

Literature.

The Malay Archipelago: the Land of the Orang-utan and the Bird of Paradise. A Narrative of Travel, with Studies of Man and Nature. By ALFRED RUSSELL WALLACE. 2 vols. Macmillan and Co.

This book is dedicated to Mr. Darwin, with whose conclusions his own are in harmony. His views with regard to the origin of species, and their geographical distribution may be open to controversy, but there can be but one opinion as to the worth and interest of this narrative. In a review, necessarily brief, and in which it will be impossible even to touch upon many of the suggestive topics considered by the writer, it may be well to confine ourselves for the most part to a statement of what Mr. Wallace accomplished during his eight years' wanderings in the East. During that period he made a vast and most valuable collection of specimens, comprising nearly "three thousand bird skins, of about a thousand species; and at least twenty thousand beetles and butterflies of about seven thousand species, besides some quadrupeds and land shells." Of these a great number are new to European cabinets, and have hitherto never been described. Other orders of insects, comprising more than two thousand species, and including two hundred new kinds of ants have been examined and described by entomologists since Mr. Wallace's return, and the fact that so much had to be done towards naming and describing the most important groups, and so many interesting problems to be worked out, decided the traveller to delay for a long while the publication of his work. The volumes before us may therefore be regarded not only as the fruit of nearly eight years' travel in the archipelago, but of six years' study and arrangement since their author returned to England. It is satisfactory to learn, however, that "almost the whole of the narrative and descriptive portions were written on the spot, and have had little more than verbal alterations." It is these portions which will be found of chief value to the general reader, although no one of ordinary intelligence can fail to be interested in Mr. Wallace's researches into the physical geography of the archipelago. A word or two on this subject may not be inappropriate. The Malay archipelago extends for more than 4,000 miles in length from east to west, and is about 1,300 in breadth from north to south.

It includes three islands larger than Great Britain; and in one of them, Borneo, the whole of the British isles might be set down, and would be surrounded by a sea of forests. New Guinea, though less compact in shape, is probably larger than Borneo. Sumatra is about equal in extent to Great Britain; Java, Luzon, and Célèbes are each about the size of Ireland. Eighteen more islands are, on the average, as large as Jamaica; more than a hundred are as large as the Isle of Wight, while the isles and islets of smaller size are innumerable.

The greater number of these islands are volcanic, and in many of them earthquakes are of constant occurrence. Java suffers the most, and possesses forty-five volcanoes, active or extinct. Mr. Wallace divides the archipelago into an Australian and Asiatic region, and in his reasons for this division gives a variety of curious details. For instance, there is, he considers, evidence from the geology of Sumatra, Borneo, and Java, that they belonged at no very remote period to the adjacent parts of the continent, while "all the islands from Célèbes and Lombok eastward exhibit almost as close a resemblance to Australia and New Guinea as the Western Islands do to Asia." The divisions are so marked that Mr. Wallace observes it is possible to draw a line between them, and at the same time the two regions are in such proximity that in some cases they are separated only by a few miles.

It was as a naturalist that Mr. Wallace visited the wonderful islands that form the Malay archipelago; and the enthusiasm with which he followed his pursuit, notwithstanding a thousand difficulties, is worthy of all praise. In Singapore, where tigers kill on an average a Chinaman every day, he acknowledges that it was rather nervous work hunting for insects in the forests, with the risk of one of these savage animals springing upon him. In Java and Malacca the same danger had to be encountered. More than once he was nearly coming to grief from the attacks of snakes, although he has no tale about these reptiles so marvellous as that related and illustrated by Mr. Biokmore, and again and again he suffered from severe and protracted attacks of illness. But sickness, loneliness, and peril were of little account in comparison with the delights of discovery and the acquisition of specimens. Of a place that abounded with beetles, Mr. Wallace says, "It was a glorious spot, and one that will always live in my memory." On one occasion he discovered a magnificent butterfly, one of the most gorgeously coloured in the world, and so great was his excitement on capturing the prize, and "opening the glorious wings," that the blood rushed to his head, his heart beat violently, and he felt "much more like fainting" than when in apprehension of immediate death. Even when ill with fever, Mr. Wallace found a consolation in the insects brought to him by boy collectors; and when confined with an inflamed foot, and unable to move without a crutch, and this too in New Guinea, a country which no naturalist had ever resided in before, his chief solace was in the birds and insects captured for him by his men. The writer's recollections of New Guinea are indeed dolorous in the extreme. "Continual rain, continual sickness, little wholesome food, with a plague of ants and flies, surpassing anything I had before met with, required all a naturalist's ardour to encounter; and when they were uncompensated by great success in collecting, became all the more insupportable." Yet even in New Guinea he collected in one day ninety-five distinct kinds of beetles, which it took six hours' work afterwards "to pin."

