

THE  TIMES

weekend

www.timesonline.co.uk/weekend SATURDAY JUNE 14 2003

MAX SCHINDLER



Darwin and the man who played God

IT WAS by pure chance that Charles Darwin embarked on the epic voyage that was to inspire his revolutionary ideas on evolution. In 1831 he was at something of a loose end. Recently graduated from Cambridge, he had tried and rejected medicine as a career and was now preparing for holy orders. If he had anything in mind, it was a quiet parish where he could indulge his passion for collecting beetles. Then, out of the blue, came an invitation to join a voyage round the world, all expenses paid by the Admiralty.

The proposal originated with Captain Robert FitzRoy, an aristocratic young

naval officer, widely regarded as one of the most promising of his generation, who had been commissioned to carry out a three-year survey of coastal South America. His ship was the *Beagle*. FitzRoy had already spent two years on the South American survey and knew only too well the loneliness and isolation of such a command.

The *Beagle's* former captain had shot himself off the South American coast and FitzRoy was uncomfortably aware of a hereditary tendency within his own family towards depression and suicide. His uncle, the statesman Viscount Castlereagh, had slit his throat when

The voyage of the *Beagle* concealed a story of innocence violated, says **Peter Nichols**

FitzRoy was aged 15, making an impression on the boy he never forgot. He spoke about it and feared it all his life.

The antidote, FitzRoy believed, was to take with him on his latest venture a young companion, a well-bred gentleman who could share the captain's table and engage him in intellectual discourse. Better still if that person was of a scientific turn of mind, abreast of the latest thinking in

geology and "natural philosophy", as the study of nature was then known. Darwin was the ideal choice. Only four years apart in age — Darwin was 22, FitzRoy 26 — both had a yearning for adventure and for tracking the unknown.

But there were great differences between them. These were pushed aside in the mutual enthusiasm of their first meeting but they became only too apparent

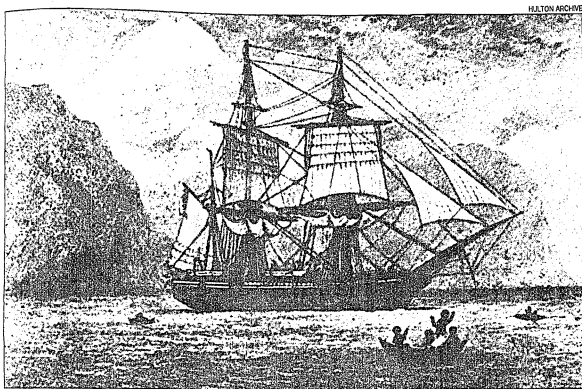
once the voyage was under way. While Darwin was more the radical free thinker (in his preparation for the Church he had difficulty in accepting some of the basic tenets of Christian teaching), FitzRoy was deeply conservative, an intelligent man but one who was caught in the straitjacket of fundamentalist religion.

The South American survey held out the prospect of huge political and economic advantages. At the time when the *Beagle* set off, the continent of South America resembled a second Africa but was far less known and still largely unexplored. The wealth of its minerals and other resources could only be guessed at.

This is where the Royal Navy came in. If British merchants were to outpace their competition from Europe and the United States, their ships needed easy access to South American ports. Islands and coastlines had to be mapped, harbours and channels sounded, tides and weather conditions logged. Parts of Patagonia and the Falklands still had to be surveyed, as well as the rugged, broken shores of the continent's southern tip, known as Tierra del Fuego, "the land of fire".

The desolate coastline of Tierra del Fuego had long held a fascination for FitzRoy. It was here, on his earlier voyage

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The *Beagle* — Darwin and FitzRoy sailed together in her for five years — one achieved fame, the other was forgotten

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that he had encountered some of its inhabitants, "being the first savages I had ever met". Going well beyond his Admiralty brief, he had taken on board two men, a boy and a girl, who had accompanied him back to England. His plan was to introduce them to the "benefit of our habits and language", before returning them to Tierra del Fuego as missionaries, charged with civilising their compatriots.

It was a nademache, as Darwin soon came to realise, but FitzRoy had pursued it with evangelical zeal. Of the four Fuegians, one died of a small-pox vaccination. The others, named York Minister, aged about 27, Jenny Button, 14, and Ojeda Basket, an eight-year-old girl, had been lodged in Walthamstow, where they attended the local infant school. Here they learnt English, arithmetic and "the basic truths of Christianity".

Fuegia and Jenny made good progress. But the hulking, brooding York Minister charmed nobody. He did not enjoy the classroom, in which he was expected to sit alongside small children, singing, clapping and moulting his alphabet by rote. York was too old and fully formed to change, to sparkle with Christian values. He was as marooned in England as was Crusoe on his island, and must have been a profoundly lonely and unhappy man.

As the two Fuegian children continued to thrive at school in Walthamstow, their adult

compatriot sank deeper into isolation. He was in the prime of his life. The Christian importuning to strict behaviour must have been a living hell to a healthy, primitive man. There is no record of any sexual liaisons he might have formed with, for example, servant girls, but it is known that he fastened his attentions on Fuegia Basket.

