

## **HMS *Beagle* 1831–36 and Charles Darwin. The role of Phillip Parker King and his colleague the hydrographer Francis Beaufort**

Brian Abbott

The traditional view has been that Captain FitzRoy, as the commander of HMS *Beagle* on her famous second voyage (1831–36), initiated and was instrumental in securing a gentleman companion who would be a ‘well-educated and scientific person’ to sail as an invited guest.<sup>1</sup> On this view, it was Captain FitzRoy who could claim the accolades for Darwin’s embarkation on the *Beagle*. The significance has been compounded with the steadily increasing interest in Charles Darwin, his work and the famous voyage in the *Beagle*, which in Darwin’s words was ‘by far the most important event of my life and has determined the whole of my career’.<sup>2</sup>

This article proposes that, whilst Captain FitzRoy was involved in the process, other persons played the pivotal role in Charles Darwin embarking on that famous voyage. Captain FitzRoy may or may not have initiated the search for a suitable scientific gentleman, but in all probability did not. FitzRoy, as the master and commander of the *Beagle*, would have been required to make an offer to, and give his approval of Darwin as a suitable candidate, but it will be argued that he was not instrumental in Charles Darwin being identified as a possible candidate, and did not influence his acceptance or give any of the necessary assurances enabling acceptance of the invitation. Sir Francis Beaufort and Captain Phillip Parker King were the persons critically involved in the events that led to Darwin’s acceptance.

Charles Darwin’s monumental achievements can be summed up in a letter that he wrote to Asa Gray on 20 July 1857 when he said that:

As an honest man I must tell you that I have come to the heterodox conclusion that there is no such things as independently created species – that species are only strongly defined varieties. I know that this will make you despise me – I do not much underrate the many huge difficulties on this view, but yet it seems to me to explain too much, otherwise inexplicable, to be false.<sup>3</sup>

It is now appreciated how significant (and demonstrably correct) that opinion was in 1859 given the entrenched concept of the ordained biblical order of the creation and immutability of the species. His view was encapsulated in the famous publication in 1859 of *On The Origin of Species* and Darwin’s fame exploded.

Although the voyage was a defining event in Darwin’s life, and from which emerged his scientific bequest to the modern world, he played down the circumstances that led to his appointment as the naturalist on the *Beagle*. In his Autobiography, Darwin concluded that his appointment ‘Depended on so small a circumstance as my uncle offering to drive me 30 miles to Shrewsbury, which few uncles would have done, and on such a trifle as the shape of my nose’.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P.P. King, R. FitzRoy and C. Darwin, *Narrative of the surveying voyages of His Majesty’s Ships Adventure and Beagle between the years 1826 and 1836, describing their examination of the southern shores of South America, and the Beagle’s circumnavigation of the globe*, 3 vols, London, 1839; vol. 2, p. 18 (conveniently referred to as the ‘Magellan Narrative’).

<sup>2</sup> Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882*, London, 1958, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Darwin Correspondence Project: [www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-1554A](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-1554A)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

He expanded upon the events in his Autobiography in the following manner:

On returning home from my short geological tour in North Wales, I found a letter from Henslow, informing me that Captain Fitz-Roy was willing to give up part of his own cabin to any young man who would volunteer to go with him without pay as naturalist to the Voyage of the 'Beagle'. I have given, as I believe, in my MS. Journal an account of all the circumstances which then occurred; I will here only say that I was instantly eager to accept the offer, but my father strongly objected, adding the words, fortunate for me, 'If you can find any man of common sense who advises you to go I will give my consent.' So I wrote that evening and refused the offer. On the next morning I went to Maer to be ready for September 1st, and, whilst out shooting, my uncle (Josiah Wedgwood.) sent for me, offering to drive me over to Shrewsbury and talk with my father, as my uncle thought it would be wise in me to accept the offer. My father always maintained that he was one of the most sensible men in the world, and he at once consented in the kindest manner. I had been rather extravagant at Cambridge, and to console my father, said, 'that I should be deuced clever to spend more than my allowance whilst on board the 'Beagle';' but he answered with a smile, 'But they tell me you are very clever'.

Darwin was clearly being casual and light-hearted in his customarily charming manner, but his correspondence alone shows that there was in fact much more to the events leading to his appointment. His references in his Autobiography were to the fact that it was his uncle's influence (and future father-in-law) which changed his father's mind against Darwin accepting the invitation, and Captain FitzRoy's peculiar interest in phrenology which he used to characterize individuals, and by which Darwin meant that FitzRoy had approved of Darwin after their first cursory meeting (although whether based on the shape of his nose is problematic).

