

## ★ **Radical by Nature: The Revolutionary Life of Alfred Russel Wallace**

**James T. Costa**

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Though Charles Darwin is the more celebrated founder of theories of evolution and natural selection, his brilliant colleague Alfred Russel Wallace worked out these ideas, too. James T. Costa's entertaining illustrated biography marks the bicentennial of Wallace's birth and describes the peripatetic naturalist's mental and physical strides across geography and time in delicious detail.

How Darwin and Wallace came to their independent discoveries and shook up Victorian science is fascinating. The dichotomy of their backgrounds could not have been more disparate: wealthy, university-educated Darwin had automatic entree to scientific circles, whereas impecunious, energetic Wallace parlayed his voracious reading and gregarious nature into securing free passage and valuable letters of introduction to colonial gatekeepers in the far reaches of the Amazon and the Malay archipelago. Decades of fieldwork securing natural history specimens and ethnological artifacts and a stream of letters and essays about his observations secured his place among the scientific elite.

The lush descriptions of indefatigable Wallace's expeditions are intense and enjoyable. The rigors of his travels, including malaria, ferocious insects, shipwrecks, and the devastating loss of thousands of specimens and notebooks on the journey home from Brazil are vivid. Costa underscores how these travails were shared by local assistants who did harder work hunting, carrying provisions, and lugging boats upriver and through the dangerous surf.

Crisp storytelling portrays an autodidact with boundless curiosity and empathy. Wallace was a staunch socialist and proponent of land reform, spiritualism, and seances, which exasperated his scientific champions and hindered his career and finances. Costa also plumbs newly available correspondence to document Wallace's graciousness in ceding glory to and defending Darwin in their shared achievements.

*Radical by Nature* uncovers fresh details about a remarkable, idiosyncratic scientist and social activist, showing how humans' understanding of the world was fundamentally altered by his ideas.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March / April 2023)

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