

2010

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 2 : The Spelling "Russel", and Wallace's Date of Birth

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Recommended Repository Citation

Smith, Charles H.; Williams, James; Stephens, Jonathan; and Beccaloni, George. (2010). Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 2 : The Spelling "Russel", and Wallace's Date of Birth. *Archives of Natural History*, 37 (2), 351-354.

Original Publication URL: DOI: 10.3366/E0260954110002081

Available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub/50

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Received 28 January 2009. Accepted 22 February 2010.

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DOI: 10.3366/E026095411000207X

Alfred Russel Wallace notes 2: the spelling “Russel”, and Wallace’s date of birth

A long-standing puzzle surrounding Wallace is the spelling of his middle name, with only one *l*. In *My life* Wallace (1905: 1: 6) wrote:

Other friends or relatives of the Greenell family were named Russell and Pugh, and are buried at Hertford. A large gentleman’s mourning ring in memory of Richard Russell, Esq., was given me by Miss Roberts, as I presume, the person after whom I was given my second name, though probably from an error in the register mine is always spelt with one *l*, and this peculiarity was impressed upon me in my childhood. . . . the precise relationship, if any, of the Russells to the Greenells I have not been able to ascertain.

This would indeed suggest that some kind of error was involved, but it is not apparent what kind, or what register is being referred to.¹

JW and JS have been interested in the details and circumstances of Wallace’s birth for some time², and have assisted me (CHS), both through their familiarity with the area where

Wallace was born and connections with local institutions, and access to some critical documents, in coming to the following assessments.

Civil registration of births did not begin until 1837 in Wales (as a result of legislation in 1836). Nevertheless, Wallace's birth is recorded in two extant sources: the Wallace family's Prayer Book, and the records of baptisms in St Madoc's Church, Llanbadoc. We carefully examined these documents.

In the family Prayer Book³ his name is recorded as "Alfred Russel", the first *s* being a long *s* (*f*).⁴ In this, Wallace's date of birth is given as 8 January 1823, and his date of half-baptism as 19 January (Sunday), in one continuous record. When this record was written cannot be determined, though of course it must have been after the half-baptism event.

The parish register is in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.⁵ Wallace's date of full baptism is given as 16 February (Sunday), and his name is clearly recorded as "Alfred Russell", with two *ls*. Half-baptisms are not recorded in this source, and usually neither are birth dates, though in this instance Wallace's is, and is given as 8 January 1823.⁶

These are the facts, but they leave the matter unresolved. If Wallace himself was correct that he was named after a member of the Russell family, the records of the name with two *ls* in the parish register might simply be viewed as consistent with this intention. Perhaps whoever it was who recorded "Russel" in the family Prayer Book was a poor speller, and everyone just went along. But there are additional considerations that make this otherwise minor puzzle instructive, at least as a matter of historical investigation.

First, we do not know which of the two recordings of birth came first. And, though in the same hand as the rest of the parish register, the recorded date of birth might have been added much later. This is, however, quite unlikely: the vicar at St Madoc, the Reverend Thomas Addams Williams, had died or for other reasons left the post before 1842, and Wallace was not a celebrity before or at that point to merit such special attention. Probably the family originally asked to have the date of birth included with the entry. The vicar may or may not have received any special instructions from the family as to the spelling "Russell"; perhaps when told the name he did not see it written, and simply assumed it was spelled the usual English way.

On examining the parish register we expected to see the entry for Wallace spelled "Russel" as reported by Wilson (2000); that it is not removes another possible theory: that the person who made the entry was Welsh-speaking or of limited education.⁷ Addams Williams was probably neither of these, as he was from a prominent family, and had he been strongly Welsh-affined would not have entered the location Llanbadoc in a distinctly English form, Lanbadock – and in any case, church and all other local records from that period are in English.

This causes us to revisit the spelling in the Prayer Book as possibly being an ignorant mistake. The handwriting in the book is consistent across all the Wallace children of that generation and according to *My life* is by Wallace's father, Thomas Vere Wallace, who was a well-educated man with some literary aspirations, so the "ignorant mistake" explanation is surely unlikely. But there is a significant complication. A close re-examination of the Prayer Book by GB and CHS strongly suggests that the middle name actually was first written "Russell", and later altered (see Figure 1).

