

The Beagle

Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882)

Captain Robert FitzRoy (1805 - 1865)

Walled with an image of greenery round him,
Stretching from carpet to plastered cornice;
Filling the room of his mind with its pictures:
Sounds from the chaffinch to snake's lowly hiss.

All life's diversity spread wide before him,
Flashed on his screen in its caricatured way;
Dolphins leapt, adders slid, corncrakes gavotted;
Plants in gross raiment now coloured his day.

Kites brightly spiralling over the roof tops;
Whiskered mice sniffing the ripe ears of corn;
Toothed beavers building and tortoises hatching;
Cats on wide prairies were eyeing the dawn;

Confusions of butterflies curtained the summer;
Stotting gazelles jumped to startle the air;
Gibbering monkeys cartwheeled in the forest;
Brown, fluffy cubs stalked a lone, silent bear.

Over the great sea and through the wide ocean
Swarming with living things both great and small,
There played Leviathan in the blue waters:
Molluscs and fishes were there to enthral.

Blackbirds with head turned awaited the earthworm;
Bats with their sonar ears gimballed with glee;
Bees oozed their honey and danced for its making;
Life teamed in each little niche he could see.

Curved for its prey was the beak of the eagle,
Talons and pinions spread wide in decent;
Wheeling birds soared; the wild shriek of a seagull
Summoned diversity's clear argument.

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Courtly, unbending, and aristocratic,
Born to the sea yet the son of an Earl,
Captain FitzRoy held command of the Beagle -
Absolute, resolute, fixed by his will:

Five years to fathom the seas and the coastlines,
Charting far ports where the bold Jack unfurled.
Firmly, FitzRoy chose the crew for his vessel -
Gathered in Plymouth to girdle the world:

Sailmaker, carpenter, mates and lieutenants;
Swarthy young riggers, artist, and boatswain;
Surgeon and cook; midshipmen and surveyor;

Tried volunteers for the heaving ocean.

Captain FitzRoy held deep -rooted convictions,
Acting with firm faith in all that he did;
Just one man more was required for the Beagle:
Called to discover what nature had hid.

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Darwin, a sportsman in vivid red tunic,
Clattering the cobbles of Christ's College court,
Handed his gun to a groom with his charger
After a good morning's hunting and sport.

Utter delight broke across his fresh features:
After uncertainty came his degree.
He'd nearly drowned in mathematical symbols,
Hated the classics and loathed liturgy.

Only his collecting aroused him to passion:
Even his mouth he would store beetles in
Given the urgency of some fresh species,
Yet with his mouth full he managed to grin,

Until its foul, acrid, pungent secretions
Forced him to spit it away in disgust,
Leaving him loathing himself for his weakness -
Next time on collecting -tins he'd better trust.

"Combine your passions - be a soft country clergyman,"
Cautioned his father while sitting at ease.
"Surely your cousin will tempt you to listen?
It's safe and respectable - and her you will please."

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"God is my reference in all my endeavours;
Your part is vital," the Captain declared.
"Find me fresh proof of the truth of the bible.
To this fine calling we'll both be well paired.

"Share half my cabin and dine at my table -
I value your work as a necessity.
Some fools have doubted the facts of creation!"
Darwin agreed to each point willingly;

Brave words, resounding through centuries of schism,
Filling believers with mistrust and dread.
Captain FitzRoy helped him sort out his hammock:
A leader of men - yet refined and well bred.

Soft ticking clocks break the time into minutes;
Twenty or more were displayed on his shelf,
Setting the limits of earth as they circled:
Each measured longitude limits himself.

The day they departed was like a great birthday:
December, the twenty -seventh day, they slipped berth,
Through grey gales lashing the seas into mountains;
Mal de mer ailed him - to the crew's gentle mirth!

Hawsers were hauled to the fife's steady rhythm;
Summoned by Coxswain's pipe, boys raced aloft,
Shaking the sails from the yards and fixed rigging;
Tuned to the sea as they crested and troughed.

Ten mounted guns leant grim hope to survival;
Oaken beams creaked under smooth teaked top decks;
Twin masts of pine caught the power of the gallants:
Rolling, the brig drew abaft the buoyed wrecks.

