

## The Last Word:

*FitzRoy, Darwin & the Fuegians*  
Part II: "They Pass Away Like Little Saints"

*NOTE: The previous article in this series on the human zoo ended at the moment Captain FitzRoy was about to return his three Fuegian wards to the sites of their capture in Tierra del Fuego. Before continuing the tale let's take a closer look at the Beagle's commander.*

Robert FitzRoy was born into an aristocratic and naval family. He was a descendant of King Charles II. If a reader's introduction to him has been by way of Charles Darwin and the voyage of *H.M.S. Beagle*, he will often be seen as condescending, argumentative, hot-tempered, a bit self-righteous and heavily Christian. And, indeed, he became, eventually, all these things. But, as in all complex personalities, there was more to FitzRoy. He was also thorough, as demanding of himself as of others, public spirited and quick to open his purse for good causes. At the age of 19 he was the first man to pass the Royal Navy lieutenant's examination with a perfect score; he had ample on-the-job-training by shipping out at the age of 12 and working his way up the ranks. It must also be noted that during his early years, including the time of the second *Beagle* voyage, he was somewhat of a skeptic concerning the literal nature of the Bible. It was FitzRoy who gave Darwin volume one of Lyell's *Principles of Geology*.

Seven years after his successful captaincy of the *Beagle*, FitzRoy became the second British governor of New Zealand. To his credit, he tried to administer with a more even hand than was usual in the colonial relationship. He demanded that the New Zealand Company, a British joint stock association, pay the Maori proper prices for their land. Unsurprisingly, this led to considerable resentment among British settlers. Forced to raise money through increased taxation to administer the fledgling colony, he became even more unpopular and was recalled to England after five years.

Tackling a variety of jobs in the Royal Navy when he returned, FitzRoy settled into something new, both for him and for Britain. Due to his friendship with the hydrographer Francis Beaufort, he was appointed head of a new division at the Board of Trade. The remit of his duties, in what eventually became the Meteorological Office, was the collection of marine weather data, an area of increasing importance for a nation whose fortunes were tied to ocean commerce. As an active administrator he developed a new barometer, put measuring instruments on board British ships and developed charts to predict weather patterns, inventing a phrase we use

on a daily basis: "weather forecast." Even in this capacity he made enemies, however. Fishing fleet owners resented his new system at the nation's ports. Based upon the fluctuations of his barometers, a hoisted cone kept ships at dock when there were impending gale force winds; time in port was owner revenue lost — sailors were expendable, ships always insured.

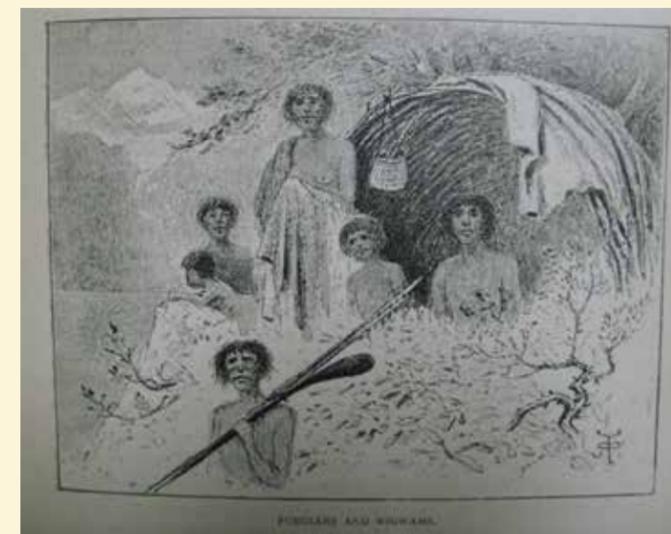


FitzRoy barometer, courtesy, Wilbur Norman

In service to the Board of Trade and various charities, FitzRoy expended about 6,000 pounds sterling, practically all his personal wealth. Fortunately for his wife and daughter, a friend began a fund after his death. He solicited monies to keep them out of poverty while also persuading the British government to reimburse the family half the personal amount FitzRoy had spent in public service. Queen Victoria also provided lodgings for them at Hampton Court Palace under the still practiced "grace & favour" program (originating from Machiavelli's *per grazia e concessione*).

FitzRoy, dying a Vice-Admiral, never knew of the largesse of the Crown. In 1865, suffering increasing depression and financial pressures, he cut his throat with a razor just as his patron-uncle, Viscount Castlereagh, had done some forty years before.

