

THE reekend

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Darwin and the man who played God

T 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. 1 nen, out of the blue, came an invitation to join a voyssion for collecting beetles. Then, out of the blue, came an invitation to join a voy-age 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 en-gage 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

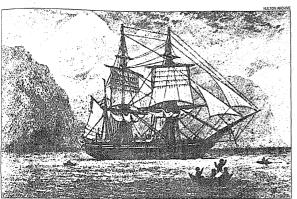
for tracking the unknown. But there were great differences be-tween them. These were pushed aside in the mutual enthusiasm of their first meeting but they became only too apparent

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 Souri American savey need our 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 unpendent of the prospect of etrated. 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 coast-lines had to be mapped, harbours and channels sounded, tides and weather con-ditions 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

nents soutnern tip, known as Herra 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, Continued on page 2



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

Nichols: I need to feel fear



significant to Peter Nichols until, in his early twenties, a friend invited him to help pilota boat from Swansea to Gibraltar. Offtheislesof Sciliv. withno warning, a Russian trawler

dismasted the vessel, firingrocketlines into its rigging. Nichols and his friend had

to be rescued by lifeboat. "It was a horrible experience but I liked the dislocation ofit," he says. "Oneday you get on a boat, the next you are filled with pure terror. Being on a boat atsea is one of few situations in life where you can't say "I want out". It is a crucible, where the heat is turned up on human behaviour."

With his first wife he lived on an engineless cutter. Toad, for ten years, Afterthey broke up, he setoff to sall the Atlantic. En route, he discovered a stash of his wife's diaries on the boat, detailing marriage. The boat sank just off the Maine coast. He wrote about the twinned metaphor — "the sinking boat, the sinking

marriage* - in his first book, Sea Change. In 2001, after spells teaching and screenwriting. Nichols paddled a folding 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 conclergeby announcing I was Mr Nichols and I had a

booking for that night." Nichols'sRoys' Own expherance translateswell onto the page. He has been compared with Herman Melville and ErnestHemingway and shortlisted forthe 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 latter had been so overlooked. "He started the Met Office. He was a scientist of the first rank If it hadn't been for FitzRov Danvin would have been a beetle-collecting

parson putting out the occasional monograph '

The sailing aspect provided more obvious appeal. "Here was a tub of a boat beingsailed to Tierra del Fuego, the graveyard of ships, a ferocious place with hurricane-force windsand unknown rocks where sallors still fear to go. And there, FitzRov tookthe most precise, delicate

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

measurements.*

Fired bythe travels of Darwin and FitzRov. Nichols 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 quetly, his greatestadventure may yetbe to come: his second wife. Roberta, is

expecting hisfirst child in August.

TimTeeman

History wobbled, and they sailed on

Continued from page 1 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 Tierradel Fuego as missionaries, charged with civilising their compatriots.

It was a madscheme 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 Minster, aged about 27, Jemmy Button, 14, and Fuegia Basket, an eightyear-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 Jemmy made good progress. But the hulking, brooding York Minster charmed nobody. He did not enjoy the classroom, in which he was expected to sit alongside small children, singing, clapping and mouthing 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 him ashore-revealed a charisolation. He was in the prime acter that fascinated him as of his life. The unceasing immuch as any natural phenomeportuning to strict Christian non he encountered on his behaviour must have been a voyage around theworld."Fitzliving hell to a healthy, primi-Roy's character was a singular tive man. There is no record of one." Darwin wrote years later of the aristocratic young sea any sexual liaisons he might have formed with, for examcantain But FitzRoy was a good ple, servant girls, but it is known that he fastened his

attentions on Fuegia Basket. to Darwin. He encouraged his naturalist activities, putting his IT was not long before Fitzcrewand ship and the facilities Roy was told whatwas happenof the Royal Navy at Darwin's ing. That the sweet child. disposal. As the voyage wore on. Darwin's mounting collecadored by so many, was having sex with a hulking savage tion - hoves and harrels of spelled disaster for FitzRov. nlants and animals - was constantly shipped back to Using his powerful relatives to persuade the Admiralty that England, free of charge, by his earlier South American surnavy ships. But FitzRoy did not like to be challenged in argument and Darwin had vey was seriously incomplete, he made ready to return his Fuegians to their nativeland problems in settling into a The Beagle, with Darwin submissive role. If he had felt and his instruments on board, freer to express his views, he weighed anchors on Decemmight have warned FitzRoy ber 27, 1831. Among the other against the crazy idea of trying passengers were the Walthamto create a civilised society in

stow Fuegians, a young mis-sionary, Richard Matthews,

and those items thought neces-

sary to recreate a little pieceof

God-fearing England on the

wild coast of Tierra del Fuego

chamber pots, tea trays,

Darwin's sudden, proximity

to FitzRoy see eating with him

daily, often accompanying

crockery, beaver hats and

Tierra del Fuego. lt 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 vears of total immersion among the most fragrant of English sensibilities, she was shocked at-sheip-nakednessand brute appearance. It is

friend, after his own fashion,

nowhere recorded whether she was pleased to come back or not - to be left here with her 28-year-old suitor York Minster, Fuegia was still only 12 years old at the most; an intuitive, empathic and clever girl, to be sure, but such attributes may not have helned her at this moment, when simple dumb ignorance might

