



Darwin's
IDRAGONS
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WWW.CHICKENHOUSEBOOKS.COM

Text © Lindsay Galvin 2020
Cover and interior illustration © Gordy Wright 2020

First published in Great Britain in 2020
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2


British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-912626-46-5
eISBN 978-1-913322-15-1

For Bill, with love.

Also by Lindsay Galvin

The Secret Deep

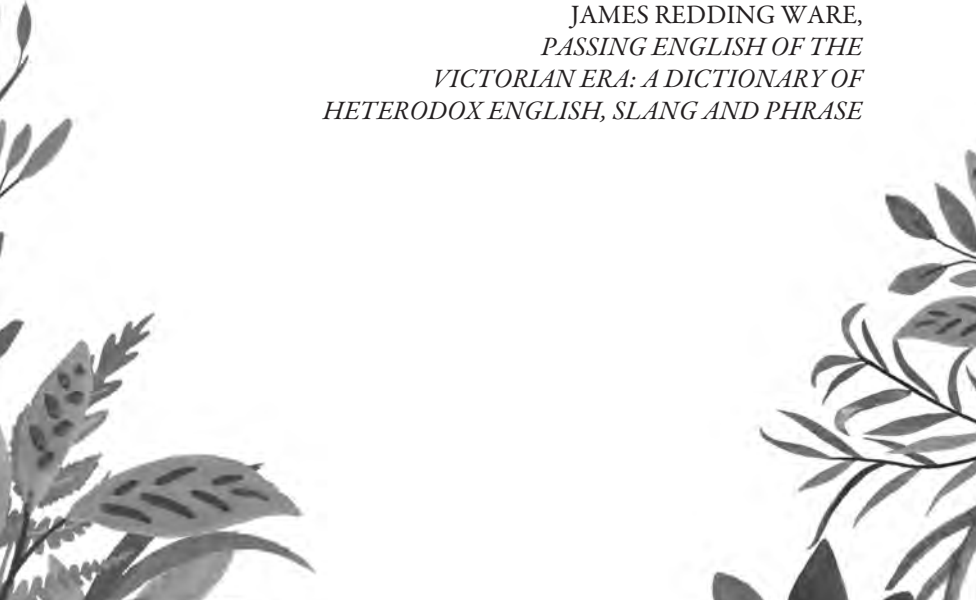


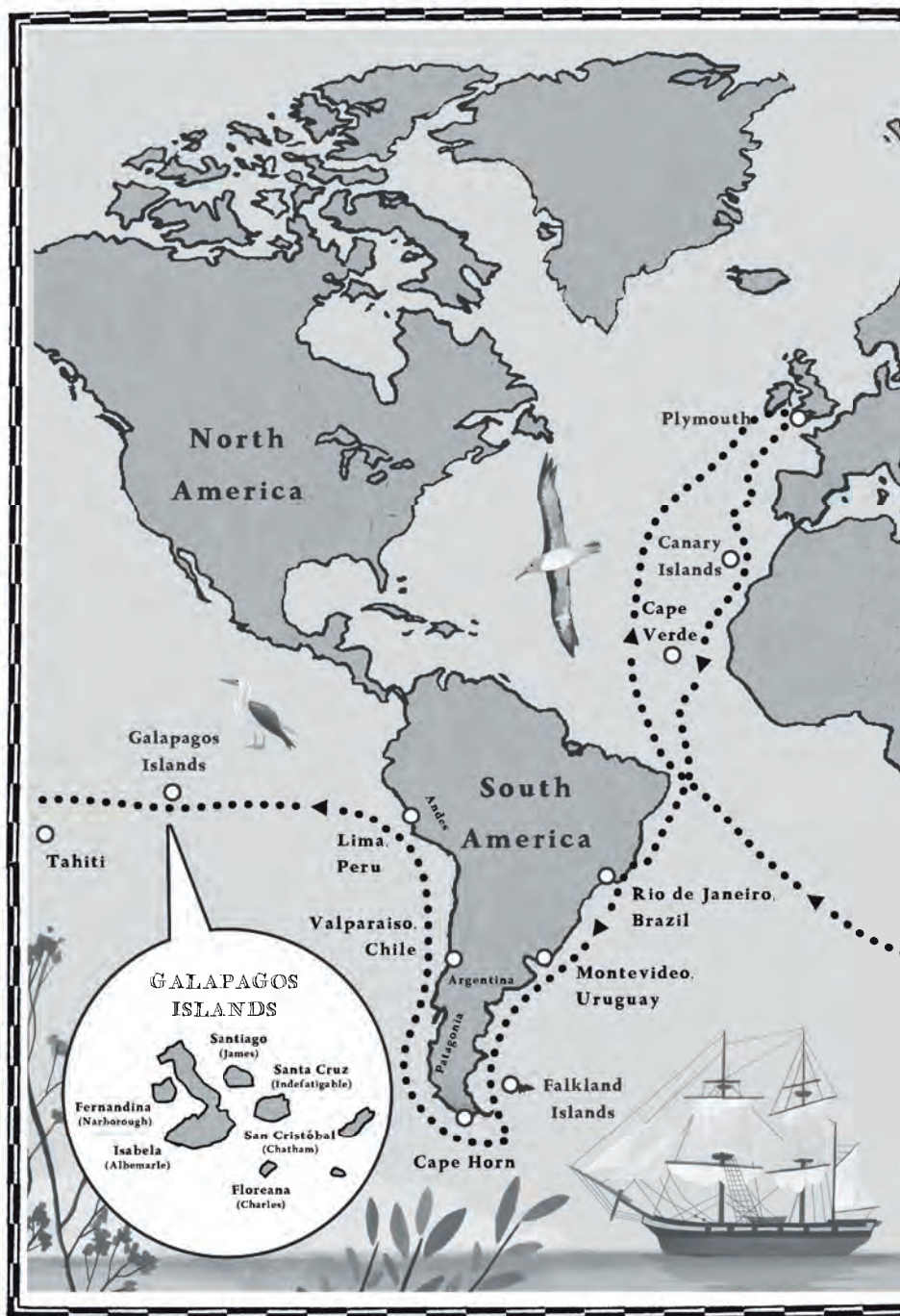
*The natural history of these islands is eminently
curious, and well deserves attention.*

