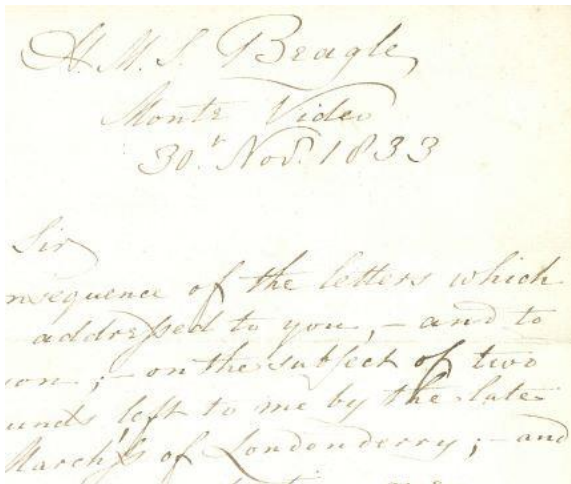


Manuscript of the Month
November 2013

Letter by Captain Robert FitzRoy, HMS Beagle, 30 Nov 1833



One hundred and eighty years ago this month, the captain of a naval barque moored off Monte Video, Uruguay, sat down and wrote a letter to his banker, Henry Hugh Hoare. Both the captain, Robert FitzRoy, and his vessel, HMS Beagle, were nearly halfway through a five year voyage, one that would take them round the world and into the history books.

Robert FitzRoy (1805-65), son of bank customer General Lord Charles FitzRoy and a grandson of both the Duke of Grafton and the Marquess of Londonderry, had entered the Royal Naval College, Portsmouth, at the age of twelve and undertaken his first long sea voyage at fourteen. In 1824, FitzRoy's

early promise was underlined when he succeeded in passing the naval lieutenant's examination without dropping a single mark, a hitherto unheard of feat. Four years later, aged just 23, he was appointed temporary commander of HMS Beagle, then in the midst of a survey expedition to South America.

Hydrographic surveys formed a vital part of the Royal Navy's work in the years following the Napoleonic Wars. With a burgeoning Empire to protect and the rapacious demands of an industrial revolution to placate, British ships were criss-crossing the globe as never before. But a lack of accurate maps was costing the country dear in terms of shipping, cargoes and men. In a bid to reduce these losses, the Admiralty organised a series of survey expeditions, using Royal Navy vessels to chart coastlines and harbours worldwide, but particularly in mineral rich South America, where new and potentially lucrative markets were opening up. When Fitzroy assumed command of the Beagle in 1828, she was halfway through just such an expedition, one that aimed to map the coastline of Patagonia. And so able a commander and surveyor did FitzRoy prove himself to be, that when a second expedition was agreed upon in 1831 he was appointed Captain once more.

On 27 December 1831, HMS Beagle left Plymouth with orders to continue its survey along the southern coastline of South America and run a chain of chronometric readings (used to determine precise longitudes) around the globe. Dreading the loneliness of command, and mindful that it had contributed to his predecessor's suicide, FitzRoy requested that a gentleman companion, one who shared his interest in science, be found to accompany him. The man chosen was 22 year old Cambridge graduate Charles Darwin, and the voyage the two men embarked upon together would become the stuff of legend. Not that life on board Beagle was ever easy, however. With 74 men crammed into a 90 foot long vessel, space was so tight that Darwin even had to remove a drawer before getting into bed each night to make room for his feet. Beyond Beagle, meanwhile, there lurked constant dangers: tempests, earthquakes, hostile locals and disease.

This second voyage was supposed to last no more than two years. But FitzRoy soon realised that it would be impossible to do all that was required in such a short space of time. He also recognised that having a second vessel at his disposal would be hugely beneficial, since it could be used not only to fetch and carry supplies, but also to undertake additional survey work. As he later

explained: *I had often anxiously longed for a consort, adapted for carrying cargoes, rigged so as to be easily worked with few hands, and able to keep company with the Beagle.* For a time he rented such vessels as and when they were required, paying for them out of his own pocket. But in March 1833 FitzRoy took the bold step of buying a 170 ton schooner from a Scottish sealing master. Unicorn cost FitzRoy £1,300 (c.£100K today), which he regarded as *a very low price considering her intrinsic value*, although he had to spend several hundred more fitting her out to his own exacting standards. Darwin immediately grasped the significance of FitzRoy's decision, writing in his journal: *If the Admiralty sanction the provisioning and payment of men, this [decision] will be an important one in the history of the Beagle. Perhaps it may shorten our cruise, anyway it will double the work done; & when at sea, it is always pleasant to be sailing in company; the consort affords an object of attention to break the monotonous horizon of the ocean.*

