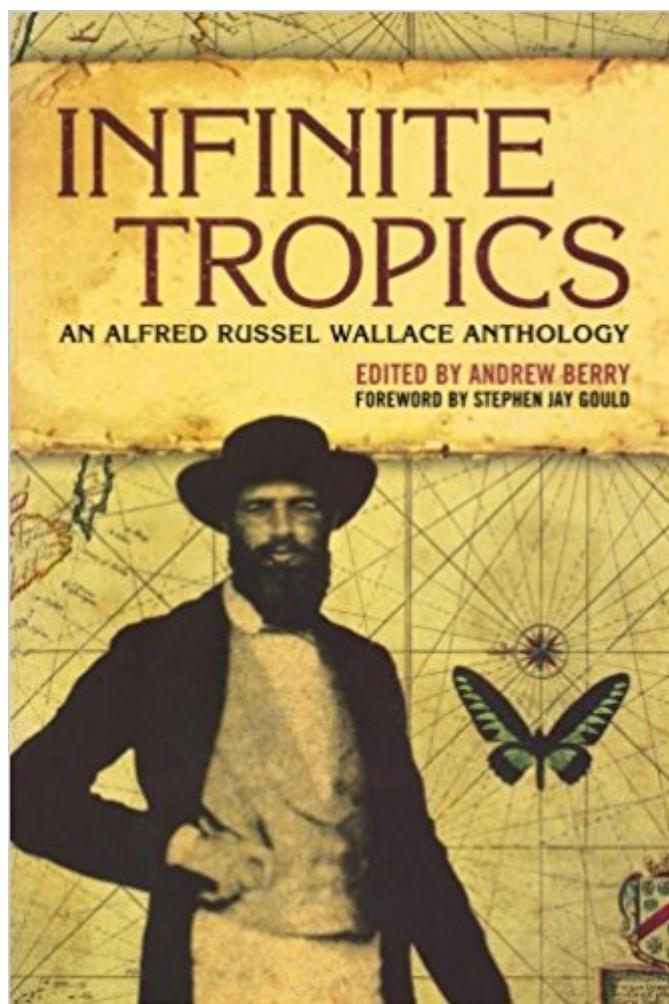


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Infinite Topics: An Alfred Russel Wallace Anthology



Synopsis

Alfred Russel Wallace's reputation has been based on the fact that, at age thirty-five and stricken with malaria in the Moluccan Islands, he stumbled independently upon the theory of natural selection. Andrew Berry's anthology rescues Wallace's legacy, showing Wallace to be far more than just the co-discoverer of natural selection. Wallace was a brilliant and wide-ranging scientist, a passionate social reformer and a gifted writer. The eloquence that has made his *The Malay Archipelago* a classic of travel writing is a prominent feature too of his extraordinarily forward-thinking writing on socialism, imperialism and pacifism. Wallace's opinions on women's suffrage, on land reform, on the roles of the church and aristocracy in a parliamentary democracy, on publicly funded education to name a few of the issues he addressed remain as fresh and as topical today as they were when they were written.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This anthology of excerpts from the basic writings of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) introduces the reader to his pioneering explorations in natural science and his critical insights into social issues. He is best remembered for codiscovering, independently of Charles Darwin, the mechanism of natural selection to explain the process of organic evolution. Yet as an extensive traveler, astute observer, and avid collector, Wallace also made valuable contributions to entomology, ornithology, biogeography, and anthropology particularly as a result of his long-term research in the and Malaysia. He focused on insect camouflage and mimicry (especially in butterflies) and described numerous life forms, from the wild orangutan to the birds of paradise. However, after embracing

both evolutionary teleology and theistic spiritualism, Wallace claimed that the human species is unique in this dynamic universe. Although he remains in Darwin's shadow, Wallace was an important naturalist during the Victorian age. Edited by Berry, a research associate at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, this excellent book on Wallace's life and thought is recommended for large academic and public libraries. [Coming in September from Oxford University Press is Michael Shermer's *In Darwin's Shadow: The Life and Science of Alfred Russel Wallace*. Ed.] H. James Birx, Canisius Coll., Buffalo, N.Y. H. James Birx, Canisius Coll., Buffalo, NY Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Ã¢ "... this collection of [WallaceÃ¢ "s] writing, each section introduced by relevant remarks on WallaceÃ¢ "s thinking at the time, is enthralling.Ã¢ "Ã¢ " •New ScientistÃ¢ "In Infinite Tropics, Andrew Berry does a wonderful job of excerpting WallaceÃ¢ "s many writings ... Berry tells this story, Ã¢ "Èœone of the most celebrated in the history of scienceÃ¢ "c, beautifully.Ã¢ "Ã¢ " •Daily TelegraphÃ¢ "BerryÃ¢ "s anthology of the most important writings ... should be read to appreciate fully the sophistication of WallaceÃ¢ "s biological thought.Ã¢ "Ã¢ " •Times Literary SupplementÃ¢ "BerryÃ¢ "s editorial commentary is succinct, accurate, and generally right to the point, and he has chosen his selections wisely, giving his readers a splendid, if somewhat teasing, glimpse of WallaceÃ¢ "s genius.Ã¢ "Ã¢ " •Choice - A Choice Outstanding Academic Title of 2002

Andrew Berry has brought together an excellent collection of the writings of Alfred Russel Wallace. The selection covers Wallace's career as a widely-travelling professional collector of plants and animals, as a naturalist, and as a scientific theorist. It also covers his political views and his later belief in spiritualism. Wallace is best known for coming up with the theory of evolution by natural selection independently from Darwin. He certainly deserves credit for this, but nobody should take seriously the ridiculous conspiracy theory which claims that Darwin stole the theory of natural selection from Wallace. Wallace himself was always happy to play second fiddle to Darwin. For example, in 1908 Wallace made a speech to the Linnaean Society in which he explicitly defended Darwin's priority, pointing out that "...the idea occurred to Darwin in October 1838, nearly twenty years earlier than to myself (in February 1858); and that during the whole of that twenty years he had been laboriously collecting evidence..." Darwin's notebooks from the 1830s and his essays of

1842 and 1844 show that Darwin had developed his theory long before he published "On the Origin of Species" and long before Wallace had his brainwave. Wallace was an admirable character. He did not have the advantages of wealth that Darwin had; he was a socialist (of sorts) who had progressive views on many issues; and his attitude towards native peoples was unusually enlightened for an era when racism was rife. Wallace also disagreed (later in his life, at least) with Darwin's mistaken decision to allow into his evolutionary theory a subsidiary role for the Lamarckian idea of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. In this, Wallace has been said to be more Darwinian than Darwin himself. Unfortunately, on the negative side, Wallace also ended up believing in spiritualism and arguing that the human brain/mind could not have evolved. Darwin and Wallace had become good friends, but Darwin was disappointed with Wallace over this issue. Darwin and Wallace also differed over the relative importance of natural selection and sexual selection. But these differences of opinion did not stop Darwin successfully campaigning to get a state pension for Wallace. Phil Webster. (England)

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