

# Maritime sea changes

Janet Browne

**HMS *Beagle*: The Story of Darwin's Ship.** By Keith Stewart Thomson. Norton: 1995. Pp. 320. \$25, £18.95. To be published in the United Kingdom on 18 October.

ONLY a few ships in the history of science are famous enough for a full-scale biographical treatment in their own right. The *Astrolabe*, the *Challenger* and the *Endeavour* spring to mind; perhaps the *Roosevelt* or the *Trieste* or even the *Kon-Tiki*; and of course the *Beagle*, the ship that took Charles Darwin round the world from 1831 to 1836, providing him with experiences that ultimately intermeshed in his theory of evolution by natural selection.

If it were not for Darwin — and Darwin's later impact on the world of science — it is doubtful whether the *Beagle* would merit a book-length study. Yet the story of its life, both with and without Darwin, is utterly riveting. From the ship's birth (as a ten-gun brig at Woolwich naval dockyard) to death (sold as a hulk for scrap on the mudflats of the Thames), and with three extraordinary voyages in between, the tale reflects all the drama of overseas expansion in the nineteenth century at the height of Britain's imperial power. Keith Thomson's account could almost serve as a case study in the history of the British Navy during Queen Victoria's reign — a case study in the actual processes of exploration, with all the dangers of navigating uncharted waters, the careful surveys, the difficulties of finding supplies, the shipboard tensions, the routine plodding backwards and forwards from port to port, the accidents, the stupidities and the sheer sea-going skill involved. As Thomson rightly suggests, Darwin's footsteps on board comprised only a small part of this narrative. Such an altered perspective makes for an intriguingly refocused story in which the ship, and its company at large, take centre stage.

The *Beagle* began as an ordinary working vessel, no different from a hundred others in its class, built with an eye for adaptations to various purposes. Thomson provides a good deal of authoritative new information from the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich and elsewhere about the *Beagle's* structure and its subsequent changes. Here his account supersedes all previous attempts to categorize the ship's technical history and will surely become standard.

But the ship was hardly used in its original form and was soon re-rigged as a barque (three masts instead of two) in order to become a survey ship. Its first assignment was to accompany the *Adventure*, commanded by Philip Parker King, in reconnoitring the eastern seaboard of

South America and establishing a British presence in the area before French or American forces. During this expedition the *Beagle* was sent south to survey Tierra del Fuego, at which point Captain Pringle Stokes was defeated by the gales, the poor handling of the ship, and scurvy among the crew. Stokes committed suicide; and the first lieutenant had to take the *Beagle* back to Rio de Janeiro on his own where Robert FitzRoy was quickly

consequence of FitzRoy's researches.

The ship's third and final voyage around Australia in 1837–43 has often been neglected but actually mirrors the last phase in the transition of the Victorian Navy from heroic, individual voyages of discovery to supplying the infrastructure of colonial life. Under John Clements Wickham, a veteran of the two previous voyages, and accompanied by many other officers and crewmen from the earlier voyages, the *Beagle* explored the north and northwest coasts of Australia in search of a safe shipping route between Sydney and the Indian Ocean. The men identified inland waterways, visited Port Essington (then just a few huts and a harbour), named Port Darwin and the River FitzRoy after their former shipmates, and delivered and

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The *Beagle* laid ashore for repairs in an estuary a few degrees north of the Strait of Magellan. appointed to fill the vacancy. Back in Tierra del Fuego within the month, FitzRoy and his crew finished the survey, and found (and named) the Beagle Channel, a clear passage through the islands south of the Strait of Magellan.

When the voyage finished in 1830, King retired to farm in Australia and FitzRoy managed to persuade the Lords of the Admiralty that the South American survey still needed perfecting. Luckily, his requests coincided with the Hydrographer's wish to send a scientifically equipped surveying expedition round the world; and the *Beagle* was recommissioned and refitted for that purpose with all the most up-to-date instruments (including a lightning conductor), and FitzRoy was appointed as captain for a second journey south. This was the voyage that Darwin joined as a gentleman companion to the temperamental captain. Thomson describes such a well-worked episode in the *Beagle's* career with commendable brevity and freshness; his interests range over the whole crew, not just Darwin and FitzRoy. He emphasizes the scientific results of the circumnavigation, many of them the

then rescued the future governor Sir George Grey not just once but twice from his almost fatal inland explorations.

After this, the *Beagle* was retired. American clippers dominated the oceans and the British context overseas was changing to settlement and commercial development. Thomson therefore escorts his ship, somewhat sadly, to a muddy berth in an Essex estuary for coastguard duty and thence to the firm of Murray and Trainer, scrap-dealers. This book is its only physical memorial; and Thomson is a fine memorialist. □

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■ The 'Darwin industry' continues apace with the appearance of two new books, one for specialists and one for general readers. James Moore's *The Darwin Legend* (Hodder and Stoughton, £6.99 (pbk)) is a fascinating piece of detective work that demolishes the myth of Darwin's deathbed conversion; and Michael White and John Gribbin's *Darwin: A Life in Science* (Simon and Schuster, £17.99) is a simplified yet readable biography.