It was this purchase that formed the subject of FitzRoy's letter to Hugh Hoare. For as he admitted: *Having purchased and fitted out a vessel, to act as a Tender to the Beagle, and not having, as yet, obtained an order from the Admiralty authorising such a step on account of Government, I have drawn upon your house for the sum of eight hundred and sixty pounds sterling, by three sets of bills of exchange.* FitzRoy was at pains to point out the good value his new consort, which he optimistically renamed Adventure, represented: *The vessel I have purchased is admirably adapted to her present Employment. She has now, on board, provisions for ten months and stores of all other kinds enough for three years fair wear, but allowing for hard work and accidents she is well found for two years, at least. She is a Schooner, English built – and of the very best materials...[and] will always command a good price upon the coasts of Chili – or Peru – being just the right sort of vessel for a trader, in those climates, or indeed in any part of the world.* And he hoped that support from Whitehall would soon be forthcoming: *Perhaps, after inspecting the documents I am now sending to the Hydrographical Office – the wise heads at the Admiralty may give me some assistance – and lighten the heavy burden which now lies Entirely upon me.* In the meantime, he asked Hugh Hoare to pay the Bills for £860 and an additional £200 in Drafts from his account, which he fully expected to have been credited with £2,000 from the late Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry's executors and a further £1,000 from Lord James FitzRoy. Almost casually FitzRoy added: *If the sums mentioned...have not yet been received by your house, may I beg that you will advance to me the said [£1,060] and allow me to repay you – with interest by those sums – as soon as they are placed to my credit – or by other means.*

Six days after this letter was written, Beagle and Adventure left Monte Video together. FitzRoy outlined his future plans to Hugh Hoare: *In a very few days the Beagle will leave the river Plate – finally. After passing several months at the Falkland islands and on the Southern coasts of this continent – we shall slowly work our way along the coasts of Chili and Peru. A Sea Survey – if correctly taken, requires so much Time and such constant attention, that it must appear extremely tedious to all except those engaged in the work. About three years more must elapse before my task will be completed.* In late January, the two vessels parted company. FitzRoy dispatched the Adventure to the Falkland Islands with instructions to carry out additional survey work, while he and the Beagle proceeded towards Tierra del Fuego and the Santa Cruz River. Three months later, the two were reunited by the Strait of Magellan and progressed in tandem up the west coast of Chile to Valparaiso, finally arriving there on 22 July 1834.

It was at Valparaiso that FitzRoy received the news he had been dreading. The Admiralty did not approve of his purchase and had refused to sanction it. Nor did FitzRoy have sufficient funds to maintain the Adventure himself. Just eighteen months after acquiring her, therefore, FitzRoy was forced to discharge the Adventure's crew, recall her officers to the Beagle and sell the schooner. Although the price FitzRoy obtained for the Adventure, nearly £1,400, was slightly more than he

had initially paid, the substantial sums he had spent fitting her out and maintaining her crew meant that overall he had incurred losses totalling several hundred pounds. More vexing in his eyes, however, was the knowledge that the loss of the Adventure would severely curtail his expedition. As he later wrote: *I saw that all my cherished hopes of examining many groups of islands in the Pacific, besides making a complete survey of the Chilian and Peruvian shores, must utterly fail.*

HMS Beagle finally returned to England in October 1836. Two years later, accounts of the voyage by FitzRoy and Darwin formed the cornerstone of a four volume publication, *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty's Ships Adventure and Beagle between the Years 1826 and 1836*. Darwin's account proved particularly popular and was soon republished on its own. *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the various countries visited by HMS Beagle, or The Voyage of the Beagle* as it universally became known, made Darwin a household name and paved the way for his later revolutionary work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

For FitzRoy too, life after Beagle was full of achievement. He was elected MP for Co Durham in 1841 and served as Governor of New Zealand for a time (1843-45) before being appointed to the newly created post of Meteorological Statistician to the Board of Trade in 1854. With characteristic verve FitzRoy threw himself into this latter role, gathering vast amounts of data from sea captains and devising new instruments to help them take more accurate readings. He also invented a storm warning device for fishing fleets and set up weather stations across Britain, each of which was obliged to submit reports every few hours via the newly invented telegraph. Detailed analysis of all this information led FitzRoy to begin, as he put it, 'forecasting the weather'. And so accurate were these forecasts considered to be that *The Times* started publishing them daily from 1860. By the time FitzRoy retired he was an Admiral and a Fellow of the Royal Society, whose work both on board Beagle and subsequently had made a significant contribution to science and saved the lives of countless seamen. But FitzRoy himself increasingly came to regard his life as a failure, feelings which, together with his declining health, led ultimately to suicide.

Today FitzRoy's achievements are honoured across the world. A mountain in Patagonia, a river in Australia and a settlement on the Falkland Islands are all named after him. And since 2002, when the shipping area of Finisterre was renamed FitzRoy by the body he was so instrumental in establishing (the Met Office), his name can be heard each day on BBC Radio 4's Shipping Forecast. Even as he sat writing to Hugh Hoare back in 1833, however, FitzRoy himself recognised the importance of his work and appeared accepting of the sacrifices it might entail. For his letter contained a final postscript: *PS I hope that my relations will not know what expence I have incurred by purchasing and hiring vessels. Their anxiety would be excited unnecessarily. Those who are married and have children do not think as an unmarried sailor whose castle is the hollow oak, whose home is on the sea. Such a voyage, as I am now making is not likely to occur twice in my life and I am quite resolved to sacrifice future comforts – and views of settling on shore – to the effective execution of the service in which I am engaged. If I can afford it, I shall take my consort – (she is dumb – obedient – and does not eat) round the world with me. If her expences exceed what I can pay I must sell her, and enjoy the satisfaction of having done my little all for the good of my country, and the satisfaction of those who are kind enough to feel interested in my conduct.*