

# Darwin's 'joint paper'

Alice K. Kenyon

Contrary to popular belief, Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin never read together a joint paper at the Linnean Society in 1858 proposing the theory of evolution by natural selection. Moreover, Darwin, having private knowledge and possession of Wallace's completed manuscript, published a 'joint paper' without Wallace's prior knowledge.

Michael Denton in his lucid and devastating book, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, wrote:

*'... Alfred Russel Wallace, who subsequently read with Darwin their famous joint paper to the Linnean Society in 1858 proposing the theory of evolution by natural selection, first became an evolutionist when he became acquainted with the facts of geographical variation in Malaya and in the Indonesian Islands.'*<sup>1</sup>

That Wallace and Darwin **read their joint paper** is often repeated and widely believed, but it is not true. On July 1, 1858, Wallace was in the Indonesian islands, in Ternate in the Moluccas. He knew nothing about the presentation of his paper until after the event.

## Summary of events

Wallace was in Ternate in **February, 1858**, when he wrote his paper and sent it to Darwin, with whom he had previously corresponded.<sup>2,3</sup> On **June 18**, Darwin received Wallace's letter and paper. On **June 30/July 1**, Sir Charles Lyell and Sir Joseph Hooker<sup>4</sup> presented to the Linnean Society Wallace's paper with Darwin's unpublished abstract of 1844 and unpublished letter of 1857. On **July 13**, Hooker wrote to inform Wallace; Darwin also wrote, forwarding Hooker's letter. On **October 6**, Wallace replied to Hooker and to Darwin (presumably on the same date). Darwin mailed eight copies of the so-called joint paper to Wallace on October 12.<sup>5</sup> On **January 25, 1859**, Darwin received Wallace's reply to him and to Hooker.

## Darwin's letters

When Darwin received Wallace's paper and letter on June 18, 1858, he wrote to Lyell:

*'Your words have come true with a vengeance — that I should be forestalled.<sup>6</sup> ... I never saw a more striking coincidence; if Wallace had my MS sketch written out in 1842 [sic], he could not have made a*

*better short abstract! Even his terms now stand as heads of my chapters. Please return me the MS, which he does not say he wishes me to publish, but I shall of course, at once write and offer to send to any journal. So all my originality, whatever it may amount to, will be smashed, though my book, if it will ever have any value, will not be deteriorated; as all the labour consists in the application of the theory.'*<sup>7</sup>

On June 25, Darwin wrote to Lyell:

*'I should be extremely glad now to publish a sketch of my general views in about a dozen pages or so; but I cannot persuade myself that I can do so honourably. Wallace says nothing about publication, and I enclose his letter. But as I had not intended to publish any sketch, can I do so honourably, because Wallace has sent me an outline of his doctrine?'*<sup>8</sup>

On June 26, Darwin wrote to Lyell:

*'Wallace might say, "You did not intend publishing an abstract of your views till you received my communication. Is it fair to take advantage of my having freely, though unasked, communicated to you my ideas, and thus prevent me forestalling you?" The advantage which I should take being that I am induced to publish from privately knowing that Wallace is in the field. It seems hard on me that I should be thus compelled to lose my priority of many years' standing, but I cannot feel at all sure that this alters the justice of the case. First impressions are generally right, and I at first thought it would be dishonourable in me now to publish.'*<sup>9</sup>

On June 29, Darwin wrote to Hooker: *'I send my sketch of 1844 solely that you may see by your own handwriting that you did read it.'*<sup>10</sup>

Darwin wrote in his autobiography:

*'The circumstances under which I consented at the request of Lyell and Hooker to allow of an abstract from my MS, together with a letter to Asa Gray, dated September 5, 1857, to be published at the same time with Wallace's Essay, are given in the "Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnean Society," 1858, p. 45. I was at first very unwilling to consent, as I thought Mr. Wallace might consider my doing so unjustifiable, for I did not then know how generous and noble was his disposition. The extract from my MS and the letter to Asa Gray had neither been intended for publication, and were badly written. Mr Wallace's essay, on the other hand, was admirably expressed and quite clear. Nevertheless, our joint productions excited very little attention ....'*<sup>11</sup>

On July 5, Darwin wrote to Hooker:

*'... You said you would write to Wallace; I certainly should much like this, as it would quite exonerate me: if you would send me your note, sealed*

up, I would forward it with my own, as I know the address, &c.'<sup>12</sup>

On July 13, Darwin wrote to Hooker:

*'Your letter to Wallace seems to me perfect, quite clear and most courteous. I do not think it could possibly be improved, and I have today forwarded it with a letter of my own. I always thought it very possible that I might be forestalled, but I fancied that I had a grand enough soul not to care; but I found myself mistaken and punished; I had, however, quite resigned myself, and had written half a letter to Wallace to give up all priority to him, and should certainly not have changed had it not been for Lyell's and your quite extraordinary kindness.'*<sup>13</sup>