Dark stained mahogany lining the cabins
Shuddered like tense cats awaiting each wave.
Overhead hammering pounded the caulking,
Keeping seams watertight 'gainst Neptune's grave.

Crossing the line in traditional manner,
Turning the hands up and shortening the sail,
Pitch, paint and lather recruited the griffins;
Even the Captain was wet by their pail.

Landfall was made amidst darkening verdure,
Towering loftily mile after mile.
FitzRoy stayed head to the wind for the evening,
Entering Rio next morning in style.

One of the fishermen hooked a diodon,
Incarnadining the seas in its rage;
Puffed to a globular, evil distension,
Toughened sharks' bellies cannot this encage.

Seeing a wasp and large spider do battle
Showed with fatality skirmishes waste;
Searching then lancing its victim's abdomen
Till, mortally wounded, by poisons effaced.

Silently marching through tracks in the jungle,
Ever advancing, ne'er to retreat,
Circling round helpless lizards in panic,
Myriads of army ants kill all they meet.

More vicious still was the martinet slaver:
Whipping, belittling and branding by spite;
Arbitrary hanging, or maiming, or prison,
Rendered these abject men less than one mite.

“Slaves are essential to run the plantations,”
With patient solemnity FitzRoy averred.
“Nothing is said in the bible against them!”
Darwin reacted with contempt and sneered.

Megalith bones littered cliffs Patagonian -

Vast, countless species now lying extinct.
Darwin proposed they had once ruled this region;
FitzRoy's reply was forthright and succinct.

Craggy rocks, bound in their minds from first childhood,
Solidly fashioned, eternity fake:
Suddenly - cracking like shells to a knife thrust -
Buildings and men fell with fearful earthquake.

Fuegian cannibals roasted their mothers;
One cracked a boy's skull for dropping sea -eggs.
Yet three same savages, though hardly human,
By FitzRoy's bounty had grown Christian legs.

FitzRoy had held Captain Cook as his hero,
Giving his life to the utmost extent.
Fighting the Horn through a newly found channel
Named for the Beagle, hell's curtains were rent.

One peak was named in high honour of Darwin:
Threatening to leave them cut off and afloat,
Slabs of blue ice fell and threw high seas over them;
Darwin's quick bravery saved them their boat.

Captain FitzRoy steered the skiff to an atoll;
Darwin took soundings with tallowed lead line:
Finding the coral rose sheer in the ocean
Showed them the bottom had sunk in the brine.

On finches he focused, in varied profusion:
Each on its island allotted one place.
Darwin envisaged them drift on the currents;
Now interbreeding, each bred a new race.

Clutches of eggs hatched each year to each mother:
Surely their numbers should show no restraint?
Foes and starvation soon ripped and devoured them:
Eternal slaughter's knife made him feel faint.

Tortoises toppling over the cliff face
Showed how untimely to life they were patched;
So many fresh ones were laid - yet each season
Buzzards were filching their young as they hatched.

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On his return to the green Wolds of England,
Darwin reflected on all he had seen;
Millions of years beyond mind to ring changes,
Forming the present. With resolute mien,

Finally wrote he contentious conclusions,
Based on firm knowledge of nature's own laws:
That life, appearing in all its abundance,
Rose from the simplest of primitive spores.

Huxley and Wilberforce argued at Oxford
Over the merits of Darwin's ideas.
Captain FitzRoy waved his bible above him
And cried with impassioned faith, hiding his fears,

“My life was lived for the pursuit of knowledge,
Pushing the curtains of evil away.
Here I have read you my text on storm theory;
Now greater storms than at sea will hold sway.

“This man is worse than the Fuegian savage
(Whose ignorance is his own self defence);
Each time I aided him, counselled, assisted,
This damned sciolist was plotting nonsense.”

FitzRoy wheeled round like an avenging prophet,
Haughty, aloof, with contemptuous pride,
Stormed from the hall in his unbending fury
Until he broke: by his own hand he died.

Red were the gaunt hands that wielded the death blow;
Crimson the last words that welled from the teeth.
Staining the greenery, blooding the carpet,
Robert FitzRoy had just death to bequeath.

(c) John Marr

References

Darwin

Bible (Psalm 104:25-26)

“Yonder is the sea, great and wide, which teems with things innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan which thou didst form to sport in it”. (A.V.)

