

Wallace and Darwin: why were they the first two Darwinians?

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I accept the traditional view: Darwin and Wallace arrived independently at very similar theories of branching descent by means of natural selection.

And I ask: Why was it these naturalists and no others? What did they and only they have in common which may explain this independent convergence? In family, social class, education, politics and religion, the two young men were different. Despite these differences, how come their theories so similar? One obvious reflection: they shared a commitment to Lyell's teachings and a concern with biogeography. But others did so too: Hooker, Forbes, Gray for example. However, only Darwin and Wallace disagreed with Lyell on one very general issue: Lyell held that the timing and placing of species origins were determined entirely by adaptive constraints. Darwin and Wallace disagreed with this view: ancestry as well as adaptation determine when and where species originate. Lyell's biogeography invoked intraspecific ancestries and adaptive divergences. Darwin and Wallace independently decided, against Lyell, that interspecific ancestries and adaptive divergences are no less explanatorily indispensable. In going on to explain how these divergences were caused, both men followed Lyell in comparing and contrasting variation in domestic and in wild species, and both emphasised that only wild species are subject to the struggle for existence entailed by superfecundity.