CHARLES DARWIN,
THE VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE

Bricky
*brave, fearless, adroit – after the manner
of a brick: ‘What a bricky girl she is.’
(See ‘Plucky’, ‘Cheeky’.)*

JAMES REDDING WARE,
*PASSING ENGLISH OF THE
VICTORIAN ERA: A DICTIONARY OF
HETERODOX ENGLISH, SLANG AND PHRASE*





North
America

Plymouth

Canary
Islands

Cape
Verde

Galapagos
Islands

South
America

Tahiti

Lima,
Peru

Valparaiso,
Chile

Rio de Janeiro,
Brazil

Montevideo,
Uruguay

GALAPAGOS
ISLANDS

Santiago
(James)

Santa Cruz
(Indefatigable)

Fernandina
(Narborough)

Isabela
(Albemarle)

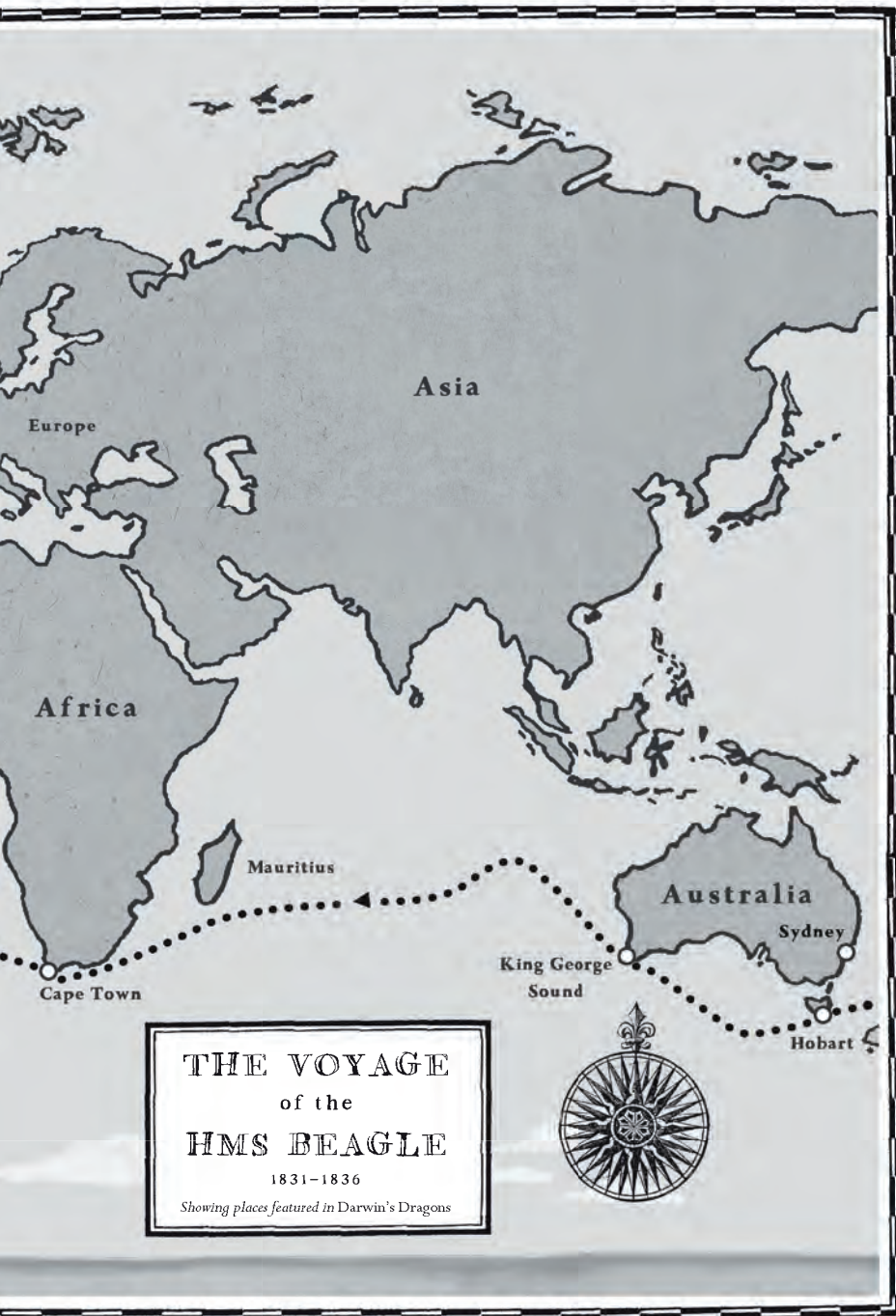
San Cristóbal
(Chatham)

Floreana
(Charles)

Falkland
Islands

Cape Horn





THE VOYAGE
of the
HMS BEAGLE

1831-1836

Showing places featured in Darwin's Dragons

A NOTE ABOUT THIS STORY

On 27th December 1831 Charles Darwin set off on his legendary voyage aboard HMS *Beagle*. After five years, he returned to England with new and revolutionary ideas about the wonderful creatures he had studied. These ideas formed the basis of one of the most famous scientific books ever written, *On the Origin of Species*.

A cabin boy and fiddler called Syms Covington became Mr Darwin's assistant during the voyage. This is a story of what *could* have happened during their exploration of the Galapagos Islands, and might explain why the earliest explorers named this place the Enchanted Isles . . .

A decorative border of stylized leaves and branches in a dark grey color frames the page. The branches are thin and leafy, with some leaves being simple ovals and others more elongated and pointed. The border is positioned around the edges of the page, leaving a white central area for the text.

