

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Darwin and Wallace could have been the original detective duo, but piecing their own clues together requires a contemporary sleuth, writes STEPHEN MCCARTY

DR JOHN VAN WYHE doesn't have a Tardis, HG Wells upholstered sleigh, DeLorean sports car or any other time-travelling contraption, steampunk or 21st-century. Which is a pity, because tall, bespectacled, intellectually radiant Van Wyhe would thrive on the sort of globe-straddling field trip at which Victorian Britons excelled.

Fellow Briton Van Wyhe is an expert of world renown on two titans of the 19th-century scientific stage: Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. And it's not too far a stretch to imagine him in a frock coat wielding a butterfly net or reptile jar across the Galapagos Islands or around Southeast Asia.

Not that the academic dwells too long on accidents of chronology. "It would be incredibly fascinating to meet Darwin and Wallace in the flesh," he says. "But alas, such things can never happen; historians are stuck trying to piece together the fragments that survive."

Van Wyhe is a historian of science at the National University of Singapore; best-selling author of illustrated biography *The Darwin Experience*, plus an accompanying raft of intensively researched, scholarly but accessible books on the lives, times and works of Darwin and Wallace. He's also the founder of Darwin Online, which he reveals is "the largest scholarly website on a single scientist and probably the largest on any individual. There were millions of visits during its first



hours, which brought down the servers. It's had more than 400 million hits since."

But even the genius of Darwin wasn't sufficient to overload Van Wyhe's own servers, so in 2012 he also created the essential Wallace resource, Wallace Online. By then he'd been in Singapore for two years, though distance and time have done nothing to weaken the bonds between him and Darwin's alma mater, Cambridge University, where Van Wyhe completed his PhD in 2001. *Charles Darwin in Cambridge: The Most Joyful Years* (2014) "benefited from a treasure trove of lost records found at Christ's, which was Darwin's college, where I was a bye-fellow", he says.

Wallace then grabbed the spotlight again with last year's *The Annotated Malay Archipelago* by Alfred Russel Wallace, which Van Wyhe "edited, introduced and annotated with 800

footnotes". Wallace, now credited with Darwin as co-discoverer of evolution by natural selection, was one of the 19th century's foremost scientific thinkers, biologist, explorer, anthropologist and highly productive author. His research expeditions across Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia led to the identification of what became known as the Wallace Line: the divide between the Indonesian archipelago's east and west, reflected in the Australasian origin of animals in the former and Asian origin in the latter.

For 30 years conspiracy theorists have continued to suggest that,

among other outrages, Darwin appropriated a central Wallace hypothesis – despite their friendship and mutual support of unorthodox ideas. Darwin, meanwhile, remains evolutionary theory's poster boy. It's an unassailable position for the superstar of natural selection; but it's one that, despite his having no personal favourite between the two, has given Van Wyhe problems generated by a spiteful few who believe Darwin denied Wallace credit for his discoveries.

In 2013 he published *Dispelling the Darkness*. "It tells the story of Wallace and Darwin, in that order," says Van Wyhe. "It's mostly about Wallace in Southeast Asia and what he really did and said.

"There are few figures in the history of science so shrouded in modern myth and legend as Wallace. I set out to research the whole man, taking nothing on faith. It turns out that all the most romantic and dramatic things said about Wallace today are wrong. He wasn't cheated out of any credit by Darwin, was never plagiarised and has never been 'forgotten'. He suffered no dramatic decline in fame or public recognition and there's nothing to fix – except the multitude of 'victim' conspiracies.

"This got me into trouble with Wallace's fan club of extremely passionate admirers, who firmly believe their 'hero' has been cheated by history and they're damned well going to set the record straight. So I've become public enemy number one for some Wallace fans. I even get hate mail! But if you don't upset people who believe traditional stories, maybe you're not discovering anything new."

