How Famous and Respected was Wallace? [Version 3]
By Alan Leyin (Thurrock Local History Society, Grays, Essex, UK), October 2014

Having read George Beccaloni's posting (Wallace Memorial Fund News blog, 25.04.2014) on John van Wyhe's assertion that it is incorrect to describe Wallace as having been ‘... among the most famous Victorian scientists during his lifetime’; and that the Victorian naturalist ‘... never approached anything like the level of fame or respect’ (van Wyhe 2013, p 172) of many of his contemporaries, I had the urge to rush to my keyboard. Not wishing to duplicate Charles Smith's response (The Linnean, 2014), to which is referred; nor being able to match either Smith's or van Wyhe's command of the Wallace archive, I make a few of observations (some also made elsewhere, on earlier postings) from the point of view of a non-specialist.

Being quite different concepts, there is limited value in addressing issues of ‘fame or respect’ as if they were synonymous. One can, of course, accrue respect without being famous; or, indeed, become famous for being notoriously disrespected. To unpick some of the issues...

On Wednesday 26th April 1882, a host of the nation’s worthies and international dignitaries gathered at Westminster Abbey to pay their final respects to Charles Darwin. Among those invited were the pre-eminent scientists of the Victorian era; all of whom would have watched the pall-bearers – three members of which had been drawn from their own distinguished circle – carry the unpolished oak coffin from its temporary sanctum in the Chapter House to its place in front of the Communion rails of the Abbey. To the sound of The Psalms being chanted to Purcell's music, the pall-bearers, having conducted their solemn duty, lowered their heads in respect before turning to take their place among the mourners. Two of those that had been given the honour of carrying Darwin’s coffin were Joseph Dalton Hooker and Thomas Henry Huxley – both being among those who John van Wyhe suggests Wallace’s fame did not match – a third was Alfred Russel Wallace. Among such stellar company, any attempt to debate relative fame (or respect) seems trivial.

To take another tack ... The Order of Merit is awarded to the elite few, considered by the reigning monarch to have contributed exceptionally meritorious service in the forces or toward the advancement of Art, Literature and Science. The award is not always a reliable indicator of achievement or fame however, as it may only be conferred upon 24 living individuals at any one time. So, whatever, one’s earthly achievements, if these coincide with the longevity of existing members, fate cruelly intervenes to block that particular path to recognition – irrespective of one's prominence or contribution. But, if conferred, the award does provide an indisputable record of the member’s contemporaneous status. As examples of those so honoured, in 1907 the award was conferred upon Florence Nightingale, and Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker – the latter, as noted above, being one Victorian scientist whose fame, John van Wyhe suggests, Wallace’s did not match. Whatever the current assertions about the ‘fame or respect’ of Darwin’s compeer, we can say with certainty that in the year 1908, a contemporaneous judgement was made: that Wallace – among all his living peers – was the scientist considered most deserving of one of the nation’s most prestigious awards. For, in that year, Wallace accepted The Order of Merit. Again, against such public recognition, the question of who was more famous than whom seems quite unnecessary. Wallace was not one to sit back on his laurels. The year after being so honoured, he was still engaged in scientific debate; and still able, as an octogenarian, to ‘pack em in’. Professor Karl Pearson, University College London, records that for
Wallace’s talk on ‘Darwinism’, in January 1909, The Royal Institution was ‘... packed to the Roof’ (Pearson, 1909), indicating that Wallace was still a major draw among his contemporaries.¹

To focus on ‘respect’:

Hooker’s remark to Darwin that ‘Wallace has lost caste terribly’ (Hooker to Darwin, 18.12.1879), suggests that by delving into spiritualism, Wallace lost the respect of some of his peers. This may or may not be the case (opinions vary). Either way, to judge a person’s contribution in one discipline on the basis of their beliefs in – or opinions on – another would be as misguided as it would be unfair (one only has to cite Newton; or, perhaps, Darwin’s own belief in the efficacy of Dr James Manby Gully’s water-cure,² to quash that particular argument).

