

GALAPAGOS LITERATURE — FACT AND FANTASY

by

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Those remote island volcanoes named “Galápagos” after their most famous aboriginal inhabitants, the giant tortoises, have inspired an extraordinary number of publications. Most of these are scientific articles and books that pour out in an ever-increasing stream. Galapagos has, in addition, inspired a small but distinguished body of fiction. Many of the works are little known, but they are as important to understanding Galapagos as are the scientific works.

Galapagos literature began with the late 17th century British buccaneers, “the literary pirates”, whose published accounts of their adventures made the Galapagos known to the reading public and also started a fashion in travel stories. This led Daniel Defoe to write *Robinson Crusoe*, a landmark in the history of the novel, which owed much to the buccaneers’ tales. His model, Alexander Selkirk, had actually been marooned farther south on Juan Fernandez Island but he belonged to the same piratical fraternity and had visited the Galapagos at least once. The lonely island setting was a great artistic convenience to Defoe, as it had been to Shakespeare in *The Tempest*: it freed the author’s imagination from the constraints of reality. Following in Defoe’s footsteps, other writers expanded the boundaries of imagination further and further and began a vogue in desert island stories. Germany, in particular, produced hundreds of escapist *Robinsonaden*.

The most distinguished of the authors who located their fantasies specifically in the Galapagos was Hermann Melville. He knew the islands well, having served there in the whaling ship *Acushnet*; nevertheless, while given a realistic setting, his stories take on an almost mystical character. His collection of Galapagos tales, *Las Encantadas*, was published in 1854, four years after *Moby Dick*. The stories are told by a seaman and, although they deliberately depart from fact, they nevertheless capture the other-worldly essence of the islands. One takes the reader on a climb up the unclimable *Roca Redonda*; another recounts the experience of the girl Hunilla, the only survivor of an expedition to extract oil from tortoises; yet another re-tells the tale of the legendary Oberlus, the alcoholic hermit, who grew vegetables which he traded for rum with passing ships. He also shanghaied members of their crews to serve him as slaves.

Las Encantadas are quiet tales of irony and pathos in a Galapagos setting that Melville paints as evil. The tales lack the sweep and majesty of *Moby Dick* but, with their companion piece in *The Piazza Tales*, *Benito Cereno*, they have come to be regarded as Melville’s finest stylistic efforts. His evocation of the giant tortoises and his description of the islands themselves (“Take five and twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there ...”) have been particularly admired. *Las Encantadas* may have been exercise for a larger novel *Tortoises or Tortoise Hunting* which seems to have fallen by the wayside when Melville turned to writing magazine pieces.

C.S. Forester, the creator of Horatio Hornblower, wrote *Brown on Resolution*. In contrast to the complex and doubting Hornblower, one of the most interesting heroes of nautical fiction, Brown, a simple seaman, is one-dimensional, a man with a single-minded dedication to duty, who succeeds in delaying a World War I German cruiser from making necessary repairs so that it can be caught and sunk by the British. Forester invented Resolution Island by combining characteristics of islands such as Genovesa (Tower) with its circular bay and Tagus Cove on Isabela (Albemarle) with its steep sides. Brown’s island is hot, waterless and steep-sided; his situation is hopeless; but he does his duty. Forester does not expect his hero to reason why, only to reason how. Forester does not reason for him.

A story with an historical foundation is John Jennings’ *The Salem Frigate* (1946), a retelling of the voyage of the U.S. Frigate *Essex*, which gave its name to Punta Essex on Isla Isabela during the War of 1812 between Britain and the United States. The novel is a sea yarn with no pretensions to being anything except a good read. In its pages on Galapagos the interest is primarily culinary, with a truthful description of how fresh meat was supplied by the capture of tortoises, marine turtles, land iguanas, fur seals and fish.

These stories have a varying degree of relationship with the reality of Galapagos but there are other books that use the islands as an escape from the real world into realms of pure fantasy: the moon would serve their purpose equally well if it were more easily accessible. A little-known example of this approach is the unfinished novel, *Los Monos Enloquecidos* (*The Maddened Monkeys*), by the Ecuadorian author, Jose de la Cuadra. The novel was written in 1931, but the Spanish Civil War and subsequent events intervened

and it was not published until 1951, when a surviving manuscript was recovered, ten years after the author's death.

Jose de la Cuadra is one of the most important figures in Ecuadorian literature. He was one of the first *mestizo* writers, choosing his themes and milieu from the evolving society of Ecuador, rather than looking back to Spain or the oligarchic society of Ecuador's past. He died at age 37 but not before he and a circle of Ecuadorian writers had ensured an Ecuadorian literary future.

His novel touches on Galapagos. The protagonist, Gustavo Hernandez, travels the world, first crewing on a convict ship which sinks on the way to Galapagos. Gustavo and some companions make their way to the islands where they are again shipwrecked. He is abandoned by the others who try to escape. They fail and one body washes up on the island and Gustavo uses it as a raft to escape.

Gustavo is a raconteur of great talent, telling tales such as that Roca Redonda is the home of mermaids who, on full-moon nights, lure whalers and fishermen to their doom. He describes a great city in the crater of Fernandina and provides the islands with terrible monsters that come out of the sea after dark, leaving paths where no vegetation will grow.

