

THE ENCHANTED ISLANDS: THE GALAPAGOS DISCOVERED

by John Hickman

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'Take five and twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside lot; imagine some of them magnified into mountains and the vacant lot the sea; and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas.' So wrote Herman Melville in his book *The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles*. But Charles Darwin was no more flattering, for his first impression recorded in his diary the day after the *Beagle's* arrival at the Galapagos was as follows: 'These islands at a distance have a sloping uniform outline, excepting where broken by sundry paps and hillocks; the whole black lava, completely covered by small leafless brushwood and low trees. The fragments of lava, where most porous, are reddish like cinders; the stunted trees show little signs of life. The black rocks heated by the rays of the vertical sun, like a stove, give to the air a close and sultry feeling. The plants also smell unpleasantly. The country was comparable to what one might imagine the cultivated parts of the Infernal regions to be.' And FitzRoy thought them 'a fit shore for Pandemonium'.

For most of us today, the enchantment of the Galapagos lies not in the rather forbidding scenery that Darwin and Melville described so vividly, but in their truly fascinating wildlife. No less fascinating, but much less familiar, is the history of their original discovery, and the accounts of them given by their early visitors, as set out by John Hickman in his highly readable book.

That people from the mainland had visited the islands before the Spaniards was proved by Thor Heyerdahl's finding of Chimu pottery on them, and it seems clear that the Incas knew of their existence. However, the first documentary account of the accidental discovery of an island where there were 'such big tortoises that each could carry a man on top of itself, and many iguanas that are like serpents' was that written by Fray Tomás de Berlanga, Bishop of Panama, after he had landed on it on 10 March 1535. His ship had been carried there by the ocean current during a windless spell, when he was bound for Lima at the command of the Emperor Charles V in order to report on the situation in the newly conquered territories in Peru. Fray Tomás claimed no credit for what he had found, but the Flemish cartographer, Abraham Cortellius, read his dispatch and in his *Orbis Terrarum*, published in 1574, showed the islands as 'Isolas de Galapagos'. Ten years later another of the conquistadors, Diego de Rivadeneira, sighted the islands again, but landed only once.

The next recorded visit was by the Dutch explorer, Jacob Herenite, in 1624. But no further interest was taken in the Galapagos until at the end of the century the English buccaneers began to make use of them as a base. Ambrose Cowley, of the *Batchelor's Delight*, made the first chart in 1684, and gave the islands their English names; and among the same group of sailors was William Dampier, who described them vividly in his *New Voyage Round the World*, published in 1697. Dampier was again present when the *Duke* and the *Duchess*, under the command of Captain Woodes Rogers, paid a rather traumatic visit to 'these unfortunate Islands' in May 1709.

The Galapagos were now firmly on the map, but during the 18th century they were little visited except by occasional smugglers. In 1792 the situation began to change, following a report by Captain James Colnett R.N., commissioned by the leading British whaling company, on the possibilities of exploiting the whale stocks of the Pacific. Colnett wrote a detailed report on the islands, and is said to have instituted the box for the exchange of mail at Post Office Bay. In April 1813, Captain David Porter U.S.N. of USS *Essex* used the post box to inform himself about the British whalers in the vicinity, and in five months of cruising captured a dozen of them. Soon there were great numbers of whalers operating in the Pacific — around 1830 there were at least 700 vessels from America alone — who found in the Galapagos a prolific and seemingly inexhaustible supply of tortoise meat. Even the *Beagle* added to the toll, and departed with 30 tortoises on board destined for culinary rather than scientific purposes. But the whales were slaughtered faster than the tortoises, and by the end of the American Civil War their numbers were so reduced that whaling ceased, and the tortoises were reprieved.

After 1832, the government of Ecuador assumed nominal responsibility for the administration of the Galpagos, though it was some time before any close control was exercised. Various attempts to make use of the meagre natural resources such as the orchilla moss and guano foundered under economic realities and harsh living conditions, though an increasing number of settlers managed to maintain themselves precariously by cultivating crops on the higher moist zone of one or two of the islands. Their possible importance in relation to the Panama Canal, either strategically or as a coaling station, was discussed from time to time, but came to nothing until in 1942 the United States Sixth Air Force constructed a complete air base on South Seymour Island (Baltra). The American base was closed in 1947, but later the runway was resurfaced by the Ecuadorean Air Force, and the Baltra air strip now serves as the main link between the islands and the mainland.

One natural resource, however, the Galpagos had in great abundance, and the material in the final chapters of the book will be familiar to the readers of the *Noticias*. In Darwin's footsteps came a series of scientific expeditions led among others by Rollo Beck, William Beebe, Victor Wolfgang von Hagen and David Lack. In 1959 the Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galpagos Islands was formally constituted under Belgian law, and in 1964 its Research Station on Santa Cruz island was opened. A few years later the Galpagos National Park Service came into operation.

The whole story with its ups and downs, its successes and failures, is told in a masterful manner by John Hickman, combining historical detail with human interest to great effect. I have very greatly enjoyed reading it.

Richard Keynes



Opuntia echios barringtonensis on Santa Fe Island
Photograph by Roger Perry