

## The reading of the Darwin and Wallace papers: an historical "non-event"

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It is a truth of historical research that great events reflected upon and recalled many years after the fact, by men who were there, often gain grandeur and magnificence in the process. This is, to some extent, the case with the commentary upon the Linnean Society meeting of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1858 when the Darwin and Wallace theories on natural selection were given their first public exposure. In Sir Francis Darwin's *The life and letters of Charles Darwin*<sup>1</sup> the recollections of Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker upon this event picture a scientific meeting stunned by the remarkable and revolutionary theories read before them. However, there are very few contemporary comments<sup>2</sup> from others present at that event. Hooker's participation at that time and the subsequent importance of Darwinian ideas no doubt embellished his reflection upon the meeting.

The *General Meeting Book* of the Linnean Society records the secretary's minutes of that meeting and those in attendance. The fellows at the meeting of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1858 included the President, Professor Thomas Bell, F.R.S., V.Z.S., P.L.S., Professor of Zoology, King's College, London; Sir Charles Lyell, F.R.S., F.G.S.; Dr Joseph Dalton Hooker; Mr Nathaniel B. Ward, F.R.S.; Mr John M. Camplin; Mr Robert Heward; Dr Fredric D. Dyster, M.D., F.R.S.; Mr Daniel Oliver jun; Mr Samuel P. Pratt, F.R.S., F.G.S.; Mr S. James A. Salter, M.B. Lond.; Mr William Archer; Mr John Ball, M.R.I.A.; Mr John Thomas Syme, lecturer on botany at Westminster and Charing Cross Hospitals; Mr Frederick Curry, M.A., F.R.S.; Dr William Baird, M.D. of the British Museum; Dr William Henry Fitton, M.D, F.R.S., F.G.S.; Mr Samuel Stevens, Treasurer of the Entomological Society; Dr William Benjamin Carpenter, M.D., F.R.S., F.G.S.; Dr Bethold Seemann Ph.D.; Mr Arthur Henfrey, F.R.S., Professor of Botany, King's College, London; Mr Benjamin W. Hawkins, F.G.S.; Dr William John Burchell, D.C.L.; Mr George B. Buckton, F.R.S.; Mr William M. Buckton; and Mr Black, associate member. Dr Dyster brought Dr Baly as his guest and Mr Ward brought Dr Melville. The scientific interests of this group of fellows included botany, zoology, entomology, geology, conchology, palaeontology, physiology embryology, and anatomy to mention only a few.

The meeting of 1<sup>st</sup> July was especially summoned by the President, Thomas Bell, to elect a new member to the Council of the Society. This member would fill the vacancy left by the recent death of Dr Robert Brown, D.C.L., F.R.S., V.P.L.S. The meeting was called to order and the first item of business was the announcement of donations and gifts to the library and museum of the society. These included *Mémoires de la Société Royale des Sciences de Liège*; *Journal of the Royal Society*; *Abstracts of the Proceedings of the Geological Society*; *The Philosophical Magazine*, and *Annals of Natural History* presented by Richard Taylor; *The Literary Gazette* presented by Lovell Reeve; a collection of original drawings of Tasmanian Orchidiae by William Archer, F.L.S., presented by Mr Archer; *The Handbook of British Flora* by George Bentham presented by Mr Bentham; *The Grasses of Great Britain* (part 9) presented by J. E. Sowerby; *Examination of Pavon's collection of Peruvian Barks contained in the British Museum* presented by the author, Mr J. E. Howard, F.L.S.; *Flora Melitensis* presented by the author, Dr Giovanni Carlo Grech Delicata; and specimens of Highgate Resin, presented by J. W. Netherall.

The business then proceeded with the election of a new member of the Council. Dr Seemann Mr Archer, and Mr Heward were appointed scrutineers and the balloting began. The tally of ballots showed Mr George Bentham had been elected. The president nominated George

Bentham for Vice-President to fill out the term of the late Robert Brown. Sir Charles Lyell seconded this and Bentham received the unanimous vote of the fellows.

A lengthy statement of sincere appreciation for the late Robert Brown was read. His more than sixty years of association with the society was especially praised. This eulogy was made a part of the minutes of the meeting.

