



## Book Review

*In Darwin's Shadow: The Life and Science of Alfred Russel Wallace: A Biographical Study on the Psychology of History* by Michael Shermer. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2002. ISBN 0195148304.

Reviewed by John van Wyhe

*In Darwin's Shadow* is a provocative and beautifully illustrated new biography of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) the nineteenth-century naturalist well-known for his theory of evolution which was so strikingly similar to Charles Darwin's. I first heard of Michael Shermer's new biography on an email list. The blurb promised not only a biography of Wallace but a scientific approach to history and biography. I was intrigued. Jared Diamond's pathbreaking *Guns, Germs, and steel* (1997) and the scientific history it utilises is certainly the most profound work on human history I have ever read. I subsequently read two reviews of Shermer's book by historians of science which seemed to chastise Shermer as an outsider to the history of science. When I acquired a copy of Shermer's book I was determined not to repeat these reactions simply because Shermer tried to do history in a scientific fashion or because he did not reveal sufficient familiarity with the details of the period such as when the words *scientist* or *agnostic* came into use or how social class was defined in nineteenth-century Britain. Well-disposed as could be, I was nevertheless disappointed. Although the

book is based on a few new sources and contains a more complete Wallace bibliography and some very nice photographs of Wallace, there is nothing substantially new about Wallace. Anyone who has read Wallace's autobiography, *My Life* (1905) or some of the more recent biographies will find little they have not read before. But Shermer does not really promise this. Instead he promises to tell us something deeper about the man and history itself.

Who is Shermer's intended audience? From the advertisement by Oxford University Press we hear that Wallace is "Virtually unknown today". Unknown to whom? Certainly not to historians. It seems therefore that Shermer's book is intended for a popular, non-scholarly audience. Fair enough. But this jars with the many quibbles Shermer makes with the minutiae of debates over the priority of Darwin and Wallace which will interest only specialists. The pleadings for what Shermer calls a scientific history seem even more out of place in a popular biography. This is not as objectionable as the gratuitous name dropping of game theory and historical counterfactuals, all of which throws no light whatever on Shermer's discus-

sion of the priority of Wallace and Darwin in formulating evolutionary theory.

### Scientific history?

Shermer wants to make history more scientific and often bemoans the fact that historians do not do so. Although one might sympathise with Shermer on this general point the details of what he considers scientific history will puzzle exceedingly any reader who sees that Shermer is the director of a California-based Skeptics Society and founder of Skeptic Magazine. It is ironic that the bold and unorthodox theories Shermer, as “historical scientist”, puts forward to explain history and biography are more than anything wanting in scepticism. For example Shermer presents a model for understanding history. “The past may be constructed as a massively contingent multitude of linkages across space and time, where the individual is moulded into, and helps to mould the shape of, those connections.” Shermer’s categorization of Wallace’s publications (‘scientific’ and ‘social commentary’ for example) is meant to be a more scientific treatment of Wallace’s output—and thereby provide a more objective understanding of what Wallace was all about. But the hard core of Shermer’s science of history is meant to be a scientific analysis of Wallace’s character which we are told results in the conclusion that Wallace was a “heretic personality”: a personality type meant to explain not only Wallace’s early support for evolution but also spiritualism, phrenology, mesmerism, anti-vaccination etc.

The means by which Shermer scientifically determines the character type are curious. He writes:

To measure Wallace's personality Frank Sulloway and I had ten historians of science and Wallace experts rate him on a standardized Big Five personality inventory of forty descriptive adjectives using a nine-step scale. For example:

I see Alfred Russel Wallace as someone

who was . . .

Ambitious/hardworking 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Lackadaisical

The results of these numerous subjective impressions about a man who died in 1913 were then lumped together to form the measurement of his personality. Social historian of science and Darwin biographer James Moore had a similarly sceptical impression when he answered Shermer’s query. Shermer had the courage to reproduce a critical passage from Moore’s email which seems remarkably sensible amidst the passages in which it is embedded:

To answer your question [about Wallace’s “unique intellectual style”] would require a long exposition of Victorian social history, including the social history of science and the sociology of knowledge. The question is a good one, both precisely and eloquently answerable in the terms of these essential disciplines. I've done as you asked, though I have to say that I think Sulloway's method is profoundly unhistorical (I told him so) and next to useless for understanding Wallace. The other thing I would say is that most of the responses are based on educated guesswork and hunch. You will end up with a composite view, not of ARW, but of what experts guess, suppose, or presume about him. In other words, it will not be a composite of a real person, as in Galton's composite photographs.

Throughout the remainder of the book Shermer gathers what seem to be confirmations for his point that Wallace was a heretic personality. However, it is difficult to see what the difference is between Shermer’s appeal to a heretic personality and a redescription of details of Wallace’s interests. No new insights are offered by the heretic personality thesis.

In addition Shermer attempts to make use of Frank Sulloway's studies of correlations between birth order and receptivity to scientific innovation (Sulloway, 1996). According to Sulloway receptivity to radical innovations is highly correlated with birth order with first borns least receptive and later borns more receptive. A problem with using such studies is how can we explain particulars with a general tendency sort of argument? If younger siblings tend to support radical ideas more than first borns, and Wallace had many older siblings, why bother with the usual biographical details of where he worked and what he read if birth order will tell us what we need to know instead?

Shermer sometimes ascribes Wallace's views to his heretic personality type and other times (such as Wallace's rejection of the possibility of life on Mars) to prior beliefs. What are the criteria according to which we decide when to appeal to general character type and when to appeal to prior learning or vested interest in explaining the reception of ideas? Shermer provides none. Instead sometimes we are told that "Wallace's personality dictated" this or that course of action but at other times a course of action was determined by some other factors.

For the basic facts of Wallace's life and la-

bours this book will do the job, though some believe that the recent biography by Peter Raby does the same job much better. Shermer notes that sceptics say "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". Shermer's biography makes extraordinary claims but lacks the extraordinary evidence to convince sceptical readers. I for one have no qualms about reading scientific explanations of historical events and should have been happy to read claims about Wallace's life or times that were in some sense scientific, but the problem with Shermer's account is that subjective evaluation is unhesitatingly given the name science.

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