

Darwin-Wallace principle of natural selection

SIR — In their Correspondence ‘Celebrations for Darwin downplay Wallace’s role’ (*Nature* 451, 1050; 2008), G. W. Beccaloni and V. S. Smith question why Alfred Russel Wallace’s achievements have been overshadowed by those of Charles Darwin, despite their discovery together of natural selection and its significance for the transformation of species (C. Darwin & A. R. Wallace *J. Proc. Linn. Soc. Lond.* 3, 45–62; 1858). I think the reasons for this are threefold.

First, Darwin’s 1859 book *On the Origin of Species* describes the theory of descent with

modification by means of natural selection in much more detail than is found in his short essay with Wallace, published the previous year. The book became a bestseller and was translated into many languages. *Nature’s* archives reveal the immediate impact of Darwin’s monograph — see, for instance, T. H. Huxley’s anniversary Editorial (‘The coming of age of *The Origin of Species*’ *Nature* 22, 1–4; 1880), but this made no mention of Wallace’s contribution.

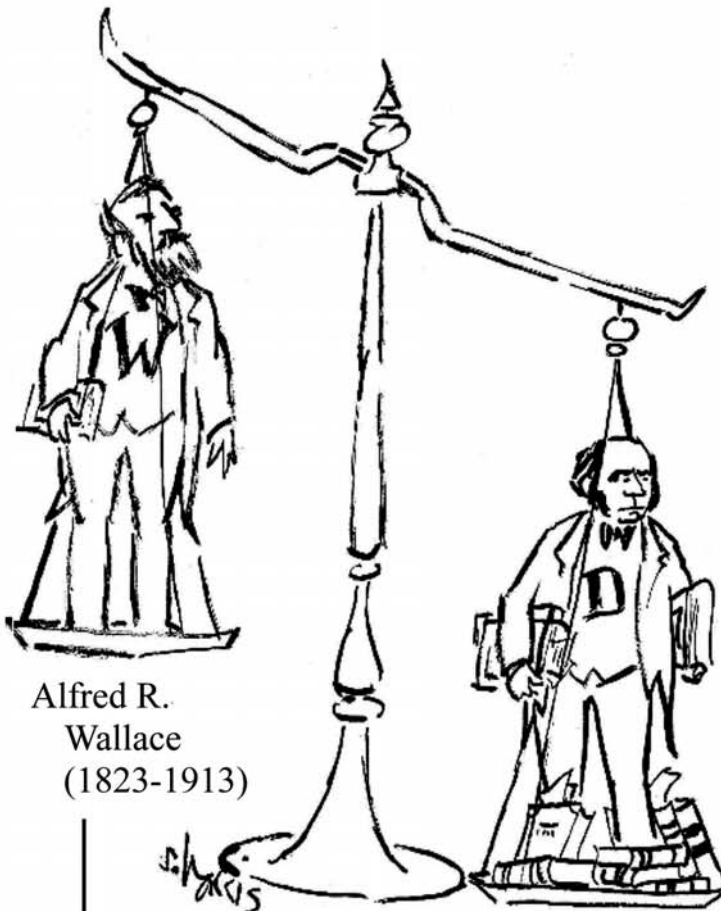
Second, Wallace had always acknowledged the priority of Darwin with respect to their joint discovery published in 1858. He used the term ‘darwinism’ as a synonym for ‘the darwinian theory of natural selection’ and popularized it (A. R. Wallace *Darwinism* Macmillan, London, 1889). To my knowledge, ‘wallaceism’ is a term that has never been coined.

Finally, Wallace was heavily involved with spiritualism by the 1860s. He confirmed his belief in miracles and defended so-called supernatural phenomena, such as ‘table-tapping’, for the rest of his long life. This seriously undermined his credibility as a scientist, and cast a shadow over his brilliant theoretical work of 1858 on the struggle for existence in wild animal populations.

What can we do to rehabilitate Wallace and to acknowledge his important contributions to evolutionary biology? The ‘Darwin-Wallace principle of natural selection’ could be substituted for the old-fashioned ‘darwinism’, which smacks more of a political ideology than a modern scientific theory. This simple change in terminology might restore balance to the Darwin-dominated view of the history of the life sciences.

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Alfred R.
Wallace
(1823-1913)

Charles Darwin
(1809-1882)