Although this was a special meeting a number of papers which would have been held over until the 4<sup>th</sup> November meeting were read. The *Register of Papers Read* shows the date when papers were received, their author, subject, by whom presented, date of reading and "how disposed of". There were three papers received before the date of this special meeting and six papers received on 1<sup>st</sup> July. The three on hand were J. E. Howard's "Nueva Quinologia" received 27<sup>th</sup> April, T. L. Ralph's "On the Arborescent Ferns of New Zealand" received 8<sup>th</sup> May, but not read until 2<sup>nd</sup> December, and Dr Welwitsch's "Letters on the Vegetation of Angola" received on 2<sup>nd</sup> June. On 1<sup>st</sup> July the secretary received six papers and only one was not read at that meeting. This paper was submitted by George Bentham under the title "Notes on British Botany" and was not read until 4<sup>th</sup> November.

The meeting proceeded with the presentation of papers. The secretary records the following presentations in the minutes of the *General Meeting Book*:

"Read 1<sup>st</sup> - A letter from Sir Charles Lyell and Dr. J. D. Hooker addressed to the Secretary, as introductory to the following papers, on the laws which affect the production of varieties, races, and species, viz.

An extract from MS work on species by Charles Darwin, Esq., F.R.S. & L.S., sketched in 1839 and copied in 1844.

An abstract of a letter addressed by Mr. Darwin to Prof Asa Gray of Boston, U.S. in Oct. 1857.

An essay on the tendency of varieties to depart indefinitely from the original type, by A. R. Wallace Esq.

2<sup>nd</sup>ly - "Notes on the organisation of *Phoronis hippocrepis*" by F. D. Dyster, M.D., F.R.S.

3<sup>rd</sup>ly - "Observations on *Ammocetus*" by Samuel Highley Esq.

4<sup>th</sup>ly - "On *Hanburia*, a new genus of Cucurbitacea" by Bethold Seemann M.D., F.R.S.

5<sup>th</sup>ly - A MS memoir, by the late Prof. Pavon, entitled "Nueva Quinologia" with observations by J. E. Howard, F.L.S.

6<sup>th</sup>ly - Two letters "on the Vegetation of Angola" by Dr. F. Welwitsch addressed to W. W. Saunders."

Sir Charles Lyell and Dr J. D. Hooker had presented introductory remarks to emphasize the importance of the Darwin and Wallace communications. It would appear, however, that the sheer volume of contributions practically buried the Darwin-Wallace papers. The fellows were not so much stunned by new ideas as they were overwhelmed by the amount of information loaded upon them at the meeting. Much of the Darwin-Wallace concept of natural selection went over their heads. This in large measure was the result of insufficient time to concentrate attention and discussion upon the Darwin-Wallace papers. Some of the silence was no doubt boredom a constant danger of long meetings.

The *Register of Papers Read* indicates that the Darwin-Wallace Papers, the Dyster paper, and the Welwitsch paper were accepted for publication. Seemann's paper on *Hanburia* was referred to Dr Hooker and Howard's "Nueva Quinologia" was referred to the council meeting of 4<sup>th</sup> November. The Darwin-Wallace paper was printed in the *Journal of the Proceedings of*

*the Linnean Society, Zoology* (3: 45-62), which was published in August of 1858. The Dyster paper on *Phoronis* was printed in *Transactions of the Linnean Society* (22: 251-256). This volume was published some time between 4<sup>th</sup> November and 24<sup>th</sup> December, 1858<sup>3</sup>. The Welswitsch paper, "Letters on the Vegetation of West Equinoctial Africa", was printed in the *Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnean Society, Botany* (3: 150-157). This volume was published in August of 1858.

The meeting of the Linnean Society on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1858 has been said to be the beginning of the "Darwinian Revolution", "the beginning of Modern Biology", "the beginning of a new era in scientific thinking", and many other such labels that indicate that from this date, dynamic new ideas, concepts and forces were turned loose in biology, philosophy and theology. This important day may well be the beginning of all these things. However the actual event seems to be second only to the presentation of Mendel's discovery of the laws of genetics as an historical "non-event".

#### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Darwin, Sir Francis, 1887. *The life and letters of Charles Darwin*. London, Vol. 2, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Darwin's own recollections of the meeting and its aftermath were more prosaic. In his autobiography, written in 1876 for his children, he recalled, "Nevertheless, our joint productions excited very little attention, and the only published notice of them which I can remember was by Professor Haughton of Dublin, whose verdict was that all that was new in them was false, and what was true was old." See p. 122 of Nora Barlow's *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882*. Collins, London, 253 pp. (1958).

<sup>3</sup> Raphael, S., 1970. The publication dates of the *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London*, Series 1, 1791-1875. *Biol. J. Linn. Soc.* 2: 61-76.