However, if Wallace had ‘lost caste’ because of his views on spiritualism, there were those who were also to lose respect within their own specialist field. Richard Owen – another eminent Victorian against whom John van Wyhe pitches Wallace, unfavourably in terms of ‘fame or respect’ – who, whilst having achieved an enormous degree of public recognition, also received increasing censure. Darwin, for one, was left ‘... burning with indignation’ (Darwin to Hooker, 3.01.1863) over Owen’s lamentable treatment of some of his peers – undoubtedly seen as rivals. Whilst having been one of the most lauded scientists of the Victorian era, with the arrival of the Darwin-Wallace theory, Owen’s reputation rapidly tarnished. After being publically accused by Huxley of being ‘guilty of willful and deliberate falsehood’ (Cadbury, 2000), for Owen, there was no return. Even on Owen’s death – an occasion on which public criticism is usually restrained – *The Times* (1892) reported: ‘A celebrated skirmish at a meeting of the British Association is still well remembered by those who it concerned, and OWEN’S name in connexion with it has never been kindly thought of by the dominant school ... OWEN, in the last quarter of his life, was out of favour with many of his scientific brethren.’ The Times column provides contemporaneous evidence of the degree to which Owen that had lost the respect of many of his peers, rather than Wallace: ‘It is enough to say here that he [Owen] never cordially accepted the Darwinian theory and was never cordial to Mr. Darwin and the Darwinians’ (*The Times*, 1892).

It was not just the theory over which Owen took umbrage; for him was personal. Indeed, Darwin himself was to suffer from the side of Owen’s character that would forever raise a few eyebrows. In a letter to Charles Lyell, Darwin bemoaned, ‘It is painful to be hated in the intense degree with which Owen hates me.’ (Darwin to Charles Lyell, 10.04.1860). No doubt influenced by an amalgam of psychological poisons – related to fame, respect and personal ambition – when asked by the British Museum’s influential Trustee, Spencer Horatio Walpole, for a view on giving Darwin the posthumous honour of having a statue placed in the museum, Owen did not openly embrace the idea, but expertly avoided voicing his support by suggesting that the matter was simply ‘... a question of “Administration.”’ (Owen, 1882; in Padian, 2001).

In contrast to Darwin’s views on Owen, his respect for Wallace’s character was heartfelt and genuine: ‘You cannot tell how much I admire your spirit, in the manner in which you have taken all that was done about establishing our papers.’ (Darwin to Wallace, 6.04.1859). Upon his death, the respect

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¹ Pearson recounts that although Wallace’s presentation was ‘... lacking in the vivacity needful to keep his audience alive’ (Wallace was in his 86th year), it was, nevertheless, ‘... really worth hearing him.’ (Pearson, 1909).

² A comparison between Darwin’s belief in the efficacy of the water-cure and Wallace’s views on spiritualism may be stretching the point a little perhaps – but the comparison may not be as oblique as it may first appear. Both men considered their views were based on evidence. Darwin based his judgement on personal experience (but any relief from symptoms would have been accounted for by the placebo effect rather than the treatment per se); as did Wallace (but he was being duped).
afforded to Wallace, simply grew; captured by Sir Charles Sherrington, President of The Royal Society, on the unveiling the portrait of Wallace at the British Museum (Natural History) in 1923. In the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sherrington opined that the image, ‘… represents a noble trait of character as well as genius, which went together in the personality of Alfred Russel Wallace.’ (The Times, 1923). A sentiment that has echoed, ‘… the greatest of our living naturalists …’ (Attenborough, 2011).

Returning to honours awarded for scientific achievements, and respective levels of ‘fame or respect’ … Those still wishing to pursue that particular thread might note that in 1890 the Royal Society first struck its Darwin Medal in recognition for ‘work of acknowledged distinction in the broad area of biology in which Charles Darwin worked, notably in evolution, population biology, organismal biology and biological diversity’. Hooker was the second person to receive the award in 1892; with Huxley, in 1894, being the third person so honoured. The medal’s first recipient was Alfred Russel Wallace.

Fifty years after the papers of Darwin and Wallace, the president of the Linnean Society described their first reading as ‘… without doubt the greatest event in the history of our Society since its foundation.’ Believing that it was difficult to conceive of any other ‘… revolution of Biological thought so momentous’ (Linnean Society, 1908), the 50th anniversary celebrations began. In front of that international gathering, with ‘profound pleasure and affection’ the president of the Linnean Society was proud to confer upon Joseph Dalton Hooker the Society’s highest honour: one that bore Wallace’s name – the celebratory Darwin-Wallace Medal. In a switch-about regarding who might have been more famous than whom – Hooker collected his award; but only after having to wait for it to be first conferred upon Alfred Russel Wallace.

Perhaps the placing of a memorial in Westminster Abbey – the Capital’s premier place of worship and remembrance – can be taken as at least some measure of the degree to which, upon death, a person’s achievements are retained within the nation’s consciousness. Of the seven people to whom van Wyhe compares Wallace’s ‘fame or respect’, only three (including Darwin himself) have been so honoured. In the Abbey’s north choir aisle, a white marble roundel was erected in 1915 to commemorate Wallace.

