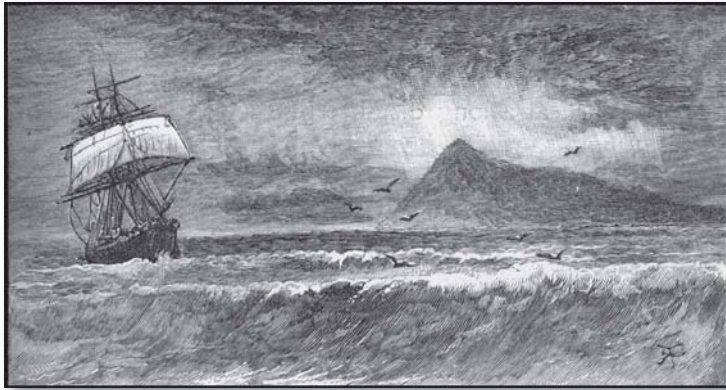


CHAPTER SEVEN



THE SECOND VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE

The voyage of the Beagle has been by far the most important event in my life and has determined my whole career.

Charles Darwin, in his *Autobiography*, 1876

THINK “GALÁPAGOS” and the next word that comes to mind is Darwin, almost as if the one were synonymous with the other. “Evolution’s Workshop” or “Darwin’s Enchanted Islands” or so many other descriptors closely link the man and the place.

Think Patagonia or Tierra del Fuego and other names take precedence: Magellan, Drake, Cavendish—all come to mind before Darwin, if in fact Darwin comes to mind at all. Yet these explorers were transients on their way somewhere else, while for Charles Darwin and Robert FitzRoy, these places were destinations. In fact, the whole point of the second voyage of HMS *Beagle* was to conclude a survey of the area begun during the first voyage, in which the rigors of the work drove its captain to suicide. Anything beyond Patagonia and the strait would be almost an afterthought.

But of course there was work to do before reaching either—and a bit of play too. On February 17th, 1832, HMS *Beagle* made the equatorial crossing, and Darwin was subjected to the usual indignities.

We have crossed the Equator, & I have undergone the disagreeable operation of being shaved. ... They lathered my face & mouth with pitch and paint, & scraped some of it off with a piece of roughened iron hoop. The whole ship was a shower bath ... Not one person, even the Captain, got clear of being wet through.

The *Beagle* continued on its way, reaching the Brazilian coast at the end of the month, and soon thereafter the ship was the scene of an angry confrontation, as FitzRoy praised slavery. Years later, Darwin recalled the incident.

He had just visited a great slave-owner, who had called up many of his slaves and asked them whether they wished to be free, and all answered “no.” I then asked him, perhaps with a sneer, whether he thought that the answers of slaves in the presence of their master was worth anything. This made him excessively angry, and he said that as I doubted his word, we could not live any longer together.

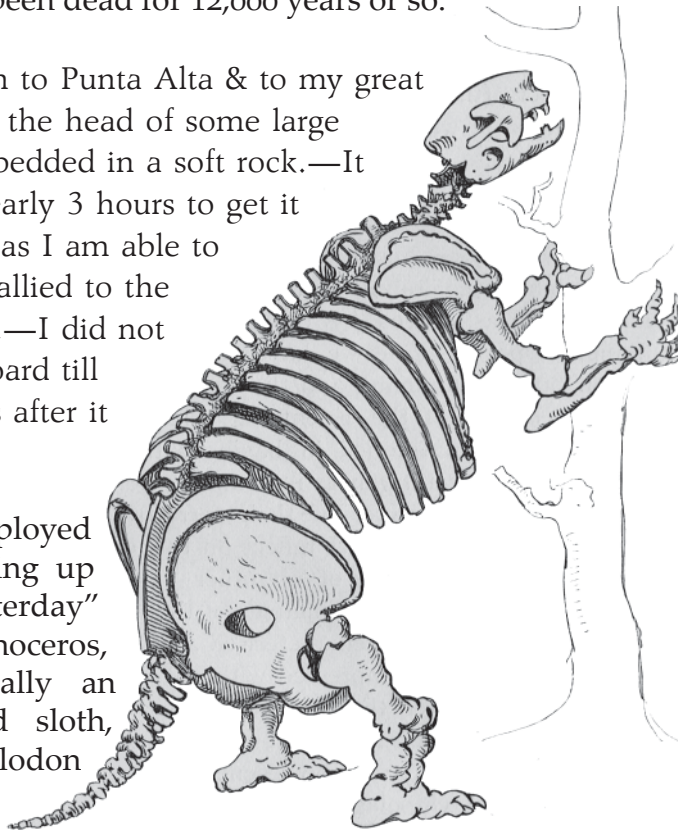
Darwin feared this might mark the end of his voyage on the *Beagle*, but soon enough the captain cooled down and sent an officer with apologies for the outburst. Peace was restored, the voyage continued, and after some months the *Beagle* quit Brazil and sailed on to Bahía Blanca, some five hundred miles southwest of Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