From Ternate on October 6, Wallace wrote to Hooker. He

*'Thanks JDH and Lyell for the actions they have taken with respect to ARW's and CD's papers. Considers himself fortunate to have been given any merit for his work. Is pleased that his correspondence has led to the earlier publication of CD's work. It would have caused him "much pain and regret" if CD had made ARW's paper public unaccompanied by his own views.'*<sup>14</sup>

On January 25, 1859, Darwin wrote to Wallace:

*'I was extremely much pleased at receiving three days ago your letter to me and that to Dr Hooker. Permit me to say how heartily I admire the spirit in which they are written. Though I had absolutely nothing whatever to do in leading Lyell and Hooker to what they thought a fair course of action, yet I naturally could not but feel anxious to hear what your impression would be.... My Abstract<sup>15</sup> will make a small volume of 400 or 500 pages.'*<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

Darwin knew that he was induced to publish in 1858 by privately knowing about Wallace's paper. It is not truthful to call the publication a 'joint paper' because it was done without Wallace's prior knowledge. The integrity of Darwin in scientific matters is thus questioned.

### References

1. Denton, M., *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, Adler & Adler Publishers Inc., Bethesda, MD, p. 34, 1985.
2. Wallace, A.R., On the law which has regulated the introduction of new species, *Ann. and Mag. Nat. Hist.*, February 1855, p. 184 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1990, 12:1466 Chicago), in which he said, 'Every species has come into existence coincident both in time and space with a preexisting closely allied species'.
3. On May 1, 1857, Charles Darwin wrote to Wallace: 'I am much obliged for your letter of October 10th, from Celebes, received a few days ago.... By your letter and even still more by your paper in the *Annals*, a year or more ago, I can plainly see that we have thought much alike and to a certain extent have come to similar conclusions. In regard to the paper in the *Annals*, I agree to the truth of almost every word of your paper... I am now preparing my work for publication, but I find

the subject so very large, that though I have written many chapters, I do not suppose I shall go to press for two years.' Darwin, Francis, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, Vol. 1, pp. 452–453, Basic Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1959. Hereinafter 'Darwin' is Charles Darwin.

4. Darwin, F., Ref. 3, p. 482.
5. Darwin, F., Ref. 3, p. 494, letter from C. Darwin to Hooker, October 12, 1858.
6. On May 3, 1856, Darwin wrote to Lyell (Darwin, Ref. 3, pp. 426f, letter to Lyell, May 3, 1856): 'With respect to your suggestion of a sketch of my views, I hardly know what to think, but will reflect on it, but it goes against my prejudices. To give a fair sketch would be absolutely impossible, for every proposition requires such an array of facts... But I do not know what to think: I rather hate the idea of writing for priority, yet I certainly should be vexed if any one were to publish my doctrines before me.'
- On May 9, Darwin wrote to Hooker (Darwin, Ref. 3, pp. 427f, letter to Hooker, May 9, 1856): 'I had a good talk with Lyell about my species work, and he urges me strongly to publish something. I am fixed against any periodical or Journal, as I positively will **not** expose myself to an Editor or a Council.... If I publish anything it must be a **very thin** and little volume giving a sketch of my views and difficulties; but it is really dreadfully unphilosophical to give a **resumé** without exact references, of an unpublished work.'
- On May 11, Darwin wrote to Hooker (Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 429, letter to Hooker, May 11, 1856): 'I do not fear being tied down to error; i.e. I feel pretty sure I should give up anything false published in the preliminary essay, in my larger work; but I may thus, it is very true, do mischief by spreading error, which as I have often heard you say is much easier spread than corrected.... What you say (for I have just re-read your letter) that the *Essay* might supersede and take away all novelty and value from any future larger book, is very true; and that would grieve me beyond everything.'
7. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 473, letter to Lyell, June 18, 1858.
8. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 474, letter to Lyell, June 25, 1858.
9. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 475, letter to Lyell, June 26, 1858.
10. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 476, letter to Hooker, June 29, 1858.
11. Darwin, *Autobiography*, Ref. 3, p. 69.
12. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 483, letter to Hooker, July 5, 1858.
13. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 484, letter to Hooker, July 13, 1858.
14. Burkhardt, F. and Sydney Smith, S. (eds), *A Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin, 1821–1882: With Supplement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (England) and New York, NY, No. 2337, p. 114, 1994.
15. Darwin's 'abstract', *Origin of Species*, was published in November, 1859.
16. Darwin, Ref. 3, p. 501, letter to Wallace, January 25, 1859.

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