



THE TWO FACES OF ROBERT FITZROY, CAPTAIN OF HMS *BEAGLE*  
AND GOVERNOR OF NEW ZEALAND

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KEYWORDS

Charles Darwin, slavery, HMS *Beagle*, Māori, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

*Robert FitzRoy, Captain of HMS Beagle and second governor of New Zealand, has two contradictory reputations among modern academics. Evolutionary biologists and Darwin scholars generally view FitzRoy as a supporter of slavery, famously quarrelling with the abolitionist Darwin over that topic during a Brazilian stopover early in the voyage of HMS Beagle. He is also regarded as a political and religious reactionary, taking a biblically creationist position at the infamous 1860 Oxford meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. New Zealand historians, however, view his record as governor much more positively. They emphasize that FitzRoy was wildly unpopular with the British settlers because of his enlightened insistence that the native Māori should be treated fairly. We outline the history of these seemingly inconsistent views and examine the evidence for each. We conclude by suggesting that a more nuanced account of FitzRoy's career would surely be more thought-provoking as well as respectful of the facts.*

*The Quarterly Review of Biology*, September 2013, Vol. 88, No. 3  
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0033-5770/2013/8803-0003\$15.00

Captain Robert Fitzroy, illegitimate descendant of Charles II, was a devout Christian with a filthy temper, which was at its worst early morning. Fitzroy held grudges, was suspicious, quick to blame and slow to forgive. As a result Charles Darwin quarrelled fiercely with him, in particular about slavery (Cameron 2011).

His [FitzRoy's] achievements were considerable. . . . In New Zealand his determination that the Maori should be treated with fairness and justice, while European settlers should discover their new life in peace and harmony, constituted a major contribution to the life of the new colony. That he had less ostensible success as governor was the result of Colonial Office policy rather than of his own shortcomings (Wards 2012).

#### INTRODUCTION

**R**OBERT FITZROY (1805–1865) is best known as captain of HMS *Beagle*, the surveying ship that carried Charles Darwin (1809–1882) on a five-year circumnavigation of the globe, during which the nascent naturalist made observations crucial to the development of his theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin's contribution to the official narrative of the voyage, which was much livelier than FitzRoy's, would become a bestseller, and from the time it was published until the captain's death by suicide in 1865, FitzRoy would live in Darwin's shadow. FitzRoy's own accomplishments were both diverse and substantial; having entered the Royal Navy at the age of 13, he had a distinguished naval career, served as the second governor of New Zealand, and pioneered the science of weather forecasting. In 1851, he was elected to the Royal Society (with Darwin's support) in recognition of his important work in hydrography. But in the scholarly as well as popular imagination, he is generally known—when he is known at all—only in connection with the achievements of his most famous passenger.

In accounts of Darwin's life and work, the portrayal of FitzRoy is usually bleak. Books, articles, websites, museum exhibits, and documentaries centered on Darwin often acknowledge the captain's extraordinary bravery and skills as a navigator and surveyor; occasionally, they also take note of his generosity and seminal work in meteorology. But the overwhelming impression is negative. In the standard portrayals, FitzRoy's most pronounced characteristics are a rigid and uncompromising personality, a hair-trigger temper, a lack of judgment, and political and religious fa-

naticism. His motivations are overweening missionary zeal, as reflected in his failed effort to Anglicize and Christianize four Fuegian hostages and return them to Tierra del Fuego as agents of Victorian civilization, and a desire to prove the literal truth of every claim in the Bible. Above all, he is portrayed as ardently supportive of black slavery.

Two episodes in particular have served to exemplify FitzRoy's purported temperamental, characterological, and ideological flaws. The first involves the exchange over slavery with Darwin, who described the episode in the autobiography he drafted in 1876 and elaborated over the next six years (Darwin 1887; Barlow 1958). Darwin wrote:

We had several quarrels; for when out of temper he was utterly unreasonable. For instance, early in the voyage at Bahia in Brazil he defended and praised slavery, which I abominated, and told me that he had just visited a great slave-owner, who had called up many of his slaves and asked them whether they were happy, and 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. I thought that I should have been compelled to leave the ship; but as soon as the news spread, which it did quickly, as the captain sent for the first lieutenant to assuage his anger by abusing me, I was deeply gratified by receiving an invitation from all the gun-room officers to mess with them. But after a few hours Fitz-Roy showed his usual magnanimity by sending an officer to me with an apology and a request that I would continue to live with him (Barlow 1958:73–74).