“I am spending the summer in Patagonia” wrote Darwin in September, although strictly speaking they were still a degree or so short of its present northern boundary.

On the 23rd, Darwin bagged his first big game. No matter that his prey had been dead for 12,000 years or so.

I walked on to Punta Alta & to my great joy I found the head of some large animal, imbedded in a soft rock.—It took me nearly 3 hours to get it out: As far as I am able to judge, it is allied to the Rhinoceros.—I did not get it on board till some hours after it was dark.

Next day was “employed in carefully packing up the prizes of yesterday” including the rhinoceros, which was actually an oversized ground sloth, now known as *Mylodon darwini*.



The *Beagle* made its way back to Buenos Aires, and Darwin made his way to the theatre where “I did not understand one word.” Later the ship crossed the mouth of Río de la Plata to Montevideo and the naturalist took in a performance of Rossini’s *Cenerentola*. He offered no critique of either, other than that the unidentified show in Buenos Aires was “most distinct & energetic.”

Next it was up river to take on fresh water, and then on November 28th to business: “we push directly onwards to

Tierra del Fuego.” They arrived in mid-December on the first of what were, in effect, three voyages of the Beagle that would carry Darwin here; the first three-month voyage was followed by an absence of almost a year as the ship visited the Falklands, Patagonia, and then back again to Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The second voyage was from January 26th to March 6th of 1834, and then it was back to the Falklands and Patagonia again. Finally, the Beagle entered the strait for the last time in May to spend another month concluding its work. In short, from the time Darwin and his captain first reached Patagonia until their final departure from the strait into the Pacific, about one year and a half had passed. Of that time, almost five months were spent in and around Tierra del Fuego. The Beagle would need more than another year to reach Galápagos, there to spend no more than five weeks. But as these would in time become the five weeks that shook the world, much of the prelude—the work that had gone before—was overlooked, all but forgotten despite its importance to the empire that ruled the waves, and to all those navigators who would pass alive from one ocean to another guided by the charts of Robert FitzRoy and his men.

In addition to the surveying work prescribed by their Lordships, there was for the captain that matter of honor in revisiting Tierra del Fuego—he had given his word to the four Fuegians that he would return them to their ancestral home after training them to be proper Christians and to adopt the English way. But his quartet was now a trio, for Boat Memory had died of smallpox shortly after arriving in England. And so when the Beagle set out again for Tierra del Fuego, it counted among its contents three Fuegians, one missionary (to see to their continuing spiritual enlightenment), one naturalist, and a hold full of the most useless items imaginable—gifts for those who would have no idea of their purpose. Later on, as the Beagle’s boatmen ap-

proached the land of their native guests, the naturalist took note of the items to be brought ashore:

January 19th, 1833: The choice of articles showed the most culpable folly & negligence. Wine glasses, butter-bolts, tea-trays, soup turins, mahogany dressing case, fine white linen, beavor hats & an endless variety of similar things shows how little was thought about the country where they were going to. The means absolutely wasted on such things would have purchased an immense stock of really useful articles.

The boats pulled into “Jemmy’s Cove” at Wulaia—a quiet place on the western shore of Navarino Island where the family of Jemmy Button lived. Here, Darwin remarked that everything seemed quite peaceful. The crew set about building three houses; one for York and Fuegia, another for Jemmy and the third for Richard Matthews the missionary. FitzRoy would leave them for their first night ashore, then return the following day. Darwin rather accurately sized up the situation:

Matthews & his companions prepared to pass rather an awful night. – Matthews behaved with his usual quiet resolution: he is of an eccentric character & does not appear (which is strange) to possess much energy & I think it very doubtful how far he is qualified for so arduous an undertaking.

