

CAPTAIN FITZROY OF H.M.S. BEAGLE

by

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The importance of Robert FitzRoy's visit to the Galapagos 150 years ago has been completely overshadowed by the fact that he was accompanied by Charles Darwin. Darwin was definitely the junior partner at that time but today FitzRoy is recalled almost solely on account of his denunciation of *The Origin of Species* a quarter of a century later. This cause of dissension did not exist in 1835. FitzRoy was not then a serious student of the Bible and a confirmed fundamentalist, nor had Darwin become convinced of the mutability of species. In spite of profound differences of temperament and political views, these two brilliant young men (FitzRoy was given command of H.M.S. Beagle at the age of 23) were still good friends when they got back to England after sharing a cramped cabin in a tiny ship for five years.

FitzRoy had a life-long interest in science (it was entirely on his own initiative that he invited a naturalist to be his guest on the voyage) and he showed outstanding talent in his own specialist fields. The object of the *Beagle's* voyage was not to revolutionize biological theory nor to provoke the greatest intellectual debate of the century but to chart coasts, chiefly in South America. FitzRoy did this with remarkable skill. The buccaneer, Ambrose Cowley, had made some rough sketches in 1684 and Captain James Colnett of H.M.S. *Rattler* had improved on them in 1793, but FitzRoy's Galapagos charts are in a different class and are barely distinguishable from those in use today. The captain of the French ship, *La Gémie*, who came to survey the islands in 1846, wrote of FitzRoy's achievement:

"Nothing escaped the perspicacity of this conscientious observer: the smallest details are all indicated with really astonishing precision and following his drawing one can visualize in the most accurate manner the shape of the coast. Coming after him there is not even an opportunity to glean".

J.R. Slevin, the historian of the California Academy of Sciences' great research expedition, wrote in 1959:

"It is truly amazing that the modern chart of the Galapagos made in 1942 by the *U.S.S. Bowditch* equipped with every modern device should so closely approximate the survey made by Captain FitzRoy over a hundred years before. His little vessel was at the mercy of strong and uncertain currents, together with deadly calms so prevalent in those regions."

When he retired from active service in 1850, Admiral FitzRoy was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in recognition of his distinction as a scientific navigator and hydrographer: his sponsors included Charles Darwin. Later he began the organization of what became the British Meteorological Office. It is unfortunate that he should be remembered, if at all, for his quarrel with Darwin and his tragic death rather than for his considerable scientific accomplishments. For over a century his meticulously drawn charts served scientists and others navigating in the hazardous waters of the Galapagos. R.D. Keynes* sums up FitzRoy's varied achievement:

"He deserves to be remembered not just as Darwin's captain on the *Beagle*, although the importance of the help and encouragement that he gave during the voyage, and his role in stimulating Darwin's ideas, are not to be lightly dismissed. He was also a hydrographer in the front rank, parts of whose charts of South American waters and sailing directions for them are still in use nearly 150 years after the survey was conducted. Above all he was one of the principal founders of the science of meteorology."

* *The Beagle Record*, edited by R.D. Keynes, Cambridge University Press, 1979.