Cook, Captain James

“I didn't just want to go further than anybody else had been, I wanted to go as far as I could go”.

Darwin, Charles (1859) The Origin of Species

Darwin, Charles (1979) The Illustrated Origin of Species (Edited Richard E Leakey)

Darwin, Charles Autobiography (OUP, 1974)

(p.31) ...from what little I had heard and thought on the subject I had scruples about declaring my belief in all the dogmas of the Church of England; though otherwise I liked the thought of being a country clergyman.

(p.32) As it was decided that I should be a clergyman, it was necessary that I should go to one of the English Universities and take a degree;

I attempted mathematicks (sic)...the work was repugnant to me.

With respect to the classics I did nothing except attend a few compulsory college lectures.

(p.33) ...my time was sadly wasted [at Cambridge]...from my passion for shooting and for hunting and...for riding across country I got into a sporting set, including some dissipated, low-minded young men.

(p.35) ...one day I saw two rare beetles and seized one in each hand; then I saw a third and new kind, which I could not bear to lose, so that I popped the one which I held in my right hand into my mouth...it ejected some intensely acrid fluid, which burnt my tongue so that I was forced to spit the beetle out, which was lost, as well as the third one.

Darwin, Charles The Voyage of Charles Darwin (Journal and Diary)

Autobiographical writings, arr. Ralling, Christopher (1978)

(p.33) ...everything is so new and different to what one has ever seen: the Coxswain's piping, the manning the yards, the men working at the hawsers to the sound of a fife...the rapidity and decision of the orders...

(p.37) ...a ship is a true pandemonium, and the cawkers(sic) who are hammering away above my head veritable devils...

(p.38-39) Ceremonies of crossing the line. (32 'griffins')

(p.41-42) Account of the *Diodon antennatus*- found floating alive in the stomach of a shark, and capable of eating its way through the stomach walls and out through the sides, destroying the shark.

(p.42) Rio de Janeiro, 3 April 1832: in the evening we drew near to the harbour of Rio. ...the captain has put the ship's head to the wind and we shall cruise about for the night.

(p.58)...a deadly contest between a *pepsis* and a large spider...the wasp soon returned and...commenced a regular hunt...inflicted two stings...it proceeded to drag away the body.

(p.93) the Fuegians on board...[Captain FitzRoy] took to England, determining to educate them at his own expense. To settle these natives in their own country was one chief inducement for him to undertake the voyage, and he had generously chartered a vessel before the Admiralty had resolved to send out this expedition.

(p.97) ...when pressed in winter by hunger, they kill and devour their old women. The boy described the manner in which they are killed by being held over smoke and choked. He imitated their screams as a joke, and described the parts of their bodies which are considered best to eat...

(p.98) a wretched mother picked up her bleeding, dying infant-boy whom her husband had mercilessly dashed on the stones for dropping a basket of sea-eggs.

(p.120) Chile: This day has been memorable for the most severe earthquake experienced by the oldest inhabitant. I happened to be on shore...[it] at once destroys our oldest associations: the earth, the very emblem of solidity, has moved beneath our feet...One second of time has created in the mind a strange idea of insecurity...

(p.158) [FitzRoy] defended and praised slavery, which I abominated, ...many slaves, asked if they wished to be free, all answered "No". I asked him with a sneer whether he thought the answers of slaves in the presence of their master was worth anything. He was angry that I doubted his word...but after a few hours showed his usual magnanimity.

(p.160) he was very indignant with me for having published so unorthodox a book as the Origin of Species. His end was a melancholy one, namely suicide, exactly like that of his uncle Lord Castlereagh. His character was in several respects one of the most noble which I have ever known... Dawkins, Richard (1976) *The Selfish Gene*

(p.11) Stotting in Thomson's gazelles- leaping high in front of a predator, analogous to bird alarm calls, to warn companions of danger- "altruism".

(p.15-17) Primaeval soup.

(p.158) Kittiwakes- monogamous pair birds of exemplary fidelity.

(p.197-201) -good example of "grudgers", "suckers" and "cheats", using grooming birds as examples. Suggests "suckers" are disadvantageous, and may end up with runaway population of "cheats" which then goes extinct. However, "grudgers" are stable, if there are not too few initially.