Subsequent events would prove Darwin right, but on the morrow all seemed well. FitzRoy decided to take his leave for a week or so. The boats paddled north, then westward to explore the Beagle Channel, where Darwin would play a

part in saving his shipmates from disaster. He records the events of one rather interesting day in his *Diary*:

January 29th, 1833: In the morning we arrived at a point where the channel divides & we entered the Northern arm. The scenery becomes very grand, the mountains on the right are very lofty & covered with a white mantle of perpetual snow. ... I cannot imagine anything more beautiful than the beryl blue of these glaciers, especially when contrasted with the snow. ... One of these glaciers placed us for a minute in most unusual peril; whilst dining in a little bay about ½ a mile from one & admiring the beautiful colour of its vertical & overhanging face, a large mass fell roaring into the water; our boats were on the beach; we saw a great wave rushing onwards & instantly it was evident how great was the chance of their being dashed into pieces. One of the seamen just got hold of the boat as the curling breakers reached it: he was knocked over & over but not hurt & most fortunately our boats received no damage. If they had been washed away; how dangerous would our lot have been, surrounded on all sides by hostile Savages & deprived of all provisions.

FitzRoy gives a few more details in his *Narrative*:

On the 29th, we reached Devil Island, and found the large wigwam still standing, which in 1830 my boat's crew called the

'Parliament House.' ... We enjoyed a grand view of the lofty mountain, now called Darwin, with its immense glaciers extending far and wide. ... We stopped to cook and eat our hasty meal upon a low point of land, immediately in front of a noble precipice of solid ice. ... Our boats were hauled up out of the water upon the sandy point, when a thundering crash shook us—down came the whole front of the icy cliff—and the sea surged up in a vast heap of foam.

Our whole attention was immediately called to great rolling waves which came so rapidly that there was scarcely time for the most active of our party to run and seize the boats before they were tossed along the beach like empty calabashes. ... Had not Mr. Darwin, and two or three of the men, run to them instantly, they would have been swept away from us irrecoverably. Wind and tide would soon have drifted them beyond the distance a man could swim, ...

At the extremity of the sandy point on which we stood, there were many large blocks of stone, ... Had our boats struck these blocks, instead of the soft sand, our dilemma would not have been much less than if they had been at once swept away.

From FitzRoy's description it would seem the large wigwam was on the island, but in his earlier account of the previous voyage he wrote,

A Yapoo wigwam was on the mainland,
close to the island of the Devil; The boat's
crew said it had been a 'Meeting House'
and perhaps they were not far wrong.

So, the wigwam named 'Parliament' or 'Meeting House' was on the mainland, and FitzRoy's men did not go ashore on Devil's Island. That is, not on this trip. But back in 1830, some men of the *Beagle* camped one night on a small island. Just after dark, one of them was startled by two large eyes staring out of a bush at him. He had seen the devil, and the devil had seen him. A well-placed gunshot blast—the devil turned into a magnificent horned owl, and the island had its name.

But if not on the island, where then was the low point of land in front of the noble precipice of solid ice? There are several glaciers in the vicinity—indeed, this section of the Beagle Channel is known today as "Glacier Alley"—but today only two answer the description of facing a low point of land with a sandy beach. One is Glaciar Italia, the other Glaciar Alemania. Chances are, Darwin and the others were enjoying their afternoon meal on the beach before one of them when the glacier calved, and Darwin helped save the day. FitzRoy was delighted and expressed his gratitude without delay.

The following day (30th) we passed into a large expanse of water, which I named Darwin Sound—after my messmate, who so willingly encountered the discomfort and risk of a long cruise in a small loaded boat.

The boats continued their westward exploration as far as Stuart Island, then turned back to Wulaia to see how Matthews and the others were getting on. One of them was not getting on well at all.

From the moment of our leaving, a regular system of plunder commenced. Matthews had nearly lost all his things; & the constant watching was more harassing. Night & day large parties of the natives surrounded his house. They tried to tire him out by making incessant noises. Another day, a whole party advanced with stones & stakes. Matthews thought it was only to rob him & he met them with presents. They showed by signs they would strip him & pluck all the hairs out of his face & body. I think we returned just in time to save his life.

