Introduction

Fieldwork, Authority, and the Making of Wallace's Anthropology

> Now if we suppose a traveller ignorant of . . . [the Indigenous language], picking up a word or two here and there . . . and noting down the "physical and moral peculiarities, manners, and customs" . . . —(for there are travellers who do all this in four-and-twenty hours)—what an accurate and instructive chapter we should have[,] what transitions would be pointed out, what theories of the origin of races would be developed! while the next traveller might flatly contradict every statement and arrive at exactly opposite conclusions.
>
> — ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE, 1869

Before achieving fame through his and Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in the late 1850s and the enduring success of *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) traveled extensively. His journeys spanned rural England and Wales and, later, Amazonia (1848–1852), following the surge of collectors and freelance naturalists thriving after Iberian dominance in South America waned in the early nineteenth century. Born in Wales into a middle-class family with limited schooling and strained finances, Wallace turned to specimen collecting and travel writing. He sold duplicates via natural history agents while exploring prime scientific locations, rising from an anonymous fieldworker to a celebrated Victorian naturalist.

In the mid-nineteenth century, freelance naturalists seeking prominence in the scientific field had options beyond collecting natural specimens. Emerging sciences like ethnology and anthropology, along with their learned societies and exhibitions, provided valuable opportunities for collectors and observers to establish reputations in their home countries.[1] Wallace belonged to a

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generation of naturalists with irregular education, benefiting from the surge in popular scientific books, pamphlets, and lessons provided by mechanics' institutions across Britain. This background equipped him with the intellectual and practical skills to confidently organize, analyze, and publish his field results rather than relying on scholars to study and disseminate his collected data.

Philosophically and politically, Wallace was an Owenite; scientifically, he followed George Combe's phrenology and the ethnological ideas of James Prichard and William Lawrence; as a natural history explorer, he aligned with the Humboldtian tradition. Drawing on these influences, Wallace began speculating on the origins of natural diversity as early as 1845. Interestingly, Wallace's inquiry centered on the monogenist versus polygenist debate regarding the origins of human differences—a key focus of nineteenth-century studies on humanity.[2] In addition to his early entomological and botanical interests in natural diversity, the study of humankind was foundational to his scientific pursuits. Indeed, a major motivation for venturing deeper into the Amazon than any previous British explorer was his desire to observe firsthand the human diversity of northern South America, an area largely absent from British ethnological mapping.

This scientific biography of Wallace, focused on his anthropological work, aims to foreground his ethnographic contributions by examining his projects, ideas, strategies, and intentions in depth. While figures like Charles Darwin, with whom Wallace shared significant aspects of his scientific life, are not entirely absent, this book deliberately avoids extensive discussions of their relationship, collaboration on evolutionary biology, or intellectual divergences—topics already thoroughly explored by historians. This approach addresses the tendency to overshadow Wallace's unique scientific endeavors with an overemphasis on Darwin's influence. By disentangling Wallace from Darwin, the goal is not to reignite rivalries between their scholars or admirers but rather to uncover Wallace's distinct program of anthropological research and vocational strategies, which he developed long before his close collaboration with Darwin from the late 1850s onward.

In this sense, Steven Shapin in *Never Pure* urged historians of science to "lower the tone of the history of science," critiquing traditional narratives that portray scientists as nearly superhuman figures. Shapin advocated grounding these representations to enrich the discipline's scope.[3] Wallace's modest circumstances, respect for other cultures, and amicable resolution of the priority issue with Darwin often contribute to an idealized image of his life and work. However, a balanced narrative is crucial—one that critically examines

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Wallace's ideas, actions, and interactions within the scientific community, staying true to the complexities of his research and contributions.

Adopting Shapin's methodological provocations to analyze Wallace's trajectory in ethnography and anthropology offers valuable insights. By moving beyond the idealized portrayal of Wallace as a heroic, faultless scientist, we gain a more nuanced understanding of both the man and his scientific context. For instance, while highlighting Wallace's contributions to ethnology and anthropology, we will also find that his ambition to establish himself as a pioneering observer of Amazonian "savages" involved alliances with kidnappers of Indigenous peoples and participants in illegal forced labor networks. Additionally, some of Wallace's actions, particularly in defending his ideas or challenging others, were viewed by some contemporaries as unfair or even cocky.[4] In sum, while acknowledging Wallace's self-confidence and outspoken nature, this book does not attempt to deconstruct or unmake a cherished historical figure. Instead, it seeks to enrich our understanding of the scientific persona Wallace cultivated, shedding light on how he navigated ethnological and anthropological circles as a fieldworker with ambitions that extended far beyond those of a mere traveler.