The main evidence for this is that there is much too large a space between the final *l* in the name and the next word (especially as compared to the entries for the other Wallace children, both before and after), a somewhat abbreviated upswing in the final pen-stroke (again, as compared to handwriting elsewhere in the book), and a decided gap in the line

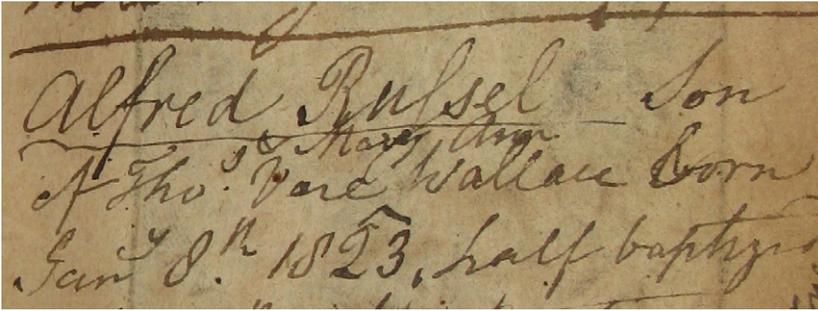


Figure 1. Portion of the Wallace family Prayer Book, showing the register of Wallace's birth, and the apparent erasure of the second *l* in his name (© George Beccaloni).

directly underneath where another letter would be (and the underline then continues to well beyond the word's apparent end). Beyond this, the paper in the vicinity of the final letter decidedly shows added wear, probably through erasure.

Accepting, then, that there really was a second *l* in the name as originally entered, new questions arise. The first concerns just when the change was made. It might have been altered at any time; Wallace himself apparently always had used the spelling "Russel", and one hypothesis we must consider is whether someone noticed the discrepancy later and simply went back to the book and changed it. Of course, this begs the question of why he did use the spelling right from his earliest years – one should not ignore the aforementioned remark in *My life* that the spelling with one *l* was a "peculiarity impressed upon me in my childhood."

Still, it might not have been changed right away, and this could account for the *ll* spelling in the parish register, one way or another. In the end it appears that the spelling "Russel" was almost certainly a deliberate decision by the family, with the main question being when the decision was made. If the correction was made before his baptism – that is, before the event was recorded – then the parish register spelling remains a minor puzzle. If, however, the change of mind occurred after the full baptism (or the Prayer Book entry was made after the baptism), the parish register spelling is less problematic. It is thus entirely possible, or even likely, that the eventual outcome "Russel" was both deliberate, and involved no "mistakes" along the way.

NOTES

¹ Winchester (2003: 56) wrote "The spelling was an error by Usk's registrar of births"; Slotten (2004: 10) noted "By a quirk in the registry, his middle name was misspelled 'Russel' and was never corrected". Neither remark can be considered correct. Smith's (2004: 920) "The spelling 'Russel' was perpetuated from a mistake made when the birth was recorded" is only slightly more likely to be accurate.

² JS is a lawyer who frequently deals with old documents concerning rural property matters in the Usk area; JW is a science educator and consultant who wrote a masters thesis on Wallace and has since lectured and written on him on a number of occasions.

³ The relevant pages are reproduced at "The Alfred Russel Wallace website": URL <http://wallacefund.info/en/category/image-galleries/wallace-manuscripts-and-artwork/other-manuscript-documents> (accessed 10 February 2010). The book itself is a *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England, published in 1723.

⁴ The long *s* (*f*), commonly seen in handwritten documents from the eighteenth century, was going out of style by 1823. It was used to replace the first *s* of an *ss* sequence, and in a few other circumstances.

⁵ A microfilm copy is also held by the County of Gwent Records Office, Cwmbran, Torfaen: index reference LDS/PA87 Vol. 20.

⁶ Wilson (2000: 1–2) incorrectly reported the date as 18 January; he probably was misled by a strangely written 8 that resembles 18. In any case, the half-baptism date is too close to 18 January to make this the likely birth date – unless, possibly, Wallace had been born sick and the family was afraid he might die. There is no evidence of this, especially as the Prayer Book shows that the Wallace family had a tradition of having half-baptisms performed. Wilson also reported incorrectly that “when writing his autobiography” Wallace discovered that he really had been born on “18 January 1823” (instead of a year earlier, as he had always thought): the source of Wilson’s statement is a 23 February 1903 letter from Wallace to E. B. Poulton, but in this Wallace actually writes “January 8”, not “January 18”. The original letter is in the Hope Library, University Museum of Natural History, Oxford, and CHS asked a librarian there to specially examine it to verify the date (Stella Brecknell, pers. comm., 14 May 2009).

⁷ In Welsh, “Russell” as spoken would most likely only have, as written, one *l*. The letter *ll* (*Ll*) in Welsh is usually pronounced quite differently – however, as JS informs me, not always. He cited as an example a neighbouring parish to Llanbadoc, Llanllowell, whose first two *ll* are pronounced in the Welsh way, but last in the English way.

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Received 12 October 2009. Accepted 27 February 2010.

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DOI: 10.3366/E0260954110002081