

# Letter to A. R. Wallace

## Charles Darwin, 22 December 1857

 [darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2192.xml](http://darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2192.xml)

Down Bromley Kent.

Dec. 22/57

My dear Sir

I thank you for your letter of Sept. 27<sup>th</sup>.—<sup>1</sup> I am extremely glad to hear that you are attending to distribution in accordance with theoretical ideas. I am a firm believer, that without speculation there is no good & original observation. Few travellers have <at>tended to such points as you are now at work on; & indeed the whole subject of distribution of animals is dreadfully behind that of Plants.— You say that you have been somewhat surprised at no notice having been taken of your paper in the Annals:<sup>2</sup> I cannot say that I am; for so very few naturalists care for anything beyond the mere description of species. But you must not suppose that your paper has not been attended to: two very good men, Sir C. Lyell & Mr E. Blyth at Calcutta specially called my attention to it. Though agreeing with you on your conclusion<s> in that paper, I believe I go much further than you; but it is too long a subject to enter on my speculative notions.—

I have not yet seen your paper on distribution of animals in the Arru Isl<sup>ds</sup>.:— I shall read it with the utmost interest; for I think that the most interesting quarter of the whole globe in respect to distribution; & I have long been very imperfectly trying to collect data for the Malay archipelago.—

I shall be quite prepared to subscribe to your doctrine of subsidence: indeed from the quite independent evidence of the Coral Reefs I coloured my original map in my Coral volume of the Arru Isl<sup>d</sup>. as one of subsidence, but got frightened & left it uncoloured. —<sup>5</sup> But I can see that you are inclined to go much further than I am in regard to the former connections of oceanic islands with continent:<sup>6</sup> Ever since poor E. Forbes propounded this doctrine, it has been eagerly followed; & Hooker elaborately discusses the former connections of all the Antarctic isl<sup>ds</sup> & New Zealand & S. America.— About a year ago I discussed this subject much with Lyell & Hooker (for I shall have to treat of it) & wrote out my arguments in opposition; but you will be glad to hear that neither Lyell or Hook<er> thought much of my arguments: nevertheless for once in my life I dare withstand the almost preternatural sagacity of Lyell.—

You ask about Land-shells on islands far distant from continents: Madeira has a few identical with those of Europe, & here the evidence is really good as some of them are sub-fossil.<sup>8</sup> In the Pacific isl<sup>ds</sup> there are cases, of identity, which I cannot at present persuade myself to account for by introduction through man's agency; although Dr. Aug. Gould has conclusively shown that many land-shells have there been distributed

over the Pacific by man's agency. These cases of introduction are most plaguing. Have you not found it so, in the Malay archipelago? it has seemed to me in the lists of mammals of Timor & other islands, that several in all probability have been naturalised.

Since writing before, I have experimentised a little on some land-mollusca & have found sea-water not quite so deadly as I anticipated.<sup>10</sup> You ask whether I shall discuss "man";—I think I shall avoid whole subject, as so surrounded with prejudices, though I fully admit that it is the highest & most interesting problem for the naturalist.— My work, on which I have now been at work more or less for 20 years, will not fix or settle anything; but I hope it will aid by giving a large collection of facts with one definite end: I get on very slowly, partly from ill-health, partly from being a very slow worker.— I have got about half written; but I do not suppose I shall publish under a couple of years. I have now been three whole months on one chapter on Hybridism!

I am astonished to see that you expect to remain out 3 or 4 years more: what a wonderful deal you will have seen; & what interesting areas,—the grand Malay Archipelago & the richest parts of S. America!— I infinitely admire & honour your zeal & courage in the good cause of Natural Science; & you have my very sincere & cordial good wishes for success of all kinds; & may all your theories succeed, except that on oceanic islands, on which subject I will do battle to the death

## Footnotes

1 Letter from A. R. Wallace, [27 September 1857].

2 Wallace 1855.

3 See *Correspondence* vol. 5, *letter from Edward Blyth, 8 December 1855*. Charles Lyell had read Wallace's paper in November 1855 and was much struck by it, for he began his scientific journals with notes on Wallace 1855 (Wilson ed. 1970, p. xli). CD had interleaved notes on Wallace 1855 in his copy of the journal in which it appeared. These are transcribed in *Correspondence* vol. 5, *letter from Edward Blyth, 8 December 1855*, n. 1.

4 Wallace 1857.

5 CD refers to a map showing the distribution of coral reefs throughout the world in *Coral reefs*, plate 3. The coloured areas indicated great zones of the sea-floor that were undergoing either elevation or subsidence. Wallace suggested in his paper that the Aru Islands once formed part of New Guinea, the intervening land having subsided (Wallace 1857, p. 479).

6 To account for the similarity between many Australian genera and species and those found on Aru, Wallace suggested that these regions might have been connected at one time through New Guinea. He argued that other islands with rich floras similar to continental floras could be shown by geological evidence to have been recently united with continents, giving Britain and Sicily as examples. (Wallace 1857, pp. 478–9).

7 See letters to Charles Lyell, 5 July [1856], and to J. D. Hooker, 5 July [1856].

8 See *Correspondence* vol. 5, *letter from R. T. Lowe, 19 September 1854*.

9 A. A. Gould 1852–6.

10 See letter from T. V. Wollaston, [11 or 18 December 1856].

11 According to CD's 'Journal' (see *Correspondence* vol. 6, Appendix II), he began the chapter on hybridism on 30 September and completed it on 29 December 1857.