(p.206) Description of "meme"- a new genetic entity, mimicry: songs to fashion (eg shoes) propagating ideas - disseminating ideas, eg arches- spreading from brain to brain.

(p.207) Memes parasitise the brain- turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation.

(p.209) Refers explicitly to the style of women's shoes, and sales statistics from shoe shops (24.6.88) *Ladybird, (1970) Birds of Prey*

(p.24) The Kite, common in the streets of London a century ago.

Moorehead, Alan (1969) Darwin and the Beagle [508.3]

(p.57) Fight to death between *Pepsis* wasp and *Lycosa* (a large spider). The spider was wounded and dragged itself off- the wasp came in for the kill with wonderful precision.

March of the army ants- lizards, cockroaches, spiders thrown into panic; cut off by a fast encircling movement, and then the ravening mass fell upon its prey.

(p.193) Giant tortoises toppling over a cliff. Buzzards lifting the young tortoises as they hatched.

(p.262) Vice-Admiral Robert FitzRoy attended the Oxford meeting by coincidence to read a paper: "British Storms".

(p.266) He stood and denounced Darwin at the Oxford meeting, waving his Bible aloft, and crying: "here is the truth!" like an avenging prophet. Five years later (1865) he committed suicide by cutting his throat.

(p.38) The Ships Company on the Beagle: 74 persons.

FitzRoy

FitzRoy, Vice-Admiral Robert (1805-1865). Oxford Dictionary of English Literature

Governor of New Zealand 1843-5. Chief of new meteorological department of Board of Trade 1854. Suggested plan of the FitzRoy barometer. Instituted a system of storm warnings - the first British weather forecasts. Commanded Beagle in surveying expedition to Patagonia and Straits of Magellan 1823-36, having Darwin on board for the last 5 years. Like Darwin, he wrote a narrative of the voyage.

Pitman, Michael (1984) Adam and Evolution

Though this work is written by an M.A. in classics at Oxford, this work typifies the strong feelings still present among many people who cannot bring themselves to accept evolutionary concepts with their full implications. To my mind they bear all the hallmarks of the flat-earthists of old, e.g. (p.253) "The creationist thesis is clear. No son of ape rose into Tarzan. Man is a distinct type". (p.255) "...there has been neither chemical evolution nor macro-evolution".

Gregory, Richard L. Consciousness

(p.274) The nature of consciousness- in ourselves, in others, in animals, insects, computers. The "unbridgeable gap between the brain as a physical object, and mental consciousness".

(p.278) Can machines be conscious? The paradox of consciousness having, or not having, causal effect. (ie if it has no causal effect, there is no reason why machines should not be as perceptually sophisticated as ourselves. If consciousness is causally effective we might need to put consciousness into machines.)

(p.280) Why, of all physical objects, are only brains states conscious?

(The Encyclopaedia of Ignorance ed. Duncan and Weston-Smith) (1977)

Sperry, Roger W. Problems Outstanding in the Evolution of Brain Function. (The Encyclopaedia of Ignorance ed. Duncan and Weston-Smith) (1977)

(p.431) Work on epileptics with surgically divided brains: under careful controlled conditions, each half seems to function as an independent decision making entity, with separate memories and will. "As far as we can see, about the only avenue remaining for direct communication between mind-right and mind-left is that of extrasensory perception. If any two minds should be able to tune in on each other, one might expect these two to be able to do so, but thus far no evidence of such effects is apparent in the test performances".

(p.432) "Every advance in the science of behaviour, whether it has come from the psychiatrist's couch, from microelectrode recording, from brain-splitting, or from the running of cannibalistic flatworms, seems only to reinforce that old suspicion that free will is just an illusion. The more we learn about the brain and behaviour, the more deterministic, lawful and causal it appears".

(p.433) "There might be worse fates than causal determinism. Maybe, after all, it is better to be embedded firmly in the causal flow of cosmic forces, as an integral part thereof, than to be on the loose and out of contact with these forces, 'free-floating' as it were and with behavioural possibilities that have no antecedent cause and hence no reason, nor any reliability when it comes to future plans, predictions, or promises".