



Our Debt to Insects

Grant Allen

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Charles Grant Blairfindie Allen (February 24, 1848 – October 25, 1899) was a Canadian science writer and novelist, and a successful upholder of the theory of evolution. He was born near Kingston, Canada West (now incorporated into Ontario), the second son of Catharine Ann Grant and the Rev. Joseph Antisell Allen, a Protestant minister from Dublin, Ireland. His mother was a daughter of the fifth Baron of Longueuil. He was educated at home until, at age 13, he and his parents moved to the United States, then France and finally the United Kingdom. He was educated at King Edward's School in Birmingham and Merton College in Oxford, both in the United Kingdom. After graduation, Allen studied in France, taught at Brighton College in 1870–71 and in his mid-twenties became a professor at Queen's College, a black college in Jamaica. Despite his religious father, Allen became an agnostic and a socialist. After leaving his professorship, in 1876 he returned to England, where he turned his talents to writing, gaining a reputation for his essays on science and for literary works. One of his early articles, 'Note-Deafness' (a description of what is now called amusia, published in 1878 in the learned journal *Mind*) is cited with approval in a recent book by Oliver Sacks. His first books were on scientific subjects, and include *Physiological Æsthetics* (1877) and *Flowers and Their Pedigrees* (1886). He was first influenced by associationist psychology as it was expounded by Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer, the latter often considered the most important individual in the transition from associationist psychology to Darwinian functionalism. In Allen's many articles on flowers and perception in insects, Darwinian arguments replaced the old Spencerian terms. On a personal level, a long friendship that started when Allen met Spencer on his return from Jamaica, also grew uneasy over the years. Allen wrote a critical and revealing biographical article on Spencer that was published after Spencer was dead. After assisting Sir W. W. Hunter in his *Gazeteer of India* in the early 1880s, Allen turned his attention to fiction, and between 1884 and 1899 produced about 30 novels. In 1895, his scandalous book titled *The Woman Who Did*, promulgating certain startling views on marriage and kindred questions, became a bestseller. The book told the story of an independent woman who has a child out of wedlock. In his career, Allen wrote two novels under female pseudonyms. One of these was the short novel *The Type-writer Girl*, which he wrote under the name Olive Pratt Rayner. Another work, *The Evolution of the Idea of God* (1897), propounding a theory of religion on heterodox lines, has the disadvantage of endeavoring to explain everything by one theory. This "ghost theory" was often seen as a derivative of Herbert Spencer's theory. However, it was well known and brief references to it can be found in a review by Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's nephew, in the articles of William James and in the works of Sigmund Freud. The young G. K. Chesterton wrote on what he considered the flawed premise of the idea, arguing that the idea of God preceded human mythologies, rather than developing from them. Chesterton said of Grant Allen's book on the evolution of the idea of God "it would be much more interesting if God wrote a book on the evolution of the idea of [Grant] Allen". He was also a pioneer in science fiction, with the 1895 novel *The British Barbarians*. This book, published about the same time as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, which includes a mention of Allen, also described time travel, although the plot is quite different. His short story *The Thames Valley Catastrophe* (published 1901 in *The Strand Magazine*) describes the destruction of London by a sudden and massive volcanic eruption. Many histories of detective fiction also mention Allen as an innovator. His gentleman rogue, the illustrious Colonel Clay, is seen as a forerunner to later characters.

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