The second oft-depicted episode is FitzRoy's intervention at the 1860 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Oxford, where Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, famously criticized Darwin's theory, while T. H. Huxley and Joseph Hooker, among others, rallied to its defense. The debate was little reported on at the time, and there is no definitive account of the event, with both contemporaneous and modern descriptions differing in details. FitzRoy, who earlier in the meeting had presented a paper on "British Storms," was present at the discussion and certainly condemned Darwin's *On the Origin*, although exactly what he said or whether, as is commonly asserted, he held a Bible aloft while he said it, is impossible to know. But the Wikipedia entry on the debate serves to illustrate the standard view: when called on by John Stevens Henslow, who chaired the discussion, "FitzRoy denounced Darwin's book and, 'lifting an immense Bible first with both hands and afterwards with one hand over his head, solemnly implored the audience to believe God rather than man.' He was believed to have said: 'I believe that this is the Truth, and had I known then what I know now, I would not have taken him [Darwin] aboard the Beagle'" (Wikipedia 2013).

Accounts of the exchange over slavery and the intervention at the 1860 meeting are mutually reinforcing. Together, they conjure up an image of an ultraconservative political and religious fanatic—an image disseminated in works on Darwin by scientists, science writers, and even historians of science. Among the latter, Janet Browne is perhaps unique in asserting that "FitzRoy did not by any means endorse slavery" (Browne 1995:198). But a markedly different FitzRoy emerges from histories of New Zealand, where he was appointed governor in 1843.

"THE KING OF THE CANNIBAL ISLANDS":  
FITZROY IN NEW ZEALAND

This FitzRoy is an ardent defender of Māori rights, whose insistence on fair treatment of the natives generated intense hostility from the white settlers and their sponsor, the New Zealand Company. According to historian Paul Moon, author of a book on

FitzRoy's governorship: "The Governor's endorsement of a separate justice system for Maori, his removal of the pre-emption clause of the Treaty of Waitangi, which had the effect of driving down land prices, his insistence that land ownership disputes be fully investigated, rather than simply deciding arbitrarily in favour of the European claims ahead of those of the Maori, his determination that Maori be permitted to serve on juries, and the creation of separate Maori magistrates, earned him the unending scorn of many of his fellow countrymen" (Moon 2000:14).

In New Zealand, FitzRoy was vilified as the "King of the Cannibal Islands" (Domett 1844; Francis 1992:219). Claiming that antisetler bias led him to favor the Māori in every dispute, FitzRoy was savaged in the New Zealand press and letters beseeching his recall, which occurred in 1845. FitzRoy's own *Remarks on New Zealand*, written as a defense of his governorship, acknowledges that he favored Māori—but claims for good cause: "I regret to say that in nearly all the affrays,—the origin of which I have been able to ascertain—the white man appears to have been the aggressor, not always unintentionally. Ignorance of language, customs, boundaries, or taboo marks, have not caused so many quarrels as insult, deceit, or intoxication" (FitzRoy [1846] 1969:6). However, outside the missionary community few sympathized with the governor, and the view that he was overly sympathetic to the natives and had brought his troubles on himself came to be generally accepted and to inform the discourse on Darwinism. Thus according to Darwin's granddaughter, Nora Barlow, FitzRoy's New Zealand difficulties were largely attributable to his "missionary zeal and over-confidence in the native [which] led him into direct conflict with the large body of settlers who were suffering from Maori outrages" (Barlow 1932:495).

A striking shift in perspectives on FitzRoy's governorship is reflected in histories of New Zealand. Older works typically portray FitzRoy as arrogant, indecisive, and incompetent, with his unwillingness to deal harshly with Māori invoked as evidence for his ineffectiveness. Even Keith Sinclair, the doyen of

New Zealand historians and in most respects no apologist for the settlers, characterizes FitzRoy as a “fanatical humanitarian,” concluding that his failure to conceal his hostility to the settlers and assumption that in conflicts with the Māori they were “invariably in the wrong,” prevented him from accomplishing his mission, “which was not merely to guard Maori welfare, but to govern both races, and to endeavour to mediate between their demands.” In Sinclair’s view: “To ignore the settlers’ interests was as unrealistic as to disregard the Maoris’ power” (Sinclair 2000:81–82).

Writing in a multicultural age, contemporary historians of New Zealand tend to view FitzRoy’s actions more favorably. Indeed, Moon (2000) dismisses the writings of an earlier generation of historians as influenced by the “odious propaganda” of the New Zealand Company. But there is actually little disagreement on the facts. Rather, contemporary scholars generally admire the same attitudes and acts that were disparaged by their predecessors.