Matthews agreed. As FitzRoy put it, "He felt convinced they would take his life." A garden started by the crew earlier had been trampled and "Jemmy was sadly plundered, even by his own family." Jemmy himself summed it up:

My people very bad; great fool; know
nothing at all; very great fool.

FitzRoy agreed: Matthews was to stay no longer. He and his remaining property were returned to the *Beagle*, a few more gifts were distributed, and the ship departed for the Falklands. It would be a year before FitzRoy and Darwin would pay a return visit to Jemmy's land.

Early March found the *Beagle* back again at Wulaia, back again in search of Jemmy and the others. This time, perhaps Matthews might have another try at living amongst

the Fuegians, but a final decision would wait until FitzRoy could see how his young friends were getting on with their kinsmen.

It was fine weather, Darwin admired the scenery, and his *Diary* takes particular note of one prominent landmark:

March 4th, 1834. A mountain, which the Captain has done me the honour to call by my name, has been determined by angular measurement to be the highest in Tierra del Fuego, above 7000 feet and therefore higher than M. Sarmiento. It presented a very grand appearance.

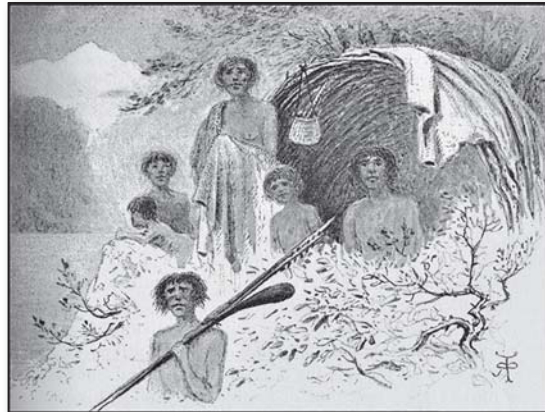
And in an April 6th letter to his sister Catherine, he describes their future plans "... to enter the Pacific by the Barbara channel, which passes close to the foot of M. Sarmiento (the highest mountain in the South, excepting M. !!Darwin!!.)".

Punctuation by the writer, whose enthusiasm shows, if not his accuracy. For notwithstanding the grand appearance of his mountain, even at some 7,005 feet it takes second place to Mt. Sarmiento's 7,545 feet, 11 inches.

A Fuegian family at home

Meanwhile back at sea level, there was at first nothing; the wigwams empty, the garden destroyed—all but a few turnips and potatoes,

served that night at the captain's table. But then visitors approached. FitzRoy made out a strange but vaguely familiar figure in one of the approaching canoes.



I could hardly restrain my feelings, and I was not the only one so touched by his squalid miserable appearance. He was naked like his companions, except a bit of skin about his loins. His hair was long and matted, just like theirs. He was wretchedly thin, and his eyes were affected by smoke.

He was Jemmy Button.

Wonder of wonders; his body was once again the body of a savage. Earlier, FitzRoy had described the typical Fuegian in unflattering terms:

... small eyes (suffering from smoke), sunken, black, and as restless as savages in general. The nose is always narrow between the eyes, hollow in profile outline, or almost flat. The mouth is coarsely formed.

But all this was nothing that couldn't be fixed, for according to the captain, "I speak of them in their savage state, and not of those who were in England, whose features were much improved by altered habits, and by education." Apparently FitzRoy actually believed that a short spell in England would do more for a brutish appearance than might be expected today at the hands of the finest plastic surgeon. But of course these changes would vanish on returning home. So here they were, with FitzRoy now facing a Jemmy who had reverted to his savage state.

Perhaps such changes worked in both directions; in later years Darwin recalled the words of his father when they were eventually reunited.

On first seeing me after the voyage, he
turned round to my sisters and exclaimed,
“Why, the shape of his head is quite altered.”