Ethically and politically, this book invites readers to engage contemporary debates about the role of racialized, exploited, or underrepresented extra-European peoples in academic works. Questions may arise: Why, in the twenty-first century, is it still relevant to study a white British man scrutinizing, speaking, and writing about extra-European peoples? In Wallace's case, three answers emerge. First, while this narrative focuses on the practices and ideas of a key figure in nineteenth-century "race science," it avoids treating his views as self-explanatory or free of contradictions. A low-tone approach ensures the enduring controversial implications of the "racial" knowledge Wallace helped produce remain critically examined. Second, analyzing Wallace's scientific and political perspectives on human diversity is relevant today because it informs our critiques of the racist foundations of Victorian sciences. Though Wallace could not escape the mindset of his era, his ideas and attitudes highlight the complexity of the relationship between scientific knowledge and human differences during that time. Third, Wallace's ethnographic experiences document a large amount of extra-European agency, contributions, and interferences that blur taken-for-granted assumptions about the roles of "subject" and "object of observation" as well as "metropole" and "periphery," binary frameworks that reinforce the processes of racialization and inferiorization of extra-European peoples and knowledge.

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Centering Ethnography in Wallace's Early Scientific Life

In Jane R. Camerini's biographical entry for Alfred Russel Wallace in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the heading omits terms like "anthropologist," "ethnologist," or even "ethnographer." The entry barely acknowledges his anthropological contributions, limiting mentions to his collection of languages during tropical travels—an important but minor aspect compared to the breadth of his work on human diversity. Similarly, Charles Smith's entry for Wallace in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, although at one point referring to Wallace as a "successful . . . ethnographer," condenses his extensive ethnological and anthropological work into his ideas on physical anthropology, shaped by his later focus on evolution by natural selection.[5] These and many other influential biographical summaries convey the impression that Wallace's ethnographic endeavors were secondary and incidental, merely fulfilling readers' expectations for accounts of local peoples in travel narratives.

A significant gap exists in the historiography of Wallace's research, particularly regarding his ethnological and anthropological work, which is overshadowed by the focus on his achievements in other areas of natural history. However, some historians have explored this aspect of his work, which can be categorized into three thematic axes—though overlaps exist. The first axis examines the development, nuances, and reception of Wallace's theories on human evolution and "biogeography."[6] The second focuses on his spiritualist anthropological research, addressing both scientific and nonscientific dimensions.[7] The third investigates his field practices and overall anthropological profile.[8] There is an interesting body of work engaging with Wallace's anthropology, notably that by Jeremy Vetter, Fenneke Sysling, Kathleen Lowrey, and Efram Sera-Shriar. However, as my scoping review shows, these studies primarily focus on his later ethnographic practices in Southeast Asia and his spiritualist anthropological investigations.[9] In contrast, this book takes a more comprehensive approach by examining Wallace's early ethnographic practices, focusing on a period that scholars have either overlooked or addressed only superficially.

The case study in this book poses critical questions about the history of fieldworkers and ethnographic practices in British anthropology: In which sociocultural spaces did anthropological knowledge circulate in mid-century Victorian society? What role did the experience and knowledge of formally uneducated fieldworkers play in shaping British anthropology? To what extent did nonscholarly researchers influence or challenge metropolitan scholars? What insights do Wallace's ethnographic practices provide for understanding the history of

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anthropology? Combining biographical and disciplinary perspectives, this book examines Wallace's early ethnographic experiences abroad and his pursuit of recognition within the British anthropological community, elucidating how his history challenges conventional ideas of "center" and "margins" of science. Also fundamental to this analysis is the question of how ethnographic experiences and anthropological knowledge shaped Wallace's scientific life. By analyzing these dimensions alongside his early vocational strategies, the book offers a deeper understanding of the pivotal role ethnography played in his scientific biography. For this reason, this book does not cover Wallace's entire life or anthropological career. This methodological choice is crucial, as my aim is to highlight how he established his anthropological authority through his early field experiences rather than the later developments of his research program, when his reputation was already firmly established.

In essence, this book represents the fieldworker's perspective on the history of Victorian anthropology, with Alfred Russel Wallace—one of the most renowned Victorian scientific figures—at its center. However, unlike works focused on his role in the theory of natural selection or "biogeography," this book delves into the young Wallace, tracing his journey from the 1830s to his forties in the 1860s. It offers a fresh perspective on his early scientific life, highlighting his substantial contribution to the emergence of anthropology in Britain. The core argument asserts that ethnographic observation and studies of human diversity were central to Wallace's scientific vocation. From the outset of his career, Wallace dedicated himself to advancing anthropology, overcoming his middle-class background, lack of formal credentials, and the intense scholarly disputes over control of the science of man in Britain.

To unpack this argument, the book traces Wallace's journey from the egalitarian ideas circulating among apprentices and workers in London's suburbs, through the East Midlands and his initial steps into naturalistic research, to South Wales, where he trained in ethnographic observation. It follows his extended travels in the Amazon (Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela), touches on his well-known Asian expeditions, and concludes with his return to the British metropolitan anthropological scene. Combining scientific biography and disciplinary history, the book explores the development of Wallace's social-scientific ideas on human diversity and his role as a field observer while also examining the contributions of early ethnographers in general to nineteenth-century ethnology and anthropology. Wallace's early practices and ideas are continually contextualized and contrasted with the works of significant figures he read, engaged with, or opposed, including Carl von

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