#### TOWARD A MORE NUANCED PORTRAIT

Which of these several images of Robert FitzRoy—if any—accurately captures the man? What can we say with confidence about his character, abilities, motivations, and attitudes? Which claims can we know to be true, which false or misleading, and which are simply unknowable with the available and quite limited evidence? Unlike Darwin, FitzRoy did not keep a diary, write an autobiography, or maintain an extensive correspondence.

About FitzRoy’s courage and skills as a sailor and scientist there is little if any dispute. Although best known for his work in hydrography and weather forecasting, he was also adept at natural history. Harry Thompson, author of a well-researched historical novel about FitzRoy and Darwin, notes that the “*Beagle* Collection” of the British Museum was actually assembled from the specimens that FitzRoy—and not Darwin—collected (Thompson 2005:783). There is also consensus that FitzRoy was moody and quick to both lose and regain his temper; Thompson plausibly suggests that he suffered from manic depression (Thompson 2005:777). FitzRoy was

indisputably a dedicated mentor of those under this command; five *Beagle* officers would reach the rank of Admiral, and others went on to distinguished political and professional careers (Stanbury 1977:16). He also died destitute, having expended all of his inherited wealth on projects intended for public benefit.

We know that FitzRoy became ultraorthodox in his religious views, although this was a post-*Beagle* development, which is generally attributed to the influence of his devout wife, Mary Henrietta O’Brien, whom he married in 1836 (Gribbin and Gribbin 2003). A common view is that “FitzRoy, who had a more conservative character than Darwin, chose him in the hope that Darwin’s observations would uphold the biblical view of creation by God, as described in Genesis” (International Darwin Day Foundation 2013). But historians of science have long known this claim to be false: as Katharine Anderson notes, “Because Darwin and Fitzroy later differed so greatly on religious matters, and on evolutionary theory, the congruity in their religious and scientific attitudes during the voyage is often underplayed” (Anderson 2012:1:xxi). At the time of the *Beagle* voyage, FitzRoy was if anything less conventional in his religious views than Darwin; indeed, before they sailed, FitzRoy made Darwin a gift of the first volume of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, which in contradiction to the view of scriptural geologists, posited that geological changes occurred over a vast period of time. He also held religious services less frequently than most other captains (Stanbury 1977:18).

In respect to missionizing too, misperceptions abound. Although Browne has tried to nudge the idea that FitzRoy and Darwin held opposed views on missionizing “toward voluntary retirement” (Browne 1994:264), it remains active on the Web and in writing intended for a popular audience. FitzRoy certainly admired the work of Christian missionaries, but no less than Darwin; for both, this attitude was grounded in the assumption that all humans were members of the same race and capable of improvement. As Desmond and Moore write, “Darwin saw eye-to-eye with FitzRoy on most things, not least the primitive tribes they met. All belonged to Lyell’s ‘great hu-

man family' and were, as the captain put it, 'of one blood'. . . . His [FitzRoy's] theology would harden, but for the moment FitzRoy's and Darwin's beliefs about humans were practically at one: the nations comprised a single 'human race'" (Desmond and Moore 2009:92). Both were angered when the painter Augustus Earle, who briefly served as the *Beagle's* official artist, published a book castigating the missionaries' work in the Pacific (Earle 1832). Indeed, Darwin's first publication, coauthored with FitzRoy, was a letter in the *South African Christian Recorder* (FitzRoy and Darwin 1836) defending missionary efforts in Tahiti and New Zealand against critics such as Earle and Otto von Kotzebue (Graham 2007). Five years later, the Church Missionary Society urged the Colonial Office to appoint FitzRoy governor of New Zealand.

It is far more difficult to assess the nature and extent of differences in the two men's views on slavery. Superficially, the claim that FitzRoy was a staunch supporter of slavery might seem open and shut; after all, we have Darwin's account of their quarrel over the incident at Bahia. But there are several reasons why that anecdote should be treated with caution.

First, it was written more than 40 years after the event, appearing in a work meant for friends and family. There is apparently no other account of the exchange in the diaries or letters of other *Beagle* crew or in the letters Darwin wrote home at the time, although there are oblique references that provide supporting evidence for *some* kind of disagreement. The incident would not have been mentioned in Darwin's diary, since FitzRoy occasionally read the entries.

