

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

3. Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*

John G.T. Anderson

John G.T. Anderson (jga@coa.edu) is the W.H. Drury professor of Ecology/Natural History at the College of the Atlantic, 105 Eden St. Bar Harbor, ME 04609

Darwin always said that of all the books he wrote, he had the greatest affection for his “first born” – the volume most of us know simply as *The Voyage of the Beagle* (Modern Library 2001, but many many other editions). This book, first published as the *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the countries visited during the voyage round the world of H.M.S. Beagle under the command of Captain Fitz Roy, R.N.* (gasp!) originally formed a portion of the four-volume *Narrative* of the two surveying voyages accomplished by the *Beagle* and her consorts that had been edited by Fitzroy, and intended as the official account of the expedition. Darwin’s portion was far and away the most readable of the four, and played well with a public hungry for tales of intrepid explorers in far away lands. The book still reads well, in part because of the hint of naïveté that its author gives off, here at the dawn of his career. This is neither the Darwin of middle age, full of the complexities of the “tangled bank” of evolution, nor the Darwin of old age, battered by the wars around the implications of his theory, worn down by long illness and frustrated by the lack of a coherent model of inheritance. Instead,

this is the young Darwin, just back from long rambles in the pampas, where he had outrun the gauchos, climbed the Andes, and contemplated endless horizons, each of which had promised (and produced) new wonders for him to contemplate. The book is arranged in more or less chronological order, describing the different landfalls that the *Beagle* made on her long circumnavigation and the travels and adventures of Darwin himself as he ventured inland or travelled cross-country between ports of call. There is a degree of irony in the popular title of the book; the actual “voyage” of the *Beagle* in fact gets very little attention throughout. Darwin was no sailor, and he was violently ill during much of his time at sea. This aspect of his journey gets very little mention here (there is a passing note of the Fuegians imitating him, saying “poor poor man” as he lay miserably in a hammock on deck). Darwin was simply not interested in many of the details of 19th century nautical life. To be fair, much of this was covered by Fitzroy in the other volumes, but Darwin’s lack of attention to the voyage as such becomes an interesting insight into his life once one knows more of the circumstances.

Much of the early part of the *Voyage* concerns geology, and it is only as he sees more and more of South America does Darwin's zoological and botanical interests come to the fore. He had left England with the first volume of Lyell's magisterial *Principles of Geology*, and it is clear that he wanted to validate and enlarge on Lyell's work on a global scale as part of his own researches. Unlike Humboldt, Darwin in the *Voyage* does not give us nearly the degree of detail or insight into either the people or the places that he encountered that we might like. Indeed, on third or fourth reading (confession, I like this book!) there is sometimes an almost bloodless degree of description, both of Darwin-as-participant and the other players that he is dealing with. In short, as a friend put it to me, it is *exactly* the sort of book that a younger brother might write, knowing that it will be read by bossy elder sisters!

Fortunately for us all, we now have much of the "rest of the story" available to enjoy. The Darwin Correspondence Project (<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/home>) has done a heroic service by making available many of Darwin's letters, both from the *Beagle* voyage and other equally significant periods in his life. In addition, we now have *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary (1831-1836)* (ez-reads.net) and of perhaps even greater interest to Natural Historians *Charles Darwin's Notebooks from the Voyage of the Beagle* (G. Chancellor & J. Van Wyhe eds. [2009] Cambridge Univ. Press). Taken together, the *Diary*, the *Notebooks*, and the letters fill in many of the gaps that *Voyage of the Beagle* failed to address. Reading the combined texts (and, trust me, this is a joy, not a chore) gives one a truly humanized

view of a really remarkable human. Darwin was by no means the priggish, proper, and somewhat colorless figure that he has sometimes been reduced to. He was cheerful, despairing, exhilarated, and frustrated by turns. He had an eye for the ladies as well as having to recover from being dumped by his first serious girlfriend almost as soon as the *Beagle* left England. Sometimes the original notebooks are more beautiful than the edited end works: here is a portion of his note from the 17th of April 1832 as he encounters the Brazilian jungle: *twiners entwining twiners, tresses like hair beautiful lepidoptera silence hosannah...* In the *Diary* this becomes: *the woody creepers, themselves covered by creepers, are of great thickness...* and in the *Voyage* we get pretty much the same: *the woody creepers, themselves covered by other creepers, were of great thickness: some which I measured were two feet in circumference...*

Now some may say (with justification) that I am quibbling here, but I think the *immediacy* of the field notes, coupled with the poetic license (never mind "silence hosannah") gives us a far deeper and richer view of Darwin at the dawn of his career as a naturalist. The later revisions are interesting and well worth attention, but taken all together we get a much more complete view of who we are dealing with, how his mind was working, what attracted his attention (and also of course, what he didn't find important enough – or found too personal – to pass along).

Many people have commented on – indeed one could say that a whole industry has developed around – "pre-Darwinian ideas of Evolution" and many people seem puzzled or even resentful that it is Darwin

who by and large gets the credit for Evolution by Natural Selection. Any doubts as to why this happened will be dispelled by a careful reading of Darwin himself, especially the letters and documents he wrote during his formative years on the *Beagle*. This was a really lovely man with an incredible eye for species and landscapes, a real yen for

adventure, and a ready pen to record it all. We are enormously fortunate that so much of the original material is now ours to peruse. It is also cracking good fun.

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