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Remote island celebrates pioneer

By Kevin Leonard
BBC News website

An island in Indonesia is celebrating the life of a Welsh naturalist whose work on the theory of evolution was overshadowed by Charles Darwin.



Alfred Russel Wallace developed a similar theory to Charles Darwin

Alfred Russel Wallace was in a remote part of what is now Indonesia when he wrote to Darwin about evolution.

But although both men's ideas were very similar, it was Darwin who became synonymous with the theory.

Authorities on the island of Ternate have now named a street after Wallace and want to rebuild his former home.

There are also plans to establish an observatory in his name to research plant and animal species in eastern Indonesia.

Dr George Beccaloni, curator of insects at the Natural History Museum and chairman of the Alfred Russel Wallace Memorial Fund, said it was a fitting tribute.

"I think it's a brilliant idea. If they rebuild the house, they would turn it into a museum dedicated to Wallace and Wallacea [a group of islands in Indonesia]," he said.

"They're also in the process of building some sort of monument outside the property."

This year is the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary since the publication of his most celebrated work.

On the Origin of Species, which put forward the theory of evolution by natural selection, contradicted the prevailing view of how species arose.

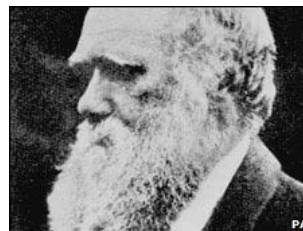
Darwin said evolution occurred by natural selection where the "fittest" animals or plants, those with the characteristics best suited to their environment, were more likely to survive and reproduce.

But Wallace, living at the house in Ternate, posted a letter to Darwin in 1858 - the year before On the Origin of Species was published - containing an essay detailing a similar theory.

Darwin had been working for many years on evolution but had not yet published his idea.

They jointly published the theory in a paper in August 1858 but, while it made an impact among scientists, it failed to capture the public imagination.

But when Darwin published On the Origin of Species a year later while



Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species 150 years ago

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Wallace was still away, it caused an immediate stir and made Darwin famous.

Dr Beccaloni said while Wallace was neglected after his death, he did receive recognition for his work during his lifetime.

"The fact of the matter is that it was a co-published theory, it was not just Darwin's theory," said Dr Beccaloni.

"Wallace wasn't overlooked during his lifetime - it was just that after his death, Darwin got more and more famous largely because historians of science focused on Darwin and hardly published anything on Wallace."

He said Wallace was awarded various medals marking his achievements, and was also given the Order of Merit, the highest honour that could be given by the British monarch to a civilian.

No grudges

Wallace was born in 1823 in Llanbadoc, near Usk in Monmouthshire, the second youngest of nine children.

His interest in natural history developed when he moved to Neath and worked as a land surveyor with his brother.

He sailed to South America and later travelled to the Far East, collecting tens of thousands of specimens, and wrote more than 20 books and hundreds of articles.

Dr Beccaloni said Wallace bore no grudges to Darwin and was always keen to give him more of the credit for the theory of evolution.

"Darwin had come up with the idea before Wallace but hadn't published it. Wallace acknowledged that and said Darwin deserved the credit," he said.

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