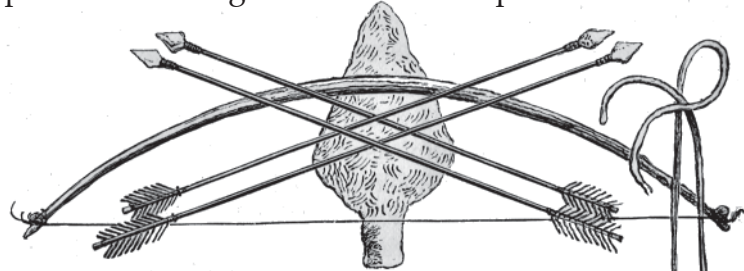
And of course Charles knew why: “My mind became developed through my pursuits during the voyage.”

But for the Jemmy of squalid miserable appearance there was little to be done. A return to England was out of the question, and so the ship’s company did the next best thing. He was hustled below and, said the captain, “in half an hour he was sitting with me at dinner, using his knife and fork properly.” FitzRoy was concerned for his guest’s health, but was immediately reassured. Jemmy was, to use one of his own favorite expressions, “heartly, sir, never better.” He enjoyed “plenty fruits, plenty birdies, ten guanaco in snow time,” and “too much fish.” All that, and a good-looking (“for a Fuegian,” wrote FitzRoy) wife.

Next morning Jemmy shared my breakfast, and then we had a long conversation by ourselves; the result of which was, that I felt quite decided not to make a second attempt to place Matthews among the natives of Tierra del Fuego.

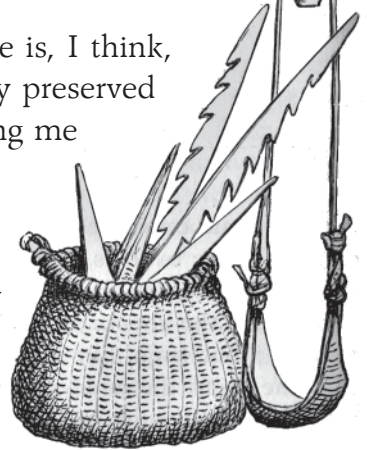
FitzRoy says little about the chat, but he did learn that York Minster and Fuegia Basket had persuaded Jemmy to come with them to their own land. A large canoe was built, Jemmy’s clothes and other worldly goods were stowed aboard, and the party set out. After making their way into the Beagle Channel, they “coincidentally” met York’s brother and spent a night at Devil’s Island. But the meeting was no coincidence. York had planned to relieve Jemmy of his possessions; aided by his brother and under cover of darkness the honeymooners stole away, leaving their naked companion behind.

But now it was time for the English to leave too. FitzRoy says little of their departure, content to leave his readers with a bit of pious moralizing about his little experiment.



The first step towards civilization was undoubtedly made. ... I cannot help hoping that some benefit, however slight, may result from the intercourse of these people, Jemmy, York, and Fuegia, with other natives of Tierra del Fuego. Perhaps a shipwrecked seaman may hereafter receive help and kind treatment from Jemmy Button's children, prompted by an idea of their duty to God as well as their neighbor.

That Jemmy felt sincere gratitude is, I think, proved by his having so carefully preserved two fine otter skins; by his asking me to carry a bow and quiver full of arrows to the schoolmaster of Walthamstow; by his having made two spear-heads expressly for Mr. Darwin; and by the pleasure he showed at seeing us all again.



Above: Fuegian weapons, including a bow, arrows and spear head, perhaps similar to Jemmy's gifts as the *Beagle* prepared itself for departure

As we shall see in another chapter, the captain was mistaken about the fruits of his labor, even perhaps about the extent of Jemmy's gratitude. For not a little Christian blood was yet to be spilled until at last the missionaries succeeded in evangelizing the natives into salvation and oblivion. But in the meantime, Darwin wondered what would happen to them.

They have far too much sense not to see the vast superiority of civilized over uncivilized habits; & yet I am afraid to the latter they must return.

Darwin of course believed "civilized" could only mean living life the English way, and apparently didn't even consider that a Fuegian might have quite another definition of vast superiority. But as the *Beagle* readied itself for departure, he jotted down a final thought in his *Diary* entry for March 6th, 1834.

Jemmy staid on board till the ship got under weigh, which frightened his wife so that she did not cease crying till he was safe out of the ship. Every soul on board was sorry to shake hands with poor Jemmy for the last time. I hope & have little doubt he will be as happy as if he had never left his country, which is more than I formerly thought.

