

# Alfred Russel Wallace as ancestor figure

Reflections on anthropological lineage after the Darwin bicentennial

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**Fig. 1.** Woodcut portrait of Alfred Russel Wallace from Edward Drinker Cope's Alfred Russel Wallace (1891) (reprinted from *Popular Science Monthly*, 11 June 1877).

The author would like to thank her mother, Bolling Puller Lowrey, for introducing her to Wallace's writings.

1. Margulis and Sagan caution that replacing 'competition' as a major motive force in evolution with 'co-operation' may merely recapitulate old problems, as 'an anthropomorphic term like "competition" has no obvious place in the scientific dialogue' (2002: 15). Their point is an important one, but whether one agrees with it will depend very much on whether one supposes biology can ever be entirely de-politicized.

2. I thank my colleague Mark Nuttall for pointing out to me that Gregory Bateson made a similar point more than 30 years ago (Bateson 1979).

3. Tim Ingold (2000) has made a similar point in these pages; see his brief summation of his own position, accompanied by useful bibliographical references.

4. Wallace returned from his overseas travels a ferocious critic of English colonial policy, but in a manner that left him without an ideological home in the England of his day and that does not allow for him to be comfortably categorized even in today's political universe. I thank Professor Jeremy Vetter for sharing his fascinating unpublished manuscript on this issue; see also Vetter 2006 and 2009.

5. I would be remiss not to concede that he captioned this photo of Ali – a married man by the time of Wallace's departure – 'my faithful Malay boy'.

6. Indeed, Darwin's biographers exert considerable efforts in the other direction: see, for example, Desmond and Moore's celebrated 2009 account of Darwin's opposition to slavery, which makes a case for Darwin as an anti-racist.

The theory of evolution as articulated in the 19th century by Charles Darwin posed three compelling questions that continue to animate scholarly and popular discussions of the human story – (1) Why are we all the same and all different? (2) What is sex all about? (3) Is this all there is? – and simultaneously answered them as follows: (1) common origin, endless divergence; (2) competition; (3) yes.

Yet however much they wished to have a unifying theory for the field, and however compelling were the results produced by biologists working within a Darwinian framework, throughout the 20th century anthropologists confronted the fact that the Darwinian answers to questions 2 and 3 were not well supported by empirical evidence accumulated through fieldwork.

The study of kinship produced results incompatible with explanations structured around competition (as Marshall Sahlins' 1976 overview definitively demonstrated). The study of magic and religion highlighted the fact that if this is all there is, no known human society behaves accordingly. While biology after Darwin moved from strength to strength over the course of the 20th century, anthropologists gathered data from more and more contexts without any clear advance toward developing an alternative model to explain these parallel irreconcilabilities.

In the latter half of the 20th century, this state of affairs became – particularly for North American cultural anthropology – the discipline's proud banner, 'It's all more complicated than that!' its rallying cry. It was a noble stance, but one unprepared to win in the shouting matches about human nature that shook society at large from the late 1960s onward. An alternative approach – taken by socio-biology as the shouting matches hotted up – was to declare that while the array of evidence might appear baffling, it still boils down to variations on Darwinian themes. Kinship, magic and religion are only so many guises and feints structuring and structured by the struggle for reproductive fitness.

The biological-cultural split widened in the 1970s. Biology explained more and more with better and better tools while anthropology scaled down its explanatory ambitions and displayed dwindling confidence in its own investigative methods. By the 1980s and 1990s a fast-growing sub-field of socio-cultural anthropology was devoted to criticizing the natural sciences (biology in par-

