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ALI THE COOK AND "PETER" THE COLLECTOR: TWO WALLACE HELPERS IN HIS LAST SARAWAK DAYS

Gerrell M. Drawhorn

ABSTRACT

Alfred Russel Wallace's last month or so in Sarawak required him to replace his personal servant and cook, Charles Allen, who had announced he would not be accompanying Wallace further on his travels. It appears that Allen's replacement, Ali, had previously been a servant/cook in the employ of Spenser St. John who accompanied Wallace up to Peninjau, Rajah James Brooke's cottage on Gunong Serambo. As well, at this time, Wallace attempted to quickly fill out his ornithological and mammalian collections by purchasing specimens from a collector simply identified as "Peter" This individual can now be identified as Joseph "Peter" Middleton, the Chief Constable of Kuching.

Keywords:



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Abstract

Alfred Russel Wallace’s last month or so in Sarawak required him to replace his personal servant and cook, Charles Allen, who had announced he would not be accompanying Wallace further on his travels. It appears that Allen’s replacement, Ali, had previously been a servant/cook in the employ of Spenser St. John who accompanied Wallace up to Peninjau, Rajah James Brooke’s cottage on Gunong Serambo. As well, at this time, Wallace attempted to quickly fill out his ornithological and mammalian collections by purchasing specimens from a collector simply identified as “Peter”. This individual can now be identified as Joseph “Peter” Middleton, the Chief Constable of Kuching.

The Cook – The Hiring of Ali

It was December 1855 and Wallace was coming to the end of his Sarawak collecting phase. He had done his intensive insect collecting at the Simunjon coal works and obtained several specimens of orangutans which he believe had helped him resolve the species issue for the *maias* (*Pongo*). Charles Allen was sent back to Kuching with the collections and equipment in November 1855 (Rookmaaker and van Wyhe 2012). Wallace then undertook a much delayed overland journey up the Sadong River, crossing overland to the upper Sarawak River watershed. He travelled “light” without collecting equipment visiting several highland longhouses to Senna (now Annah Rais) and from there he took a *prau* back to Kuching (Wallace 1856). He simply needed time to pack up his collections so they could be transported back to his agent, Samuel Stevens, to be sold in London. But unexpected events interrupted Wallace’s plans for a quick journey to the Moluccas and required him to hire new assistants, one of whom was “my Bornean lad Ali” (Wallace 1869: 2: 23–24). But precisely how this transpired has remained something of a mystery (Cranbrook and Marshall 2014; van Wyhe and Drawhorn 2015; Drawhorn 2016).

Upon arriving in Kuching Wallace discovered he had nearly another two months before the next vessel left for Singapore (Wallace 1869: 63). He decided to spend a few of those days with Rajah James Brooke at the latter's cottage of "Peninjau" (or "See-Afar") near the summit of Gunong Serambo. It appears that Wallace first went up just prior to Christmas, accompanied by Spenser St. John and the Rajah (Wallace 1869: 65). St. John had been ill after a journey to the unhealthful climate of Labuan and Brunei where he was under consideration for the position of Consul General of Great Britain. We are unsure if the Rajah and St. John stayed the full week, but Wallace and Allen remained on the mountain from December 13th–20th.

It's likely that Wallace had noted a change in Allen's behaviour and attempted to keep him active and involved. To this point Wallace rarely involved Allen in the collection of insects. But Wallace's Insect Notebook for 1855 (2/3 facing page 1) indicates that he now involved Allen in capturing nocturnal insects using the light of a lantern thrown against the whitewashed wall of the verandah of the cottage. Oddly in the *Malay Archipelago* (1869: 65–66) one might get the impression that this was a solo collection. "*As soon as it got dark I placed my lamp on the table against the wall, and with pins, insect forceps, net and collecting boxes by my side, sat down with a book.*" Indeed, for moths it was. However from his collection Notebook 2/3 it is clear that he had tasked Charles Allen with collection all the other insects. From December 13th to December 20th 1855 Wallace records the weather, phase of the moon and how many moths that he collected, and also how many other insects that Charles Allen was able to obtain against his own yield of moths. But again in the *Malay Archipelago* (1869: 66) Wallace provides a night-by-night summary of his night collecting at Peninjau, but only of moths! He leaves out Charles Allen's contribution.

"Sometimes during the whole evening only one solitary moth would visit me, while on other nights they would pour in, in a continual stream, keeping me hard at work catching and pinning till past midnight. They literally came by the thousands..."

On those nights, usually rainy and dark, he would acquire up to 260 different specimens, of 130 different species. On moonlit nights, Charles Allen would capture more beetles, wasps, termites, and other insects...on two nights actually collecting more specimens than Wallace. Wallace was careful, even when he was not successful at catching moths to "keep to the rules". He was

to exclusively catch nocturnal Lepidoptera while all other catches were to be made by Allen (Wallace Insect Notebook 2/3 1855; facing page 1).

On December 20th, 1855 Wallace and Allen returned to the annual celebration where many of the outstation officers and other Europeans, along with selected native guests, would be treated to a feast and revelry. Wallace had long complained about Allen's work habits and incapability of following instructions and it is possible that this led to a breach between them (Rookmaaker and van Wyhe 2012). It was during this time period that Charles Allen informed Wallace that he no longer wished to undertake such long journeys into the wilderness with Wallace. He announced he was going to remain in Kuching, taking up a position as teacher in the Mission School.¹ Whether he had spoken with the newly consecrated Bishop McDougall regarding this, or perhaps, Mrs. McDougall is not known. McDougall had just arrived back in Sarawak from India and Singapore a few days before Christmas² (H. McDougall 1882; there is question about the precise date of his return – see J. Brooke to A.R. Wallace).

Spenser St. John's Ali

Wallace returned to Peninjau on New Years Eve without Charles Allen his personal servant and collecting assistant. We can deduce this again from Wallace's Insect collecting notebooks which show him undertaking nocturnal captures from 31st December 1855 through 18th January 1856. Charles Allen is no longer collecting "other insects". Wallace is approaching the task alone and only capturing moths. Nonetheless, the dark, windy and rainy night produced a prodigious number of moths (200 with over 130 species).

Wallace was either accompanied or visited by a contingent of officers also seeking relaxation in the cooler mountain breezes.

"Peninjauh 27th ? Jany to 7th Feb 1856³

My dear Brooke,

Our communication is so completely dislocated that we are daily expecting the arrival of two mails by one or other of three vessels each of which has been gone a month from this. En attendants I am willing to write you a peaceful letter from the Hill where with the two St Johns and Wallace, I am passing a few days....Wallace leaves us soon – he is a pleasing and