But Mr. Wallace also hunted larger game, and very amusing is his description of the search after the orang-utan in the forests of Sumatra and Borneo. This great ape, known to the natives as the Mias, is not very easy to capture. It moves with great rapidity from tree to tree, throws down branches at any one who approaches it, and protects itself from attack by laying a number of boughs together and concealing itself behind them. The animal is very dangerous when forced to stand on its defence, and, according to the report of the Dyaks, there are only two creatures that will venture to encounter it. A chief of whom Mr. Wallace inquired said, "No animal is strong enough to hurt the mias, and the only creature he ever fights with is the crocodile. When there is no fruit in the jungle, he goes to seek food on the banks of the river, where there are plenty of young shoots that he likes, and fruits that grow close to the water. Then the crocodile sometimes tries to seize him, but the mias gets upon him, and beats him with his hands and feet, and tears him and kills him." The chieftain declared that he had himself seen such a fight, and another stated that if a python attacks a mias, the ape is sure to be the conqueror. Mr. Wallace's account of a baby mias which he attempted to rear is extremely interesting. It would scream and kick like a child in a passion, make ridiculously wry faces when it was washed, and lie upon its back quite helpless, "rolling lazily from side to side, stretching out all four hands into the air, wishing to grasp something, but hardly able to guide its fingers to any definite object; and when dissatisfied, opening wide its almost toothless mouth, and expressing its wants by a most infantine scream." Mr. Wallace observes that the size of the orang-utan has been greatly exaggerated, and that the largest met with in Borneo have been 4 feet 2 inches high, with the outstretched arms 7 feet 8 inches. Among the animals and birds discovered or seen by the traveller, we may mention the flying lemur, one of which he observed run up a trunk, and then glide obliquely through the air to another tree, on which it alighted near its base. "I paced the distance," he says, "from the one tree to the other, and found it to be seventy yards;" a flying frog, the first instance known; some wonderful birds known as the megapodidae, which make large mounds often six feet high and twelve feet across, in which to lay their eggs; and many precious specimens of the Bird of Paradise. Of this most beautiful bird Mr. Wallace was fortunate enough to discover a completely new form, differing remarkably from every other known bird. It is named "Wallace's Standard Wing." But the naturalist's greatest successes appear to have been butterflies and beetles.

Mr. Wallace has some amusing statements as to the house accommodation with which he had often to content himself on his travels. He is six feet one inch in height, yet he lived for six weeks pretty comfortably in a hut eight feet square and only five feet high. Evidently he could make himself at home no matter how unfavourable the circumstances. Here is another picture of an interior:

My house at Waypiti was a bare shed, with a large bamboo platform at one side. At one end of this platform, which was elevated about three feet, I fixed up my mosquito curtain, and partly enclosed it with a large Scotch plaid, making a comfortable little sleeping apartment. I put up a rude table on legs buried in the earthen floor, and had my comfortable rattan chair for a seat. A line across one corner carried my daily-washed cotton clothing, and on a bamboo shelf was arrayed my small stock of crockery and hardware. Boxes were ranged against the thatch walls, and hanging shelves, to preserve my collections from ants while drying, were suspended both without and within the house. On my table lay books, penknives, scissors, pliers, and pins, with insects and bird labels, all of which were unsolved mysteries to the native mind.

We may remark, in conclusion, that Mr. Wallace's book is not without its consolations for those of us whose travelling is limited to these islands or to the neighbouring continent. He assures us that no mountain he ever ascended in the tropics "presents a panorama equal to that from Snowdon, while the views in Switzerland are immeasurably superior." Moreover, he asserts that the pictures drawn by travellers of tropical vegetation are too highly coloured, and that it has been their custom to group together all the fine plants they have met with during a long journey, and thus produce the effect of a gay and flower-painted landscape. "During twelve years," he says, "spent amidst the grandest tropical vegetation, I have seen nothing comparable to the effect produced on our landscapes by gorse, broom, heather, wild hyacinths, hawthorn, purple orchids, and buttercups."