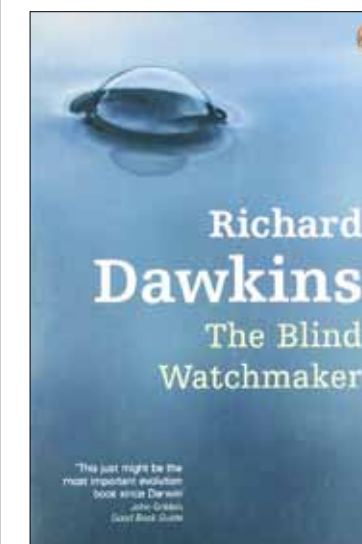
At least Van Wyhe's "myth busting", as he calls it, has endeared him to the likes of CNN, the BBC and various globally recognised publications, for whom he has become the sound-bite man of choice on all things evolution. "The international visibility and publicity that resulted from the founding of Darwin Online changed things radically for me," he reveals.

That's a position unlikely to change with his forthcoming book, which, though representing a departure in subject matter, will retain his strong narrative style.

"Telling a story is often the best way to explain something," he says. "Writing clearly, in plain English and without academic jargon, seems the easiest way to communicate and persuade." The book is a biography of an intrepid, 19th-century Austrian widow, Ida Pfeiffer, who was the first woman to circle the globe alone, but who seems to have fallen off history's front page. It will be a departure in many ways – but as with all Van Wyhe's work it promises to be a first-class ticket to ride. **P**

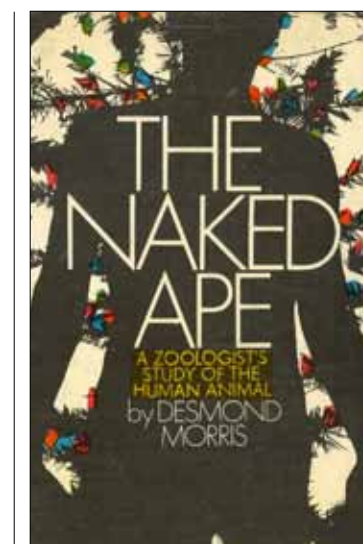
NATURAL SCIENCE 101

Your primers to life, evolution, biodiversity and extinction



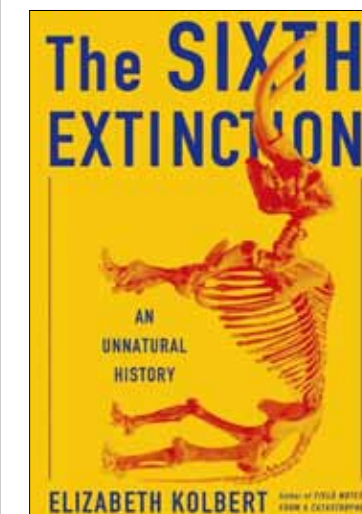
THE BLIND WATCHMAKER

A tower of natural-selection strength, Richard Dawkins sets out in terms intelligible to the general reader how and why tattered concepts such as "intelligent design" should be lanced. "That theory was totally out of date at the dawn of the 19th century," says John van Wyhe.



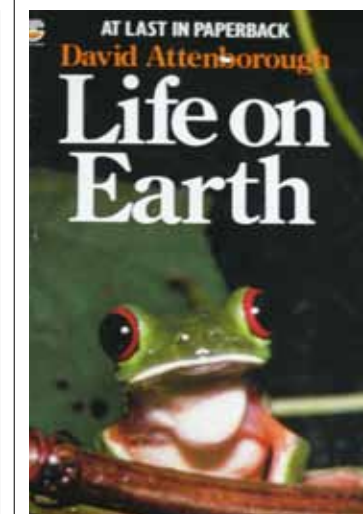
THE NAKED APE

As recently as 1967, polite society was scandalised by the suggestion that humans are in fact apes without hair. Desmond Morris postulated that biology was behind our higher ambitions and animal impulses – not morality. The book remains a favourite of Christian fundamentalists.



THE SIXTH EXTINCTION

The history of life on Earth reveals five large-scale extinctions. According to Elizabeth Kolbert, the next is just around the corner – thanks to us. Elevated and accelerated extinction rates are pushing everything else off the planet. Can we survive without other species? Do we deserve to?



LIFE ON EARTH

David Attenborough's book does what it says on the tin and gives a sumptuous history of the existence of everything from the unicellular organism to his close relation, the modern office worker, plus all else between. Animals and plants couldn't have wished for a more assiduous biographer than the venerated broadcaster and naturalist.