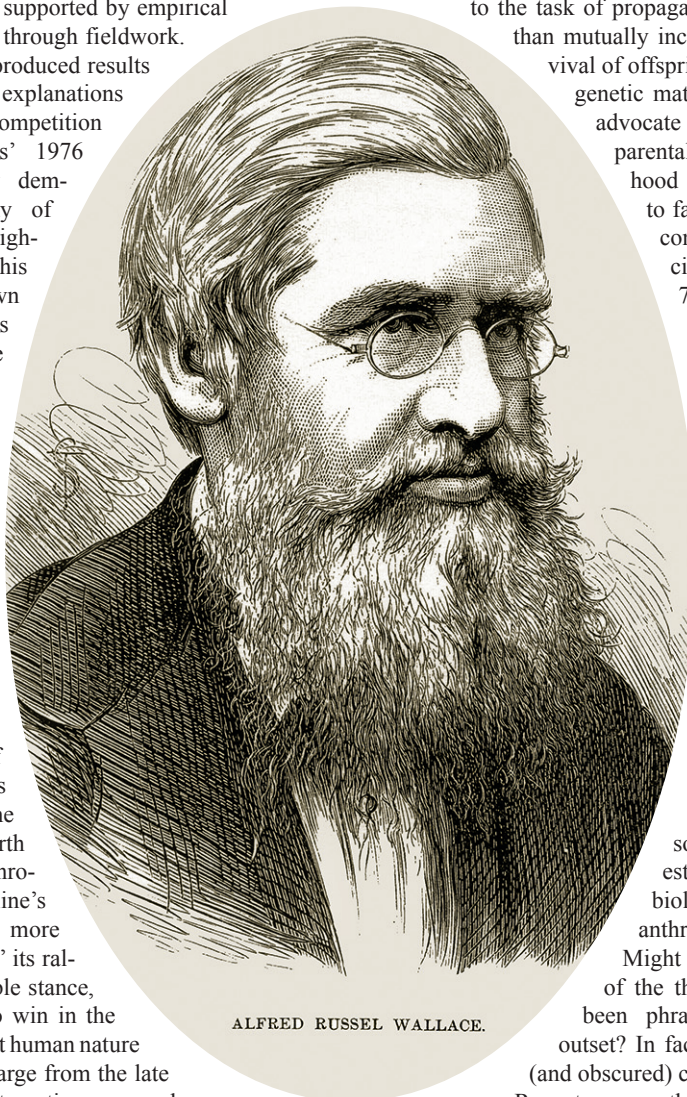
ticular) as ideological and irrelevant. This was unfortunate timing. The owl of Minerva was just about to take flight, and to catch a lovely set of rats.

Late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century developments in the fields of evolutionary developmental biology and ecological developmental biology are coming round to what has been the anthropological position all along, and are tending not to support Darwin's response to question 2. There is an increasing body of evidence that, as biologist Joan Roughgarden puts it in her recent book *The genial gene*, 'sexual reproduction owes its very existence to cooperation' (2009: 85). She documents the ways that as a reproductive strategy, sex is less about dragooning others

to the task of propagating one's own gametes than mutually increasing the odds of survival of offspring equipped with mixed genetic material. To quote an early advocate of this view, 'sex is a parental adaptation to the likelihood of the offspring having to face changed or uncertain conditions' (Bonner 1958, cited in Roughgarden: 79). This answer to the second question – laying emphasis on co-operation rather than competition<sup>1</sup> – makes the cumulative results of 20th-century anthropological fieldwork suddenly less incompatible with biological approaches, an exciting development preliminarily considered in recent brief treatises by Donna Haraway (2003), Susan MacKinnon (2005) and Emily Schultz (2009).

Was the long and sometimes hostile estrangement between biology and socio-cultural anthropology unavoidable? Might the revelatory proposal of the theory of evolution have been phrased differently at the outset? In fact it was, by its obscure (and obscured) co-discoverer.<sup>2</sup>

Recent, sympathetic accounts of why Darwin was for so long credited as the lone originator of the theory of evolution, when Alfred Russel Wallace's clear exposition of the same idea in a short 1858 paper precipitated Darwin into publishing his own long-simmering thoughts on the matter, tend to emphasize the role of class and character in the way events played out (Quammen 2008, Raby 2001, Rosen 2009, Sloten 2004, Wilson 2000). Darwin was rich, well-connected and self-promoting; Wallace was poor, self-taught and self-effacing. Darwin was a sober scientist; Wallace was an enthusiastic polymath. But if 20th-century anthropology has taught us anything, it's that it was probably more complicated than that.



ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.



**Fig. 2.** Photograph of Ali taken in 1862; from Wallace's 1905 book *My life: A record of events and opinions* (London: Chapman and Hall, 2 volumes).