It was not long before FitzRoy was told what was happening, and his instruments on board, weighed anchors on December 27, 1831. Among the other passengers were the Walthamstow Fuegians, a young missionary, Richard Matthews, and those tempts thought necessary to recreate a little piece of God-fearing England on the wild coast of Tierra del Fuego.

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chamber pots, tea trays, crockery, leather hats and white linen.

Darwin's sudden, proximity to FitzRoy—sailing with him daily, often accompanying

him ashore—revealed a character that fascinated him as much as any natural phenomenon he encountered on his voyage around the world. FitzRoy's character was a singular one. Darwin wrote years later of the aristocratic young sea captain.

But FitzRoy was a good friend, after his own fashion, to Darwin. He encouraged his naturalist activities, putting his crew and ship at the disposal of the Royal Navy at Darwin's disposal. As the voyage wore on, Darwin's mounting collection — boxes and barrels of plants and animals — was constantly shipped back to England, free of charge, by navy ships. But FitzRoy did not like to be challenged in argument and Darwin had

submissions in getting into the freer to express his views, he might have warned FitzRoy against the crazy idea of trying to create a civilised society in Tierra del Fuego.

It was Fuegia Basket who had the strongest reaction to the sight of her countrymen in their original state — her first in two-and-a-half years. She was plainly terrified. After two years of total immersion among the most fragment of English sensibilities, "she was shocked, alarmed, and depressed and brute appearance. It is

nowhere recorded whether she was pleased to come back or not — to be left here with her 28-year-old tutor York Minister. Fuegia was still 12 years old at the most; an intuitive, empathic and clever girl, to be sure, but she contributes may not have helped her at this moment, when simple dumb ignorance might have been preferable.

For four days the Englishmen worked at preparing the

The perfect equality of the inhabitants will prevent their civilisation. A shirt is torn up to be shared immediately'

settlement that Matthews, York, Fuegia and Jenny were to call home. They gave them the best the Royal Navy and missionary zeal could provide.

The sailors erected three homes. These were called "wigwams", fashioned, like the native enclosures, of saplings and thatched with grass and twigs. Near the wigwams, the seven men stepped off a good-sized plot and dug, planted and sowed a kitchen garden. A growing number of Fuegians looked on. Relations with the Englishmen were initially harmonious but there were several attempts at thwarting On



THE SEA was not significant to Peter Nicholls until, in his early twenties, a friend invited him to help pilot a boat from Swansea to Gibraltar. Of this seafaring of Solly, without warning, a Russian trawler

dramatised the vessel, firecrackerlike into the rigging. Nicholls and his friend had to be rescued by lifboat.

"It was a horrible experience but I liked the dislocation of it," he says. "One day you get on a boat, the next you are filled with pure terror. Being on a boat at sea is one of few situations in life where you can't say, I went out. It is a crucible, where the head is turned up on human behaviour."

With his first wife, he lived on an English cutter, Taffy, for five years. After they broke up, he set off to sail the Atlantic. En route, he discovered a stash of his wife's diaries on the boat, detailing her unappetising life and the

marriage. The boat sank just off the Maine coast. He wrote about the behind-the-scenes metaphor — "the sinking boat, the sinking marriage" — in his first book, *Sea Change*.

In 2000, after spells teaching and screenwriting, Nicholls paddled a fishing kayak from Burgundy to Paris. "It was pure SAS, emerging from the river like a salamander, covered in mud and weeds. Then I would alight at the best hotel in town and shock the concierge by announcing I was Mr Nicholls and I had a booking for this night."

Nicholls' Boys' Own exuberance translated onto the page. He has been compared with Herman Melville and Ernest Hemingway and shortlisted for the William Hill sports book prize for *A Voyage For Madmen* this book about the first Golden Globe single-handed, non-stop round-the-world race in 1968.

He was inspired to write about Darwin and FitzRoy because he believes the other had been so overlooked. "He started the Met Office. He was a scientist of the first rank. If it hadn't been for FitzRoy, Darwin would have been a beetle-collecting

person putting out the occasional monograph."

The sailing aspect provided more colouring. "There was a tub of a boat being sailed to Tierra del Fuego, a graveyard of ships, a terrible place with hurricane-force winds and unknown rocks where sailors start to fear to go. And there, FitzRoy took the most precise, delicate measurements."

The awful irony, Nicholls says, is that FitzRoy, "a fanatical Christian", was "collateralised" by Darwin's theories in *On the Origin of Species*, a heresy which drove him to suicide.

Fired by the travels of Darwin and FitzRoy, Nicholls wants to spend some time on a boat in Tierra del Fuego.

"Everything in life is guaranteed you go to work, come home, watch TV. Well, I have an abhorrence of the humdrum. I need to feel fear." Having said that, he adds quietly, his post-venture may yet be to come his second wife, Robert, expecting his first child in August.

Tim Teeman

History wobbled, and they sailed on

by depression. He stopped eating. Darwin described his condition in a letter home as "a mild melancholy, a depression and a loss of all decision and resolution. The Captain was afraid that his mind was being lost."

It was Lieutenant Wickham, FitzRoy's loyal second-in-command, who urged his captain round. He brought him to accept his good, leaving him to what they had already done and to continue the mission by crossing the Pacific and returning to England.

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