



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXIII No. 94

December 2014



ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Earl of Cranbrook and Adrian G. Marshall. (2014). Alfred Russel Wallace's Assistants, and Other Helpers, in The Malay Archipelago 1854-62. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXXIII (94) : 73-122

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE'S ASSISTANTS, AND OTHER HELPERS, IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO 1854-62

Earl of Cranbrook¹ and Adrian G. Marshall²

INTRODUCTION

In the centennial year of his death on 7 November 1913, Alfred Russel Wallace (henceforth ARW) has been commemorated as co-originator of the theory of evolution by natural selection (Wallace 1855d, Darwin & Wallace 1858, Wallace 1870). Also recognised are his wider contributions to biological theory, in zoogeography (Wallace 1876), especially reflecting the selective influence of the tropical environment (Wallace 1878) and the consequences of isolation (Wallace 1880), and animal coloration and mimicry (Wallace 1867, 1879)^ A formative influence on his thoughts in all these fields was his experience of eight years (1854-62) as a naturalist-collector in island South-east Asia. His account of these eastern travels, best known under its short title *The Malay Archipelago* (henceforth MA), was published in 1869 and has never since been out-of-print. Reflecting on his career in old age, ARW declared that the years spent in the Malay Archipelago 'constituted the central and controlling incident of my life' (Wallace 1905 i: 336).

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In 1853, hardened by his experiences in the Amazon (Wallace 1853), ARW was a seasoned collector for the natural-history market. Insects were his chief objectives, mainly beetles and butterflies but not excluding other orders; birds also ranked highly. His field equipment was simple: nets for insects and guns for birds and mammals. Preparations for his venture to the Malay Archipelago included the purchase of these items, and labels for his specimens. For pinned insects, he obtained small blank, round discs. When used, the locality was written on individual labels, generally in abbreviated form: e.g., SAR for Sarawak (Baker 1995: 173, Table 2). For birds and other vertebrates, he ordered rectangular parchment tags pre-printed with the heading *Collected by A.R. Wallace 185*, leaving the last digit of the year to be added. In due course, as his stay in the Archipelago extended beyond the decade, he obtained a second version, *Collected by A.R. Wallace 186* and an alternative, *Collected for A.R. Wallace 186* (Cranbrook *et al.* 2005).

From arrival at Singapore in April 1854, ARW kept field records of his collections in small notebooks. Two of these, generally known as the *Species Registry*, are now in the Natural History Museum, London.⁴ The Linnean Society of London holds four further notebooks of similar size and appearance. Three mainly list specimens from the localities he visited; the fourth, which was called the *Species Notebook* by McKinney (1972), has been reproduced in facsimile with annotations by Costa (2013).

The Linnean Society library also holds four slightly larger volumes of a *Journal*.⁵ This does not cover the entire period of ARW's travels in the Archipelago but starts, after some miscellaneous notes, with his arrival at Bileling on the north coast of Bali on 13 June 1856 and closes, on a torn last page of the fourth notebook, at the village of Kayeli, Buru, 19 May 1861. The whole was transcribed by Pearson (2005) and images of the original are now available on line.⁶ The main text consists of sequentially numbered entries, varying in length from a single paragraph to several pages, covering ARW's travels and collections – mostly written shortly after the events described. The *Journal* later provided source material for narrative passages of *MA* and, apart from the first volume, each page has been cancelled by an oblique line, presumably as it was transcribed.⁷ Unlike the account of his travels in *MA*, the *Journal* is chronological⁸ and therefore provides a contemporary record of what he did, when, where and with whom. For this reason, it has been used as primary source material in the following pages. Transcripts from the *Journal*, *MA* or other sources are given in single quotation marks. Within quotations, ARW's spelling of place names has been retained but elsewhere modern equivalents are used.

While travelling, ARW kept in touch by correspondence with his family and friends, professional acquaintances including Charles Darwin (Berra 2013) and, importantly, his London agent, Samuel Stevens.⁹ Stevens (1817-1899) was a dealer in natural history equipment and specimens, and also a respected member of several scientific bodies at whose meetings he mingled with leading naturalists, some of whom indulged their passion by lavish purchases.¹⁰ At intervals ARW shipped his latest collections to Stevens (Baker 2001), who exhibited choice specimens at such meetings. Stevens also arranged the publication of progress reports on ARW's travels (Anon. 1859, Wallace 1855a,c, 1856a,b, 1858a, 1860d,e, 1861b, 1862a), descriptions of new species (Wallace 1855b, 1860a) and his developing ideas on classification and zoogeography (Wallace 1856c, 1859, 1860b). Through Stevens, ARW

kept abreast with the marketing of his specimens and also received scientific periodicals. When the ornithological journal *Ibis* was founded in 1859, the editor, P.L. Sclater, published ARW's comments on matters including the species of parrots and problems of nomenclatural precedence (Wallace 1859, 1861b). These sources, which were important for expressing ARW's emerging theories (Fagan 2008, Cranbrook 2013) as well as reporting his discoveries, have been drawn on in the following pages.

By his own account, ARW's collections in the Archipelago amounted to 310 specimens of mammals, 8050 birds, 100 reptiles (a group in which he included amphibians), 7500 molluscan shells, 13,100 Lepidoptera, 83,200 Coleoptera and 13,400 other insects, totalling 125,660 'specimens of natural history' (Wallace 1869: Preface). His claim to ownership of this large and varied lot of animal specimens is unchallengeable. His was the drive and initiative that directed their collection; he was responsible for the logistics, chose the locations, curated and catalogued the specimens and arranged for their packing and shipment to Samuel Stevens. ARW was himself a skilled and dedicated collector, but many of these specimens he did not actually obtain by his own hands. He did not conceal this fact. Indeed, both the *Journal* and *MA* indicate the extent to which he relied on the assistants who accompanied him on his travels, as well as local people on temporary terms, to accumulate his impressive collection of scientifically (and financially) rewarding specimens.