**Fig. 3.** *Cuscus ornatus*, drawn on wood by Robinson; from Wallace 1869 (vol. 2): 82.

7. It is beyond the scope of the present short essay to discuss the conflation of Darwin's answers to questions 1 and 2, which animated so much of 19th- and 20th-century social thought: that is, the relation of observable differentiation among human communities to competitive dynamics. Toward the end of his life Darwin's ruminations on the matter led him to agreement with the eugenicist arguments of his cousin Francis Galton. For his part, Wallace found Galton's work unpersuasive, wrote and campaigned for many years in favour of land nationalization, and as an old man declared himself a socialist.

Bateson, G. 1979. *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc.

Darwin, C. 2002 [1845]. *Voyage of the Beagle*. Mineola, NY: Dover Value Editions.

— 1859. *On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. London: John Murray.

— 1871. *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*. London: John Murray.

Dawkins, R. 2006. *The god delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Desmond, A. and Moore, J. 2009. *Darwin's sacred cause: How a hatred of slavery shaped Darwin's views on human evolution*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Endersby, J. 2003. Escaping Darwin's shadow. *Journal of the History of Biology* 36: 385-403.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Fichman, M. 1981. *Alfred Russel Wallace*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.

Fodor, J. and Piattelli-Palmarini, M. 2010. *What Darwin got wrong*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Haraway, D. 2003. *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Hitchens, C. 2007. *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*. New York: Twelve Books.

*The Origin of Species* (1859) may well have been much less central to the ultimate popular success of Darwin's specific articulation of the theory of evolution than was *The descent of man and selection in relation to sex* (1871). In the latter treatise, Darwin proposed competition between the sexes as a key evolutionary mechanism and plainly stated its consequence for humans: 'man has ultimately become superior to woman'.

Wallace always disagreed with Darwin about the centrality of sexual selection as a mechanism of evolution. He especially thought Darwin's notions of 'female mate choice', and the idea that male rivalry was consequent upon it, were speculative and unsupportable. Late in life, Wallace endorsed Edward Alexander Westermarck's views on secondary sexual characteristics as means of mutually facilitating mating opportunities, rather than as manifestations of competitive stratagems (Sloten 2005). One didn't need then to be a sexual selectionist to be an evolutionist and there is even less good reason for such a combination now.<sup>3</sup> But Darwin's notions of sex were more congenial to his own and subsequent eras than were Wallace's. Wallace was a believer in women's emancipation and an advocate of more egalitarian sex roles in human society. Darwin, on the other hand, seemed to ground sexism in biology, which goes a long and under-noted way to explaining why Darwin became famous while his peer and erstwhile colleague Wallace languished in obscurity.

Turning to another of 20th-century anthropology's concerns, race, Darwin and Wallace shared the answer to question 1 with equal conviction. However, Darwin's and Wallace's direct attitudes toward various kinds of people encountered during their travels outside Europe were starkly different. Again, Darwin's reactions were much more congenial to his era – and many decades beyond it – than were the views of Wallace. To take only the two most-quoted examples, there is the notorious line from Darwin's journal written during his time in Tierra del Fuego:

Viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe that they are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world. It is a common subject of conjecture what pleasure in life some of the lower animals can enjoy: how much more reasonably the same question may be asked of these barbarians! (2002 [1845]: 217-218).

Contrast this to this passage from Wallace's journal, written during his time in the Malay archipelago:

The more I see of uncivilised people, the better I think of human nature on the whole, and the essential differences between so-called civilised and savage man seem to disappear (cited in Wilson 2000: 77).

An anthropological audience might well object to this set piece; Malinowski's diaries have taught us that lone quotes do not necessarily make the whole man. In Wallace's case, however, there was a genuine common thread running through his field journals and later ruminations on human evolution. It finds expression here in relation to the inhabitants of Dorey (now Manokwari, West Papua):

If these people are not savages, where shall we find any? Yet they have all a decided love for the fine arts, and spend their leisure time in executing works whose good taste and elegance would often be admired in our schools of design! (1869, v. 2: 198).

Wallace returned again and again to this theme of 'aesthetic sensibility' as the marker of humanity. It became a centrepiece of his disagreements with Darwin about sexual selection and human difference. Contemporary anthropologists would use a different language to Wallace – that of symbolic capacity rather than of aesthetic sense – but the basic idea is similar. What is vastly different is that Wallace attributed this definitive human capacity to some sort of higher power. I will take up this point toward the end of the present article.