Second, it is inconsistent with FitzRoy's actions and his own contemporaneous remarks in the *Narrative*. There he wrote:

The immense extent and increase of the slave population is an evil long foreseen and now severely felt. Humanely as the Brazilians in general treat their slaves, no one can suppose that any benevolence will eradicate feelings excited by the situation of those human beings. . . . Could the Brazilians see clearly their own position, unanimately condemn and prevent the selfish conduct of individu-

als, emancipate the slaves now in their country, and decidedly prevent the introduction of more, Brazil would commence a career of prosperity, and her population would increase in an unlimited degree (Anderson 2012:3:54–55).

But few people read the *Narrative* and, apart from New Zealand historians, even fewer FitzRoy's *Remarks on New Zealand*. In a bibliographical note to his novel, Thompson observes that, "Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Origin of Species* are available in many editions. By contrast, FitzRoy's *Weather Book*, *Remarks on New Zealand* and *Narrative of the Voyage of HMS Beagle* are hard to find outside the Bodleian (the library's copy of the latter volume still had its pages uncut — nobody had bothered to read it in 165 years)" (Thompson 2005:786). Anyone who had read the *Narrative* or the *Remarks*—or was aware that FitzRoy petitioned the Admiralty to buy the schooner *Adventure* in order to pursue slavers—would confront inconsistencies that might be explained away but certainly at least require acknowledgment (as in Desmond and Moore 2009:85–86).

Third, FitzRoy's purported pro-slavery attitudes need to be squared with his support for Māori rights, especially since, as Sinclair noted, in New Zealand "the movement for the protection of aborigines [was the] direct heir of anti-slavery" (Sinclair 1957:224). FitzRoy *might* have been simultaneously pro-slavery and pro-Māori, or his views may have evolved over time. After all, Edward John Eyre (1815–1901) was viewed as a protector of the Australian aborigines before he became infamous as the "Butcher of Jamaica" (Evans 2005:9). But there has been little if any effort to show how FitzRoy's conflicts with the settlers in New Zealand can be made congruent with a pro-slavery stance in Brazil. Instead, his struggles as governor and ultimate recall are attributed to personality flaws or explicit or implied ineptness as in a biologist's recent dismissive comment that FitzRoy served "disastrously as the second Governor of New Zealand—during his term, the colony almost became bankrupt and a new war broke out" (Pallen 2011). Thus, when not simply ignored, FitzRoy's governorship is characterized in ways that reinforce the prevailing

narrative. The result has been two parallel histories—of Darwinism and New Zealand—that never intersect.

David Stanbury, who edited the *Narrative*, intended to write a biography of FitzRoy and, to that end, consulted numerous collections of papers, including some in private hands. Tragically, he died before completing the planned book. Three years before his death, one of the current authors inquired as to his views on the slavery issue. His generous response ran to three dense handwritten pages. Stanbury's is perhaps the most informed and measured conclusion:

I think FR was critical of slavery,—but he also believed that “native people” could be “civilized,” “helped,” “improved,” “recognised,” even “saved!” . . . and that a good slave owner could achieve some of the objectives of a missionary society or a benevolent government. . . . FR was indeed pro “natives” and “anti” their exploitation and his record in that respect was almost second to none in his own generation. It was just that he thought that a “good” slave owner benefited the natives he owned. He had after all captured and taken into benign “slavery” his Fuegian hostages, taken them from their home and families for nearly 2 years, indeed kept them chained in irons and imprisoned to begin with—but then decided that he could do

something for them (and for shipwrecked sailors) and also ease his conscience. . . . Darwin did not put down his “slavery” dispute with FR until 1876,—years later, and like so much of the “Autobiography” it is a story which had improved with the telling and whose details often do not fit more contemporary accounts (David Stanbury to Hamish G. Spencer, 10 January 1994).

It is time to stop taking Darwin's account at face value. Scientists, science writers, and others who repeat his famous anecdote should at least acknowledge the existence of contradictory evidence and the possibility that Darwin exaggerated or misremembered details of what was surely some kind of quarrel concerning slavery. A more nuanced account of FitzRoy and slavery would be less dramatic and less easily deployed to score points, but it would surely be more thought-provoking as well as respectful of the facts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We dedicate this article to the memory of David Stanbury (1933–1997), who so generously shared his preparatory work for his unpublished biography of FitzRoy. We are grateful to Emma Gattey for her research assistance and insights, and to the Allan Wilson Centre for Molecular Ecology and Evolution for its financial support.

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Handling Editor: Michael Ruse