He lighted a farewell signal as the ship stood out of Ponsonby Sound, on her course to East Falkland Island.

The *Beagle* spent a little time at the Falklands before making its way back to Patagonia and the mouth of Río Santa Cruz,

there to make an attempt at finding its source. The river expedition will wait for another chapter, because now it is time to move on.

May 12th began a few unpleasant days as the ship battled its way south for yet another passage through the strait. As Darwin put it, "The weather had been bad, cold, & boisterous (& I proportionally sick & miserable)." The first day of June found them at Port Famine, which was not one of the voyage's high points: "I never saw a more cheer-less prospect" he complained, for here was "... an atmosphere composed of two thirds rain & one of fog."

But all bad things must come to an end, and Darwin's June 9th *Diary* entry begins on a positive note:

We were delighted in the morning by seeing the veil of mist gradually rise from & display Sarmiento.—I cannot describe the pleasure of viewing these enormous, still, & hence sublime masses of snow which never melt & seem doomed to last as long as this world holds together.

Global warming was not part of Charles Darwin's world.

The next day found the ship on its way into the great Pacific, as the "two year voyage" neared the end of its third year, HMS *Beagle* was done with Tierra del Fuego, the west coast of South America lay before them, and after that perhaps the Galápagos Islands and then the far Pacific. The end was somewhere beyond a distant horizon. But then came a letter which almost brought the ship's company back to the strait.

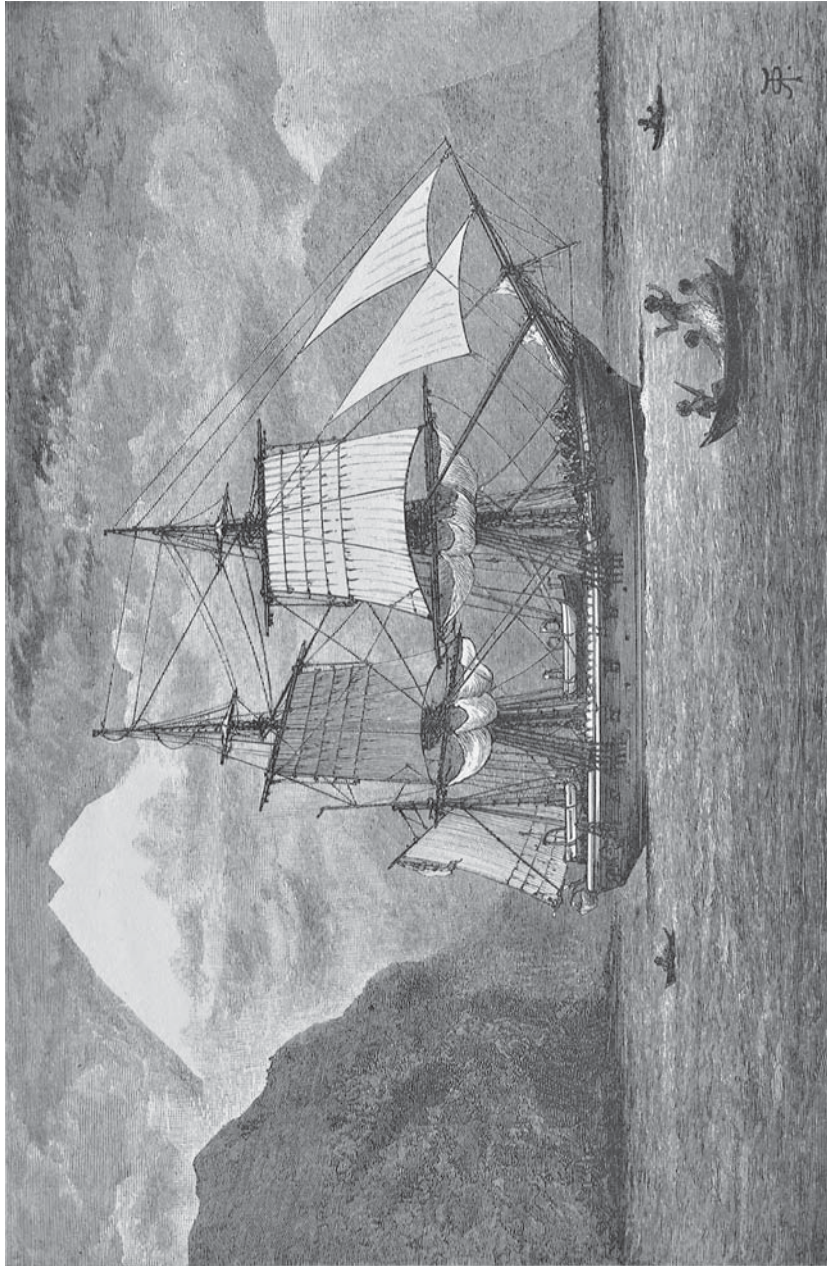
Earlier, the captain had purchased an auxiliary ship with his own funds to assist in the surveying work, confident the Admiralty would support him. It was a confidence misplaced; At Valparaiso, he learned that it was their lordships' pleasure that he dispose of the ship with all haste and expect no re-