To focus on ‘fame’

But even in the face of such evidence one might still argue that these honorific remembrances do not necessarily reflect a person’s ‘fame’ – ‘respect’, yes; ‘achievement’, yes; ‘fame’, not necessarily. How might we make a judgement on van Wyhe’s (2013) assertion that it is incorrect to describe Wallace as having been ‘… among the most famous Victorian scientists during his lifetime’? Fortunately, we need not rely on the opinion of 21st century commentators as there exists contemporaneous examples of the esteem in which Wallace was held. For example, in 1900, when reviewing Wallace’s book, Studies, Scientific and Social, for the readers of the Daily News, the writer offered his opinion: ‘Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace is not only the greatest of our living naturalists …’ There it is; printed source material: ‘… the greatest of our living naturalists’. But still one has to proceed with caution when making a judgement: should one rely on the view of a single contemporaneous source; or on the opinion of a chronicler, over 100 years later? That would be a difficult call; the authenticity of our source is not questioned, but could that opinion have been misguided; simply wrong, leading us down the wrong path? Fortunately, primary sources again come to our rescue. In his article, George Smith

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3 Darwin-Wallace Medal continues to the present day; now awarded annually by the Linnean Society of London.
(2014) cites 17 obituaries of Wallace that confirm the opinion of our reviewer from the *Daily News*. But don't obituarists often, perhaps – except in the case of Owen, it seems – err on the side of being reverential? Smith also has that one covered; having done a trawl, he has come up with 38 printed quotes – made *during* Wallace’s lifetime – reinforcing the degree to which Wallace’s fame had been contemporaneously reported. (Smith notes that neither the list of obituaries nor that of the other printed sources is exhaustive – others will be out there, to be discovered by the vigilant researcher.)

With the extant primary sources on Wallace’s fame, surely the burden of proof would be on the researcher to disprove or discredit the original source material (by presenting contrary source material, in at least equal number), not simply disagreeing with the conclusions drawn by those using the evidence. Evidence has to be countered by evidence, not mere opinion.

We, the non-specialists, rely heavily on not only the evidence presented by specialists in the field – be they scientists, historians of science – but also on their interpretations of that evidence, and of their opinions (drawn, hopefully, from reputable source material). When any particular matter is in dispute, we (the non specialists) then have to revert to source material to make our own judgement or, at least, check the evidence being used by the specialists. In doing the latter, we are aware that to inform his opinion on Wallace’s fame, Smith (2014) has used primary source material from newspapers and popular journals of the time, and an online search of 60 of the best-known scientists active between 1900–14, from the HathiTrust Digital Library (www.hathitrust.org), and that Beccaloni (2013) has used an analysis based on Google’s Ngram Viewer to inform his opinion. Unfortunately, although we are aware that van Wyhe (2013) contests the inferences drawn from this evidence we (the non specialists) are not informed of the evidence he is using to refute these claims.

… And we don’t want Lady Brewster fainting in the aisle.

**Conclusion**

Even if one were to accept van Wyhe’s assertion that Wallace ‘… never approached anything like the level of fame or respect attributed to Lyell, Richard Owen, William Whewell, Louis Agassiz, T. H. Huxley, Hooker, or Darwin’ (van Wyhe 2013, p 172) – a view challenged by the evidence presented by Smith CH (2014) and Beccaloni (2013) – and that Wallace was the back-marker in this pantheon, it would still place Wallace ‘… among the most famous Victorian scientists during his lifetime’; the very point that van Wyhe contests.

**References**


Beccaloni G. 2013. *Just how famous was, and is, Wallace?* http://wallacefund.info/just-how-famouswas-and-wallace


Linnean Society (1908) *The Darwin-Wallace Celebration held on Thursday, 1st July, 1908 by the Linnean Society of London*. London: Printed for the Linnean Society.

http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/Ancillary/1908_Darwin-Wallace_A281.html


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*This source captures the major portion of the total scientific literature of that period, and exclude newspapers.*


*The Times* (1882) The Funeral of Mr. Darwin. 27 April; p5.


*The Times* (1913) Death of Dr Russel Wallace. A veteran of science. 8 November; p9.


The obituary and other notices published making reference to Wallace’s fame, collated by Charles Smith are to be found: http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/wallace/obits.htm

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