It is probably not due to character alone that Wallace's tone and observations are more in keeping with anthropology as we now know it than are Darwin's. Wallace was by far the superior fieldworker. He spent years living on his own in Amazonia and then in the Malay archipelago, making detailed and sympathetic observations about local peoples, practices and cultures.<sup>4</sup> In the latter context his travelling companion and research assistant for many years was a young Malay man, Ali. At their parting, in 1862, Wallace commissioned a photograph of Ali to carry home to England and included it in his 1905 autobiography. Compare this to the erasure of non-white participation and assistance in other European explorers' accounts of the time.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, and as is well known, during his tropical sojourn Darwin was the companion to the captain of a British vessel. He never lived for extended periods of time away from the ship during the famous voyage of the *Beagle*. The non-white people he came to know best were three Fuegians, survivors of a group of four that the crew of the *Beagle* had forcibly kidnapped on a previous trip to South America and taken to England (where one died). The three survivors were being returned to South America on the trip Darwin joined.

When even sympathetic intellectual historians and biographers of Wallace describe the story of why Darwin became famous while Wallace did not, it goes unmentioned that Darwin's attitudes were far more racist and sexist than were Wallace's.<sup>6</sup> But it is difficult to believe it did not play a role at least as significant as did class (and class politics – Wallace was a progressive and Darwin a classic English liberal).<sup>7</sup> Given that time is suggesting that Wallace may have possessed a surer intuition as to evolu-

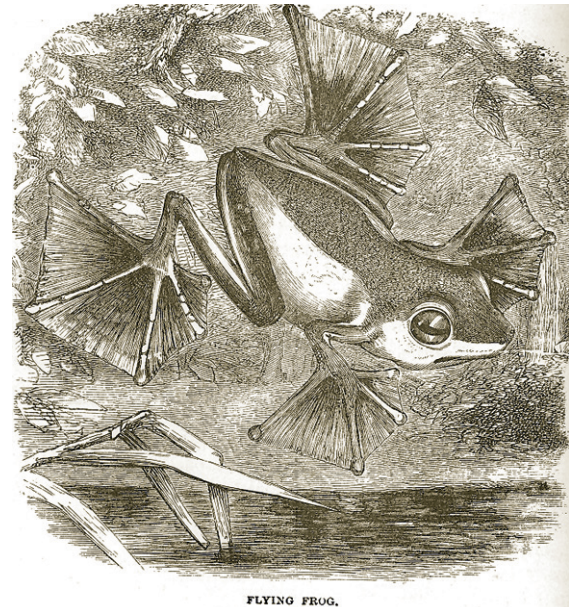




Xenocerus semiluctuosus, fem.  
Xenocerus (new species), male.

Arachnobas  
(new species).

Eupholus (new species).  
Euchirus longinautus, male.



FLYING FROG.

**Fig. 4.** Moluccan beetles, drawn on wood by Robinson; from Wallace 1869 (vol. 2): 89.

**Fig. 5.** Flying frog, from a sketch by the author, drawn on wood by Keulemans; from Wallace 1869 (vol. 1): 38.

Ingold, T. 2000. The poverty of selectionism. *Anthropology Today* 16(3): 1-2.

Latour, B. 1993. *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

— 2009. Perspectivism: 'Type' or 'bomb'? *Anthropology Today* 25(2): 1-2.

Lévi-Strauss, C. 1963. The sorcerer and his magic. *Structural Anthropology*, Volume 1. New York: Basic Books.

MacKinnon, S. 2005. *Neoliberal genetics: The myths and moral tales of evolutionary psychology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Margulis, L. and Sagan, Dorion 2002. *Acquiring genomes: A theory of the origins of species*. New York: Basic Books.

McLean, S. 2009. Stories and cosmogonies: Imagining creativity beyond 'nature' and 'culture'. *Cultural Anthropology* 24(2): 213-245.

Quammen, D. 2008. The man who wasn't Darwin. *National Geographic*, December. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/12/wallace/quammen-text>.