Gustavo travels on around the world, acquiring family and further adventures. He inherits a farm in the wilds inland from Guayaquil on the Ecuadorian mainland. There he hears of a treasure which can only be extracted by men who have never been touched by Holy Water. Inspired by Galapagos and Darwin, he decides to speed up the evolution of monkeys so that they can dig up the treasure for him. The novel ends at this point, unfinished. The distinguished Ecuadorian author, Alfredo Pareja Diezcanseco, is of the opinion that, had de la Cuadra been able to finish it, *Los Monos Enloquecidos* would have been one of Latin America's most exciting contributions to the adventure novel.

Another work of imagination is *Mas alla de las islas*, a novel by my mother-in-law, Alicia Yanez Cossio, one of the few Ecuadorian women writers. It is very much of the school of Latin American "magical realism" which sometimes appears to have given Latin Americans a monopoly on innovative fiction in the latter half of this century. Reality, death and the supernatural are intermixed in an everyday context. The novel is a series of vignettes concerning a set of characters who represent archetypes of human approaches to nature. All die or are defeated by the islands but out of the sum total of their deaths comes a new wave of colonists, combining the good of each and living in harmony with the islands. The setting could be Galapagos or any other islands but the message is one of reconciliation and co-existence with nature.

The latest (1985) and perhaps the most fantastic of all these novels is *Galapagos* by the North American writer, Kurt Vonnegut. There may have been two reasons for his choice of setting. One is his interest is what he considers to be "the explosive development in the South American novel ... We are seeing a literature that has been hidden in drawers for years". A second reason is the islands' association with Charles Darwin and evolution. In order to achieve absolute isolation, he maroons his collection of characters, an international group taking part in "The Nature Cruise of the Century", on the Galapagos with no chance of rescue, as the rest of the world has been destroyed by nuclear war. Not only does he isolate his characters in space but he also removes them in time and considers their condition a million years into the future. During this period, evolution has produced an enormous expansion in the size of the human brain — with dramatic consequences. "This was a very innocent planet except for those great brains", his narrator concludes.

The islands seem to have driven novelists to the wilder extremes of imagination but, at times, Galapagos fact has rivalled fiction. The most sensational case was that of the multiple deaths on Floreana in the 1930's. There were three very peculiar "family" groups of Europeans who came to live on this otherwise uninhabited island; each cordially hated the other two. The last arrival, the polyandrous "Baroness" Wagner-Bousquet supported by her male companions, proclaimed herself Empress of the Galapagos and announced her intention to establish a luxury hotel for millionaires, despite a lack of water and other amenities. She and one of her lovers suddenly disappeared without a trace. No acceptable explanation of their fate has ever been forthcoming. Another lover left precipitately only to be ship-wrecked and die of dehydration. Another settler, Friedrich Ritter, a vegetarian doctor engaged in the daunting task of reconciling the teachings of Nietzsche and Confucius, claimed to have evidence about the disappearances, but died of meat-poisoning before he could divulge it. His mistress also left the island so that only the third family, the Wittmers, remained. The doctor's mistress, Dora Strauch, published her account in *Satan*

Comes to Eden and Margaret Wittmer presented her version in *Postlagernd Floreana*. Not only do the two accounts contradict one another but neither book stands up to critical examination of its own evidence.

Two fictional accounts have been inspired by the Baroness. Maurice Breziere's *Floreana Paraiso Infernal* (1941), despite the lurid title, is a straight-forward but fictionalised retelling of the baroness's story. An Ecuadorian diplomat, Gustavo Vasconez, developed the story extravagantly in his 1973 book, *La Isla de los Gatos Negros*, turning Floreana into a hotbed of international espionage. The baroness becomes a Japanese spy, assigned to assess the Galapagos as a base for the coming war; the dentist is a spy for the Nazis who wish to keep an eye on the baroness, while the Wittmer-like family work for German army intelligence, which is in an alliance with the Americans. While implausible, nothing about the baroness or Galapagos is impossible and the author ties up most of the loose ends of the original story.

More recently a visiting Cambridge biologist, John Treherne, turned aside from his investigations on *Halobates* water striders to try to sort out this "whodunnit" in his book, *The Galapagos Affair*, but despite his painstaking research the full truth still eludes us.

Although factual, the book by Paulette de Rendon, *Galapagos: las ultimas islas encantadas*, published in French in 1946 and in a Spanish translation in 1971, is one of the best evocations of Galapagos and of certain recent historical figures already slipping into legend. De Rendon was stranded in the islands while on holiday in 1940, waiting months for a ship to take her back to the mainland. At that time the total population of the archipelago was only that of a modest village. She evokes — with a touch of poetry — the idyllic setting of "the last of the enchanted islands" and describes such extraordinary characters as Manuel J. Cobos, the ruthless tyrant of San Cristóbal, and one of his many victims, Camilio Casanova, whom he condemned to solitary exile on then-uninhabited Santa Cruz Island, where Casanova somehow survived for three years on cacti, fruits and tortoises. Señora de Rendon loved the islands but was distressed that the miserable human relations of the settlers contrasted so harshly with the loveliness of nature. This is much the most sympathetic and understanding account of the Galapagos before the radical changes that came with the establishment of the National Park and the Charles Darwin Research Station, bringing the islands into closer contact with the outside world.

The baroness aside, the Galapagos seem to be chosen by novelists because of their isolation and their ties with Darwin and evolution. Oddly enough, these are the same reasons that scientists chose to work in the islands. Those who see science and art as totally different might well ponder why, at least in this case, the inspiration should be the same.