because of the greater value to the State of young men and women when their education, which would be manual as well as scholastic, was finished. Their added economic value in efficiency would more than pay the whole cost of their education and support up to the age of twenty-five years.

With the magic of his personality, Dr. Wallace conjured up before me a Utopia, where noble men and beautiful women with sweet children lived in a state of refinement, harmony, and plenty. I did not like to break the spell of the vision by any untoward remark, but a sceptical vein that runs through my most optimistic moments prompted me to ask: "Under such a scheme, where plenty reigned, would not the population so increase that poverty would eventually come in again?"

This had the result of stirring up the great scientist to make a vigorous protest. "*The theory propounded by Malthus is the greatest of all delusions. As man develops towards a higher type; as he becomes more refined and more civilised, so his fecundity decreases. Low down in the*

scale of life, birth is only limited by available sustenance. But the higher grows the type, the less is the fecundity. This is true, not only of ascending types in the evolutionary scale, but it is also true of ascending man. The fecundity of the slums is much greater than that of Mayfair. As man progresses in comfort and refinement, he tends to have fewer progeny; as witness the millions of India and China, compared with the almost stationary population of England, and the declining native population of France. Besides, if young people continued at school until the age of twenty-five, early marriages would be discountenanced, for public opinion would not tolerate marriage during the educational period."

"But you must not dream that I approve of any of the modern eugenic heresies that are now being advocated. I feel a little sore on this point because in a popular scientific publication that has just been sent to me, I am referred to as spending the evening of my days in furthering the teaching of eugenics. Wherever did I advocate any such preposterous theories? Not a reference to any of my writings; not a word is quoted in justification of this scientific libel. Where can they put their finger on any statement of mine that as much as lends colour to such an assertion? Why, never by word or deed have I given the slightest countenance to eugenics. Segregation of the unfit, indeed! It is a mere excuse for establishing a medical tyranny. And we have enough of this kind of tyranny already. Even now, the lunacy laws give dangerous powers to the medical fraternity. At the present moment, there are some perfectly sane people incarcerated in lunatic asylums simply for believing in spiritualism. The world does not want the eugenicist to set it straight. Give the people good conditions, improve their environment, and all will tend towards the highest type. Eugenics is simply the meddlesome interference of an arrogant, scientific priestcraft. There are no really bad people; no one absolutely beyond reclaim. That is where our prison system is all wrong. We treat our prisoners as though they were utterly bad. There are none utterly bad, but only different degrees of goodness. When we understand that, we shall give up our absurd ideas of punishing crime, and shall, instead, try to reform the criminal."

I got up to go. But Dr. Wallace was in no hurry to let me depart. For nearly three hours, however, he had been talking, and that must involve no small strain on a man of ninety. So I persisted in taking my departure, although the charm of his personality almost overcame my judgment, and I would fain have stayed a little longer, to sit at his feet and absorb the wisdom of two centuries.