PART ONE

*Narborough Island presents a more rough and horrid
aspect than any other; the lavas are generally
as naked as when they poured forth.*

CHARLES DARWIN, *THE VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE*,
30TH SEPTEMBER 1835



CHAPTER ONE

September 1835
Albemarle Island, Galapagos

Mr Darwin crouched in front of a giant tortoise, notebook in hand. His home-made magnifying eyeglass, which the sailors of the *Beagle* all made fun of, gave him the look of a studious buccaneer.

‘See how the shell is completely domed, Covington,’ he said. ‘It means they can’t raise their necks at all.’

‘Reckon they don’t need to, sir,’ I said, watching the tortoises chewing. ‘There’s a lot of grass growing here, so they’re always looking down at the ground anyhow.’

Mr Darwin's eyebrows shot up and he grinned. 'An interesting observation. Could the shell design force this behaviour, or could it be the other way around?'

I didn't know the answer to that but felt my cheeks warm in the glow of his approval. When our voyage began four years ago, I was Ship's Fiddler and Cabin Boy, but for the last two and a half years I'd been assisting Mr Darwin, making use of my letters, like my da would have wanted. I liked to think I'd picked up some of his way of thinking too.

'I wonder if it would be difficult to ride on such a shell,' I said idly, then kicked myself. That wasn't the kind of thing Mr Darwin wanted to hear from his assistant!

