

FOREWORD BY DAVID ATTENBOROUGH



These letters were written by one of the greatest of nineteenth-century naturalists, at one of the most crucial periods in the history of biology. That fact alone makes them fascinating reading. But they become the more gripping when one remembers that their author, Alfred Russel Wallace, was travelling in what was then one of the wildest and least explored parts of the world, the islands of Indonesia. Halfway through his journeying, as he lay shaking in the grip of a malarial fever, a theory came into his mind that would solve the mystery that was obsessing many zoologists of the time—how new species came into existence. After his fever subsided, he wrote an essay outlining his explanation and posted it to one of his regular scientific correspondents in Britain, Charles Darwin. Its arrival, for Darwin, was a profound shock for he himself had thought of exactly the same theory some 20 years earlier, but instead of publishing it he had spent his time since then accumulating evidence in support of it.

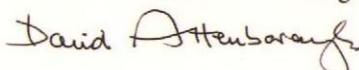
The problem of who should be regarded as the originator of the theory was famously solved by Darwin's scientific friends, who arranged for Wallace's essay and two extracts from Darwin's earlier manuscripts to be read out at the same meeting of the Linnean Society in London. In spite of this scrupulously even-handed arrangement, Darwin was generally perceived in London's scientific circles as the prime author of the theory and less than two years later that precedence was established by the publication of his magisterial book *The Origin of Species*.

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Since then, some have claimed that Wallace was badly done by. A few have even suggested that Darwin falsified the date on which he received Wallace's essay in order to give him time to take some of Wallace's ideas and incorporate them into his own presentation. The editors of this book have been able to find evidence about postal dates that shows this accusation to be false. And Wallace himself had no doubt that Darwin was entitled to the greater credit because of all the work Darwin had done substantiating the theory. Nowhere in these letters does he show the slightest hint of resentment, whether he is writing directly to Darwin himself, or indeed to other more intimate naturalist friends to whom he might have felt free to express it. Indeed, the generosity of spirit that is evident on both sides is truly heartwarming.

The consequences of this fascinating episode echo throughout these letters, but there is much else in them to enjoy and relish. Writing to his close friend Henry Bates, with whom he had travelled in South America on an earlier expedition, Wallace reveals the competitive element that affects so many collectors by comparing the number of different species of beetles he has accumulated with the number found by Bates on the Amazon. Elsewhere—particularly when writing to his mother and sister—he gives more general accounts of his activities. Sometimes he recounts episodes in such detail that you can sense he has in his mind a bigger audience than his immediate correspondent. But anyone who has travelled in the remoter parts of Indonesia, particularly some 50 years ago or more, will need no reminding of what he seldom mentions—the arduous conditions in which he was working. Apart from a rare parcel of food from Europe, most of which had decayed into inedibility by the time it reached him, he lived entirely on local food. For much of the time he had no European companion. He had virtually no medicines except quinine with which he managed to subdue his malarial attacks. And he relied on small, flimsy local craft to take him on his frequent journeys from island to island. So these letters contain at one and the same time, the raw material, not only of the most influential of all biological theories, but of a thrilling story of exploration and take the reader into the mind of one of the most adventurous, observant, and honourable scientists of his time.

David Attenborough



ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE:
LETTERS FROM
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