Raby, P. 2001. *Alfred Russel Wallace: A life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rosen, J. 2007. Missing link: Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin's neglected double. *New Yorker*, 12 February. [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2007/02/12/070212crat\\_atlarge\\_rosen](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2007/02/12/070212crat_atlarge_rosen)

Roughgarden, J. 2009. *The genial gene: Deconstructing Darwinian selfishness*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

tionary mechanisms than did Darwin (not just regarding sexual selection, but also on biogeography [see Quammen 1996] and, as is well known, Lamarckian inheritance), we might turn to Wallace's and Darwin's notorious disagreement as to question 3: is this all there is?

Nearly everyone who writes about Darwin and Wallace attributes Wallace's ultimate obscurity in whole or in part to his later-life enthusiasm for spiritualism (Endersby 2003 is a notable exception). Certainly Wallace's accounts of his experiences at séances are endearingly or off-puttingly credulous (depending on how these things strike one). However, serious scholarly interest in the supernatural was not in itself a source of stigma in the 19th century, nor necessarily fatal to long-term reputation: Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, for example, have hardly been punished with ignominy over the years for the same curiosity; Robert Owen's utopianism has not been considered the less inspired for it.

It is also the case that the third question remains stubbornly resistant to resolution. If evolution's answer to question 1 has long enjoyed untroubled acceptance among scholars, and if question 2 is looking newly amenable to bio-cultural syntheses (albeit not in the form of Darwin's answer), question 3 is still something of a cross between a battleground and a freak show. Advocacy for the rationality of atheism in recent years has a self-parodying air of vampire-staking and zombie-hunting about it, lunging as it does at this thing that should by rights be dead yet will not lie quiet (Dawkins 2006, Hitchens 2007). Meanwhile, anthropology has yet to come up with a better explanation for witchcraft than the one proposed by Evans-Pritchard in 1937, and he believed in it and God, too.

In the years since, anthropology's standard take on magic and religion has been to say these are not so different from science, in terms of social effects. Much of the recent florescence of work on 'ontology' more or less boils down to the repetition of this limited insight. Many current challenges to what is still known as the nature/culture distinction tend to naturalize everything in the name of culture, flattening out into a single plane such diverse entities as meteor showers, ancestor spirits, historical narratives, forms of government, global warming, vengeful ghosts and food allergies. All are equally real as to their effects, and thus equally as real as they need to be. It's a sort of 'Velveteen Rabbit' take on the evidence, where 'reality' is in the eyes of the beholder, even (as in the work of Bruno Latour, especially his *We have never been modern* [1993]) at its most elegant and articulate. The closest thing to an advance in this field has been the recent

work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – indebted to Latour and in its turn highly praised by him – which amounts to swapping the 'nature' and 'culture' poles of the debate and insisting that such a perfectly symmetrical reversal can be meaningful, even revolutionary (see Latour 2009 for relevant references).

Anthropology has rightly stood down ridicule on the subjects of gender, sexuality, race, politics, and economics, but in order to do what the current crop of ontology scolds say we must – take our informants' cosmologies seriously – we have to grapple with the fact that these are full of imaginary entities that do not fit at all well into the putatively revolutionary ontologies of the hour. To be fair, Viveiros de Castro did, in the early versions of his perspectival theory (1992, 1998), include the category 'supernature', but this aspect of his argument has received infinitesimal attention compared to its nature/culture inversion. Affirmations of 'stories as expressions in linguistic form of a dynamic power of self-differentiation immanent to the material substance of the universe' (McLean 2009: 232) and insistence that 'ethnography might be understood as an encounter through which the parameters of the real can be renegotiated and, potentially, expanded – to include, for example, magical metamorphoses and animal-human ancestors alongside automobiles, the Internet, neoliberalism, and stem cell research' (ibid: 235) are not notably clarifying. Rather, it is symptomatic that these statements have been published in all po-faced seriousness in a major journal of the discipline.

If one is unwilling to go in for this jolly conflation of material and immaterial processes and phenomena into one great humming network of vital energies possessed of infinitely reversible polarity, one must simply concede that during the 20th-century history of the discipline anthropologists have accumulated a huge wealth of data relating to question 3 for which no plausible explanation, general theory, or provisional hypothesis exists. Even Evans-Pritchard's account of ultimate causality is only persuasive to the extent that one either believes in ultimate causes of a supernatural kind (which, in the end, he did) or supposes that people find it more satisfying to explain one mysterious thing by means of a second mysterious thing than to stop at the first mysterious thing. This state of affairs is so embarrassing that grasping at mash-ups that seem to make the problem go away – a proposal made in naked form by McLean, and in more philosophically clad iterations by Latour and Viveiros de Castro – has acquired a considerable degree of disciplinary momentum. The only available alternative is to become a crank.