'Well ready yourself then,' said Mr Darwin, and to my surprise he clambered aboard one of the giant tortoises, perching on top of its shell. 'What are you waiting for?'

The ancient animal stretched out its long crusty neck and hissed at the unexpected weight, then took a ponderous step. Mr Darwin just managed to catch his balance. His laugh rang out, much clearer and louder than his voice, and he slapped his thigh.

This was more like it. The master might be awful clever and mostly serious but he was only a young man himself, and I loved those rare moments he was game for a lark. We'd been measuring tortoise shells all day and a

break was more than welcome.

I eyed up the tortoises and chose a smaller one that seemed to be fast asleep, its head tucked into its wrinkled neck like an acorn in its cap. I scrambled on to its back. It wasn't as easy as Mr Darwin made it look. My master was tall and sometimes stooped. He had a way of swinging his arms when he walked, but wasn't nearly as clumsy as he looked. My knees slipped on the mottled shell, but I finally managed to settle my behind in the centre. When the tortoise started to move, I felt as though I was back on the *Beagle* sailing around the stormy waters of the Cape Horn.

Mr Darwin's tortoise was heading across the lava field but mine stopped and dipped to munch some grass, nearly tipping me off.

'You've chosen a donkey, Covington, but mine is a noble steed!' called Mr Darwin.

I laughed out loud as he waved his hat in the air. If only Da could see me now.

A shadow darted over me and I looked up. Two magnificent frigate birds swooped on the air currents, massive black wings almost as sharply pointed as their beaks and tails. Their red throats flashed.

Mr Darwin stared upwards too. 'Looks like some weather coming in, Covington ...'

I could see it too. The sky was suddenly the colour of

a bruise and the air smelt of copper pennies.

The young sir hopped down from the tortoise. ‘Did you pack the specimens well?’ His voice was serious once more.

‘I did, sir,’ I replied, and slithered down myself. My tortoise had tucked its head back in. I pulled up some grass which it took from my offered hand with a beaky, toothless mouth. I liked the tortoises, there seemed to be a lot of thinking going on behind those old black eyes.

‘Make haste then, boy. Let’s get them back to the barrels,’ said Mr Darwin.

The casks of wine would preserve the specimens we’d collected until we landed at a port where they would be sent all the way back to Mr Darwin’s colleagues in Cambridge.

A fat spot of rain hit my arm and a gust of wind nearly separated me from my hat. The weather changed rapidly in this part of the world – we always had to be ready for it, and Mr Darwin’s blue-grey eyes looked dark beneath his frown. I shouldered our knapsacks and stowed the logbook in my satchel. Mr Darwin’s eyeglass had been discarded on a boulder, and I slipped it inside my fiddle case, then thumbed some wax around the seals to keep out the water. I’d brought my fiddle as an experiment to see the effect of music on wildlife, but there’d been no time to play in the end. Mr Darwin wasn’t partial to

the old instrument, he called it Scratch and the name stuck.

The spatters of warm rain turned into a downpour, and we hurried across the black lava plain towards the shore where the rowboat waited.

‘Watch your step here, Syms,’ said Mr Darwin, and I nodded. Beneath the lava plain were tunnels, which had once been underground rivers of molten lava, and there were dangerous holes near the surface.

Mr Darwin said these islands looked like the infernal regions – which to the likes of you and me, means hell. The five volcanoes of Albemarle lined up behind us, and ahead, purple-grey clouds the shape of cauliflowers had piled behind the silhouette of the *Beagle*, which was anchored out at sea.

One of the sailors, Robbins, met us at the shore in a bit of a lather, which wasn’t like him at all. ‘You’ve seen the storm then, sir?’

Mr Darwin nodded. ‘Let’s get back to the ship. All haste.’

Robbins took Mr Darwin’s equipment and made giant strides through the bright green seaweed that covered the black rocks. We tramped straight in to the sea, wading out to the rowboat which was held steady in the surf by the other seaman, Tanner. I helped my master in first, then scrambled in myself. It had been minutes

since our tortoise ride, but the *Beagle* was now near invisible through the rain, and the sea was dark and spiked. Robbins pushed off from the shore and waded through the surf, then leapt in behind us.

‘Hold tight, lad. Mr Darwin.’

The two men began to row, muscles cording at their necks, as the swell of the sea rose and rain pelted us like stones thrown by a furious beast.