Wallace has been the subject of many biographical treatments, the most recent being Benton (2013), Collar & Pry's-Jones (2013) and van Wyhe (2013). During his travels in the Malay Archipelago, he drew on the advice of many people to locate collecting sites with good prospects. He met naturalists who shared his enthusiasm and, sometimes, made joint excursions with him. Above all, for the success of his expeditions to different localities he relied on paid assistants to supplement his own activities to obtain and prepare the natural history specimens that were the objective of his travels.

Apart from Charles Allen, about whom additional information is obtainable from sources in UK and Singapore, all we know of the people whose experience and skills helped him to amass his varied collection of specimens of natural history are the scant references vouchsafed by ARW himself. Many remain anonymous. Some, whose names are given in the *Journal* or *MA*, were with him for longer periods but, even in these cases, there are few insights into their characters or personal lives. None the less, named or nameless,

these assistants deserve a fair measure of recognition for their undoubted contribution to the success of the expedition to the Malay Archipelago, and to the consequent high reputation of their employer. The following pages are dedicated to their memory.

The assistants (and other helpers)

As did any man of his social position, ARW employed servants for domestic tasks. In Sarawak, when staying at the Rajah's Santubong bungalow he was accompanied by 'one Malay boy as cook' and when navigating a narrow river in a small boat, he 'only took a Chinese boy as a servant' (*MA*). Later, some locally recruited assistants were expected to fulfil both tasks.

Charles Martin Allen (1)

His first assistant, however, came with him from England. He was Charles Martin Allen, later described by ARW as 'a London boy, the son of a carpenter who had done a little work for my sister, and whose parents were willing for him to go with me and learn to be a collector' (Wallace 1905 i: 340). There is a minor mystery about Charles's age when he travelled out to the East. It is certain that he was born in London at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday 9 June 1839 at 21 Mary Street, by Hampstead Road, St Pancras Parish (FRC undated). His father, John Allen, a wheelwright, and his mother, Elizabeth Mary, née Alavoine, had both been born in Middlesex, his mother in nearby Marylebone. By the time of the March 1841 British national census the family had moved, although a John Allen aged 74, Jane Allen, 75, and Jane Allen, 30, lived in Mary Street¹¹ – possibly Charles's paternal grandparents and an aunt. At the March 1851 census Charles's age was given as 11, with his brother James, 9, living with their parents, John, 41 and Elizabeth (Eliza), 40, at 42 Little Albany Street North, St Pancras. Both boys were at school.

In late 1852, after his return in October from over four years in Brazil, ARW rented 44 Upper Albany Street¹² for himself, his mother, his sister Fanny and her husband Thomas Sims (Wallace 1905). Fanny employed John Allen as a carpenter and it seems likely, from subsequent correspondence, that she encouraged her brother to take an assistant, well aware of the difficulties he had encountered in the Amazon. It appears that his parents exaggerated Charles's age in their communications with the Wallaces at this time. In his later autobiography ARW stated that, on their arrival in Singapore in April 1854, Charles was sixteen years old but, perceptively, also observed that he

was 'quite undersized for his age, so that no one would have taken him for more than thirteen or fourteen' (Wallace 1905). In fact, as recognised by van Wyhe (2013), Charles had not reached his fifteenth birthday (9 June 1854). This deception over Charles's age was continued throughout his life. The stated ages given at his marriage and his death (NAS undated; SFP 1892) suggest that he was born between 25 December 1837 and 6 July 1838, rather than June 1839.

ARW was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in February 1854. He sought help from Sir Roderick Murchison, President RGS, who successfully obtained the offer of a free passage to Singapore on a ship of the Royal Navy for ARW and 'his servant lad'. Having dispatched his professional luggage to Singapore by the Cape route, in January 1854 ARW, accompanied by Charles, went to Portsmouth and boarded HMS *Frolic*, 16 guns. They remained on board from 28 January to 8 February, the ship crowded and Charles 'tucked away amongst the crew', but then *Frolic* was called to the Crimea. ARW and Charles moved to Portsea and HMS *Juno*, 26 guns. This passage also fell through and they returned to London. Again ARW approached the RGS, and the Admiralty was persuaded to fund their passage, ARW travelling First Class, by the 'overland' route to Singapore with P & O, the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (Rookmaaker & van Wyhe 2012: 18-19).¹³ The P & O paddle steamer *Euxine* left Southampton on Wednesday 8 March (SFP April 1854), via Gibraltar (13/14 March) and Malta (17/18 March) to Alexandria. ARW and Charles crossed overland to Suez between Tuesday 21 and Friday 24 March, to board the P & O screw steamer *Bengal* (Wallace wrote to his sister from the Red Sea on Sunday 26 March) via Aden (30 March) to Galle, Sri Lanka (7/8 April). Changing to the *Pottinger*, another P & O paddle steamer, they departed on Monday 10 April and travelled via Penang to arrive at Singapore on Tuesday 18 April, three days behind schedule, the delay apparently occurring at Galle. Wallace (1905) gave the date as the 20th, but this is contradicted by the shipping arrivals news in SFP April 1854 (Marshall 2003).

In Singapore, ARW found accommodation in the French Jesuit Mission. There is still a church and active community centre on the site, although the surrounding country no longer consists of hills topped by stands of virgin forest, 'much frequented by wood-cutters and sawyers', which offered excellent opportunities for collecting. Soon after arriving, he and Charles were out in the forest on Bukit Timah. In a letter, ARW described himself decked with insect collector's paraphernalia: '[a] large collecting box hung by straps over my