But, in Patagonia's early summer, January 1833, this was all in the future. After the *Beagle* weathered a month-long storm, the worst in FitzRoy's experience, he ordered three whaleboats and a yawl into the water, leaving the *Beagle* to the carpenters for repair. The four small boats would deliver the Fuegians, "according to their wishes," to their desired destination. Sailing, from a western approach, toward the Bay of Wulaia, across the Beagle Channel from present-day Ushuaia, the boats drew many natives to the shore. This route was something a European vessel had not done before and many of the Fuegian men followed along at a run, keeping pace with the ship. Illustrating how colonialism exercises a mental hold upon the oppressed "and the contempt with which it had inspired them for their own hordes," (*Voyages Round the World...*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd; 184?, Third Edition, erroneously attributed to Andrew Kippis) "York Minster laughed heartily at the first [natives] we saw, calling them large monkeys... it turned out that Jemmy's own tribe was as inferior in every way as the worst of those whom he and York called "monkeys—dirty—fools—not men." (Robert FitzRoy, *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty's Ships Adventure and Beagle...*, London: Henry Colborn; 1839, Volume II, page 203.) I think one must assume this behavior was gleaned from their time in England.



Drawing by Robert T. Pritchett of "Fuegians and Wigwams" from the 1890 illustrated American edition of Darwin's book about his voyage on the *H.M.S. Beagle*.

Dropping anchor in the bay near where Jemmy Button had originally boarded the *Beagle*, FitzRoy set all three Fuegians ashore accompanied by Matthews, an English missionary. The ship's crew unloaded the (useless) things the Fuegians had brought from London, planted some seeds and erected a few "wigwams." On January 24th Jemmy's brothers and mother showed up, having heard of his return through the local 'grapevine.' (The rapidity with which news traveled continually amazed the Europeans, as did the preemptory greetings exchanged. Darwin wrote that two horses, long separated, would have displayed more interest in each other when reunited.\*)

Unfortunately, after his stint in England, Jemmy had forgotten most of his own language. Nevertheless, believing things to be ordered and settled, with Jemmy back in the bosom of his family, FitzRoy, Darwin, and the crew left for a short exploratory sail. They returned February 6th to find the local Fuegians helping themselves to Jemmy's, Fuegia Basket's, and York Minster's possessions. Worried about being involved in tribal bickering, FitzRoy boarded Matthews, pulled anchor and beat away, leaving his former charges to fend for themselves.

York Minster and Fuegia Basket are believed, based on statements from Jemmy and later reports of seal hunting ships, to have left for York Minister's home region. There, York Minister disappears from history (after, according to Jemmy, taking all the belongings of Jemmy and his family by disappearing with the booty into the night). A decade later, Fuegia Basket is probably the woman who surprised sealers with a good command of English when she boarded their ship. She spent a few days with them in the western stretches of the Straights of Magellan. "She lived (I fear the term probably bears a double-meaning) some days on board," wrote Darwin. She may or may not have lived to an old age, depending on whether one finds later reports credible. One report has her being killed on the sealers' ship.

Despite Darwin's attempt to keep FitzRoy from backtracking to see Jemmy as the *Beagle* finally prepared to leave Patagonia in 1834, the Captain was not to be denied. Darwin had earlier written from 'Monte Video' to his sister Susan, "It will be very interesting, but I am afraid likewise painful to see poor Jemmy Button & the others — I expect to find them naked and half starved — if indeed they have not been devoured during the past winter." (Darwin Letter #233, 3 December 1833, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin. Volume 1, 1821-1836*. Cambridge University Press; 1985.)

But find Jemmy they did. On March 5, 1834 the *Beagle* again

anchored in Wulaia Bay and found the little settlement they had erected more than a year before deserted.

“Soon a canoe, with a little flag flying, was seen approaching, with one of the men in it washing the paint off his face. This man was poor Jemmy — now a thin haggard savage, with long disordered hair, and naked, except a bit of a blanket round his waist. We did not recognise him till he was close to us; for he was ashamed of himself, and turned his back to the ship. We had left him plump, fat, clean, and well dressed; — I never saw so complete and grievous a change. As soon however as he was clothed, and the first flurry was over, things wore a good appearance. He dined with Captain Fitz Roy, and ate his dinner as tidily as formerly. He told us... that he did not wish to go back to England: in the evening we found out the cause of this great change in Jemmy’s feelings, in the arrival of his young and nice-looking wife. With his usual good feeling, he brought two beautiful otter-skins for two of his best friends, and some spear-heads and arrows made with his own hands for the Captain. He... boasted that he could talk a little of his own language! But it is a most singular fact, that he appears to have taught all his tribe some English: an old man spontaneously announced ‘Jemmy Button’s wife.’ “ — Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World, Under the Command of Captain FitzRoy, RN.* London: John Murray; 1845, second edition, page 228.

Lassaweea, his wife, refused to board and called to Jemmy to come away. He finished dinner, shook hands all around and disembarked with his wife in tow. They stayed in the area for an additional day, during which time he re-boarded until the ship was under way causing Lassaweea to cry violently until he returned to his canoe. Darwin wrote “when Jemmy reached the shore, he lighted a signal fire, and the smoke curled up, bidding us a last and long farewell, as the ship stood on her course into the open sea.” Thus Jemmy parted from the Beagle, Englishness and (almost) FitzRoy’s experiment in transmitting “the plainer truths of Christianity.”