For four days the Englishmen worked at preparing the

have been preferable

'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 Jemmy 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 na-

thatched with grass and twigs. Near the wigwams, the seamen 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 thieving. On

their return to the encamnment. FitzRov's darkest visions were realised. The zeal and stoicism of Matthews had collapsed in the face of the rude attention directed at him. At first there had been only

York and Jemmy told FitzRoy

that they were sure they

would come to no harm, and

Matthews appeared as steady

as ever. FitzRoy was impressed

by his stoicism. At sunset, the

boats paddled away, leaving

For a week, Darwin and Fitz-

Roy had exciting but relatively

trouble-free cruising. But on

the settlers behind

"a few quiet natives". But three tive enclosures, of sanlings and days after the English boats had left, canoes full of rowdier Fuegians had turned up to bedevil him both night and day. Despite constant assurances from Jemmy to the contrary, Matthews told FitzRov that he believed he would be killed. FitzRov decided to take

January 26 a few Fuegian men gave no argument, despite his tried to force their way into former zealotry. the English encampment.

FitzRov had done his best. Surely, his faith in all he held to be true assured him, God would take this seed and make it grow. Darwin was not so easily persuaded: "It was quite melancholy leaving our Fuegians amongst their barbarous countrymen," he said. "They have far too much sense not to see the vast superiority of civilised over uncivilised habits: &

yet I am afraid to the latter

they must return." Ten months later, the Beggle was back in Tierra del Fuego Darwin was struck by the existence of the unreconstructed Fuegians in their natural environment: "I never saw more miserable creatures:stunted in their growth their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint & quite naked. Their red skins filthy and greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant, their gesticulation violent & without any dignity. Viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe that they are fellow creatures

placed in the same world... Jemmy Button paddled out to meet them. FitzRoy asked him what had happened to York and Fuegia. After the Beagle had left, the year before, Jemmy told them, other Fue-Matthews away with him on eight hearing of the settlement, the Beagle, and the missionary had raided the camp. York had

managed to save most of his belongings. He and Fuegia then urged Jemmy and his family to move with them, with all their belongings, to York's country, farther west. There, while Jemmy slept. York madeoff withall his goods, leaving him in his naked, original state. An act of consummate villainy, Darwin

thought.

AFTER farewells and more present-giving the next day, the Beagle sailed away. Darwin was glad to see the last of the Fuegians. Scientifically, they fascinated him, but he had grown sick of their incessant importuning. FitzRov's great experiment seemed to have failed utterly. Darwin had already noted what he believed to be a crucial impediment to

ines of Tierra del Fuego: "The perfect equality of all the inhabitants will for many years prevent their civilisation: even a shirt or other article of clothing is immediately torn into pieces to be shared. Until some chief rises, who by his power might be able to keep to himself such presents, there must be an end to all hopes of

the improvement of the aborig-

bettering their condition. FitzRoy would not admit it. He persisted, even now, in seeing a hopeful outcome. But the stress must have borne in on him because he was overtaken

by depression. He stopped eating. Darwin described his condition in a letter home as "a morbid depression of spirits. and a loss of all decision and resolution. The Cantain was afraid that his mind was hecoming deranged". It seemed that the voyage might have to be cut short.

It was LieutenantWickham, FitzRoy's loyal second-in-command, who brought his cantain round. He urged him to accept the sufficiency of what they had already done and to continue the mission by crossing the Pacific and returning to England at the conclusion of the circumnavigation all

hoped to achieve. FitzRoy pondered Wickham's suggestion a short while, and then agreed. On Septem-ber 7, 1835, almost four years after leaving England, the Beagle sailed away from the continental coast of South America.

History had wobbled for a moment as FitzRoy's despair got the better of him: the Beagle had almost turned around and sailed for home. But then her captain recovered, and she pointed her bow northwest toward a small scattering of islands on the Equator, and history shifted its weight on to the Beagle's unsuspecting natural philosopher

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