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- Wallace, A.R. 1858. On the tendency of varieties to depart indefinitely from the original type: Instability of varieties supposed to prove the permanent distinctness of species. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnaean Society of London (Zoology)* 3: 53-62.
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- 2009. The unmaking of an anthropologist: Wallace returns from the field, 1862-1870. *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 64: 25-42.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. 1992. *From the enemy's point of view: Humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1998. Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4: 469-488.
- Wilson, J.G. 2000. *The forgotten naturalist: In search of Alfred Russel Wallace*. Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

And this is why, under present circumstances, I want to advocate for Wallace – a brilliant and unashamed crank – as an ancestor-figure for contemporary anthropology. In Wallace's articulation of the theory of evolution, he arrived at the same answer to question 1 as did Darwin, but came up with different answers to questions 2 and 3, responding as follows: (1) common origin, endless divergence; (2) co-operation; (3) no.

Late 20th-century developments in biology are beginning to suggest that Wallace's ideas hew closer to the truth than did Darwin's, and specifically, that his answer to the second question explains more of the emerging evidence than does Darwin's. But as Roughgarden has it, '[t]he broad failure of sexual selection is not a threat to evolutionary biology' (2009: 247). In fact, it's a mark of progress in the field. To their great credit, socio-cultural anthropologists faced considerable ridicule throughout the 20th century for standing their ground on question 2 and insisting that their data were not amenable to Darwin's model. In this, they were in some measure already Wallacean evolutionists without knowing it.

At present I think we might make a more conscious alliance with Wallace's cause – despite the ridicule it will surely bring to us, as it did to him – in regard to question 3. I do not mean by this that we should (as Wallace did) start to write glowing accounts of séances in which flowers miraculously appear on a table while the lights are out, or a ghost whom we salute by the name of a dead relative gravely assents to our guessing of his identity (this is what I meant by Wallace's responses being either endearing or off-putting). And, lest I be wilfully misread by Darwin supporters who label all his critics closet creationists (see Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini 2010 on the pervasiveness of this reaction), I do not mean that we should begin waving in the direction of an intelligent designer instead of

crafting plausible explanations on the basis of the analysis and interpretation of the available evidence. I mean that we ought to continue to investigate supernatural phenomena on their own terms – which is to say, not by squashing them into one-size-fits-all ontologies that explain everything and nothing all at once. The resilience of the spirit-world to science's dismissal of it is one of anthropology's great puzzles, and it is not one we can yet congratulate ourselves for having resolved.

Wallace quite rightly considered the lush complexity of human thought a serious mystery, one inexplicable within the necessity-driven framework of natural selection. As he put it, the human brain 'furnishes a surpluse of power – of an instrument beyond the needs of its possessor' (cited in Fichman 1981: 114). This sounds very much like Lévi-Strauss's enchanting assertion that 'the universe is never charged with sufficient meaning [...] the mind always has more meanings available than there are objects to which to relate them' (1963: 177). Here, of course, is the old, familiar, and still stubborn problem of culture: why it exists at all; and why so much of it is so gorgeously useless, bent not so much on 'renegotiat[ing] the parameters of the real' as refusing them altogether.

Having agreed already during the 19th century on question 1, and on question 2 after long and separate 20th-century trajectories, biology and anthropology look poised for a real bio-cultural synthesis in the 21st. On question 3, anthropology is still on its strange, lonely own, and should not pretend otherwise. We can look to Wallace as a model for supposing that someday this idiosyncratic stance will be vindicated by robust new theories, as yet undreamt of, that finally do explain the available evidence. If one prefers to avoid ancestor worship (or the worship of odd ancestors), it would at least be salutary to admit we have not got them yet. ●



**Fig. 6.** Dobbo in the trading season, from a sketch by the author, drawn on wood by Baines; from Wallace 1869 (vol. 2): 161.

**Fig. 7.** Clay-beater, used in New Guinea, drawn on wood by Robinson; from Wallace 1869 (vol. 2): 197.