Twenty-two years later, in 1855, members of the Patagonian Missionary Society (PMS) sailing in the ship the Allen Gardiner, under Captain William Parker Snow, visited Navarino Island and were surprised to find Jemmy, and more surprised to find he still understood English. Snow and his wife had Jemmy to dinner and showed him the portraits FitzRoy had drawn and published in a volume of the Beagle voyages. Jemmy was reportedly touched. (This is the drawing depicted, along with details of Captain Snow’s work, in Part 1 of this story in the last issue.) Unfortunately, the considerate and non-fanatical Snow was dismissed the next year by the

PMS and replaced by a captain more willing to take orders from zealots. After weeks of harassment, Jemmy and his family of two wives and three children agreed to relocate to the mission station in the Falklands. The six of them were housed in a tiny 3 x 3-meter brick hut, forced into “Christian discipline,” daily church attendance and more. After many pleas, they were finally allowed to return home in September 1859 after reports of the great progress made with them appeared in the PMS circular Voice of Pity, boosting its circulation.

Events took a darker turn a couple of weeks before Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was released that November. A PMS group on a Beagle Channel island was attacked during religious services and all but one sailor-member killed by a crowd of 300 Yaghan tribal natives. This lone survivor, named Cole, reported his belief that Jemmy and his family were angered by their having to leave the Falklands mission! He further stated that one of Jemmy’s brothers had been in the marauding crowd, adding that the Allen Gardiner was ransacked and Jemmy had slept in the captain’s bed.

Jemmy travelled to Kepple Island in the Falklands\*\* to record his defense testimony for a trial that was to take place at the capital, Port Stanley, in early 1860. He denied any participation in the attack and denied he had slept in the captain’s bed. As it was his word against Cole’s, he was acquitted. We do not know whether Cole’s view that Jemmy and family were angered by being ‘made’ to leave the Falklands, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, made the judge favor Jemmy’s testimony; his acquittal is remarkable in light of the normal treatment of natives.

In 1863 Waite Sterling, another PMS missionary, found Jemmy and succeeded, with his help, in improving relations between the locals and the missions. Proving that no good deed goes unpunished, around 1866 a smallpox epidemic swept Cape Horn, killing at least half the native population. Jemmy was one of those who did not recover. One of his sons, Threeboy, who had been baptized, was eventually taken to England by Sterling. Despite reading several PMS journals and engaging an Internet search, I have not been able to find out what happened to Threeboy.

Jemmy Button, who, you might remember, received his name for the pearl button FitzRoy paid for him, was caught between two worlds, but once shorn of his place in his own land, was a full participant in neither. I have tried to imagine having the ‘eternal verities’ of life swept away in a single moment; have the foundations of one’s existence crumble under the walls of an encroaching dominion impelling a dizzying

mix of confusion and anger — certainly fear, and more. A discombobulation of all that is known, believed, felt, seen, tasted, heard, and loved. Even all that one has ever hated. A world entire replaced by a new set of truths and a daily mind-numbing routine until the semi-acceptance of a new life is grasped, an apprehension that all one’s past has, indeed, passed. Of course there was at least one other possibility: the one that bechanced most of Jemmy’s fellow Patagonians and then Jemmy himself. The following words about the neighboring Dawson Island missions tell it well:

“Epidemics followed, and at another mission the Mother General noted that ‘... by the end of the year we’ll end up with no girls.’ But this was perfectly understandable: ‘They are physically unsuited to cope with civilization.’ ” To which the mission prefect added his own word of cheer: “These Indians die even in the woods, but among us they pass away like little saints...” The Dawson Island mission closed its doors in 1912, its holy work done. The savages were dead.” —John Woram, *Here Be Giants*, Rockville Centre, NY: Rockville Press; 2009. Chapter Eleven, Mission to Patagonia, page 242.

\* Alongside the time spent in the Galapagos, Darwin’s close contact with the Fuegians had significant influence on his ideas and theories. Their, to him, extreme ‘primitive nature’ led to a comparison of their development with that of Europeans. Despite his many errors in judgment concerning the Fuegians and their society, his reasoning helped form an eventual belief that man was subject to the workings of natural selection just like the earth’s other creatures.

\*\* The British Overseas Territory of the Falkland Islands, claimed by Argentina as “Islas Malvinas,” is an archipelago of almost 800 islands. The name dispute strikes me as ironic as the Spanish name itself is a transliteration from the French name, Îles Malouines, bestowed by Louis Antoine Bougainville for the first settlers, all transplants from the French walled port city (then an island) of Saint Malo on the coast of Brittany.

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