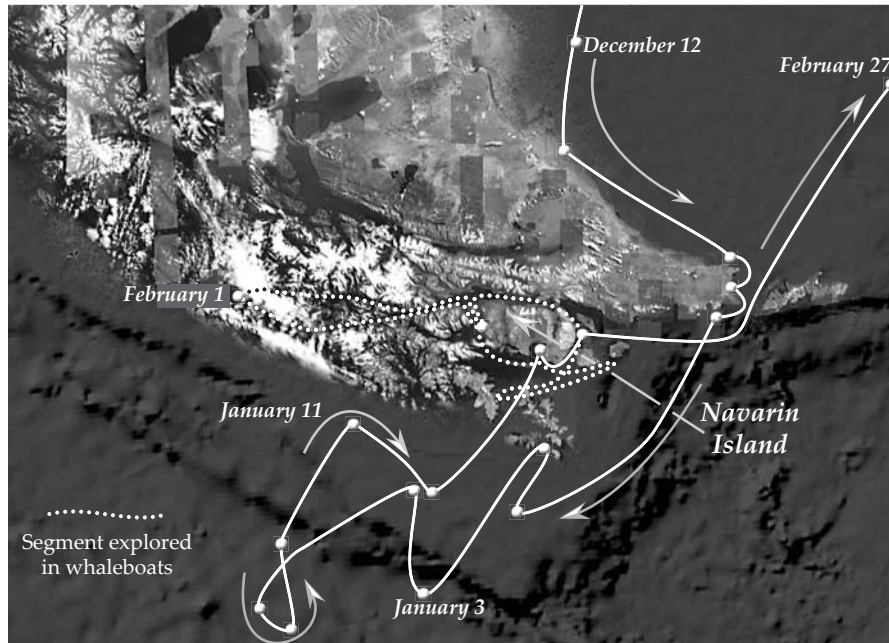
muneration for his troubles. FitzRoy retreated to his cabin for several days to sulk in solitude. Did he think for a moment about following the example of the unfortunate Pringle Stokes? Perhaps. But suicide would have to wait, and instead he prepared a letter of resignation, leaving command of the *Beagle* to Lieutenant Wickham, whose orders were clear. The Admiralty had directed in advance that if the captain were incapacitated, the ship was to proceed directly to England. At this point in the long voyage, that would mean to reverse course and pass through the strait yet again on the way home. The Galápagos Islands would never see Charles Darwin.

Fortunately for science, Wickham would have none of this. Not a man on the ship wanted to see Magellan again, a pleasant sail across the Pacific would be a welcome relief, and in due course a despondent captain would find himself much refreshed by a change in climate. The acting captain, backed by the full force of the ship's company, staged a mutiny in reverse. For perhaps the first and certainly the last time in his career, the captain bowed to the will of his social inferiors. FitzRoy withdrew his letter, Wickham withdrew his temporary command, and Darwin withdrew to his cabin to dash off a happy note to sister Caroline. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Facing page: HMS *Beagle*, with Mount Sarmiento in the distance







HMS *Beagle*'s three voyages to Tierra del Fuego
Above: December 1832–February 1833. *Below*: January–March and May–June 1834. The latter followed the previous voyage as far as Port Famine, then sailed southward (dashed line) through the Magdalena and Cockburn Channels and out into the Pacific.