The traditional view has been that Captain FitzRoy, an aristocrat whose family were illegitimate descendants of Charles II, was searching for a suitable gentleman companion to keep him company on the long voyage. FitzRoy's letters and papers appear to have been lost,<sup>5</sup> but in his account of the voyage, FitzRoy described the early events in the following manner:

Anxious that no opportunity of collecting useful information, during the voyage, should be lost; I proposed to the Hydrographer that some well-educated and scientific person should be sought for who would willingly share such accommodations as I had to offer, in order to profit by the opportunity of visiting distant countries yet little known. Captain Beaufort approved of the suggestion, and wrote to Professor Peacock of Cambridge, who consulted with a friend, Professor Henslow, and he named Mr Charles Darwin... a young man of promising ability, extremely fond of geology, and indeed all branches of natural history. In consequence an offer was made to Mr. Darwin to be my guest on board.<sup>6</sup>

The thought had crossed FitzRoy's mind previously; he had written in his Journal on 24 January 1830 when he was off the Fury and Magill Islands in Tierra del Fuego during the first expedition (1826–30), that 'if I ever left England again on a similar expedition' then I would

---

<sup>5</sup> It appears that there is no collection of FitzRoy's papers extant, although there is a large collection of documents and letters at The National Records (TNR), Kew, England, concerning FitzRoy's role at the Meteorological Office from about 1855, and some papers in New Zealand concerning his time as governor 1843-1845. FitzRoy's Journals and his preparation of volumes 1 and 2 of the Magellan Narrative appear to be the principal primary sources for the voyage of *Beagle* 1831-6 (often referred to as *Beagle II*). However, various important items emerge from time to time in random places, including correspondence received by recipients. His personal and signed copy of the three volumes (in four parts) of the Magellan Narrative (King, FitzRoy and Darwin), published in 1839, was offered for sale by a Melbourne bookseller in 2017 for A\$225,000. If his copy of the Magellan Narrative has emerged, one wonders where his letters and papers for that period may be.

<sup>6</sup> *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of HMS Adventure and Beagle*, vol. 2, p. 18.

have ‘a person qualified to examine the land’.<sup>7</sup> The qualification of the person whom FitzRoy had in mind on that occasion probably was a geologist or mineralogist, but at that time the broad field of enquiry was covered by a ‘naturalist’.<sup>8</sup>

Charles Darwin made it his business to get on with Captain FitzRoy during the voyage, but he frequently found that he had to endure the Captain’s bad temper and rage. Darwin later wrote that FitzRoy’s ‘character was in several respects one of the most noble which I have known, though tarnished by grave blemishes.’

Furthermore, it is indisputable how Darwin felt about the voyage; in a letter to FitzRoy in 1840 he wrote:

However others may look back to the *Beagle*’s voyage, now that the small disagreeable parts are well nigh forgotten, I think it far the most fortunate circumstance of my life that the chance afforded by your offer of taking a naturalist fell on me – I often have the most vivid and delightful pictures of what I saw on board pass before my eyes – These recollections of what I learnt in Natural History I would not exchange for twice ten thousand a year.<sup>9</sup>

Darwin’s great appreciation of the voyage is clear. In referring to ‘the chance afforded by *your offer of taking a naturalist* fell on me’, Darwin was clearly acknowledging that the offer came from Captain FitzRoy. This was as it should be as FitzRoy, being the master and commander of the vessel, fulfilled the formal role of making an offer but that is not to say that he was instrumental in Darwin accepting it. Furthermore, as the voluminous collections of Royal Navy Captains’ Letters at that time demonstrate, naval commanders always sought approval for just about everything on their vessels and in particular matters related to personnel or provisioning, Captain FitzRoy could not have initiated a search or made an offer for a naturalist without seeking approval from his superiors.

The pre-occupation with FitzRoy’s role seems in many ways to fit with FitzRoy’s contradictory personality and his view of himself as an aristocrat in nineteenth century England. There are numerous examples of FitzRoy’s inherent view of his superiority including the fact that FitzRoy informed Captain King about the Fuegian hostages detained on the *Beagle* in the first expedition 1826–30 *after* the expedition<sup>10</sup> had left Rio de Janeiro on its return to England in 1830, that FitzRoy claimed that the ordering of the return voyage of the *Beagle* to South America by the Admiralty was a result of his approach to an uncle (or in other words, that it was a purely family affair),<sup>11</sup> that it was as a result of the conversations between FitzRoy and Darwin that the latter accepted the offer, that offers had not been considered by others (as they were at least by Professor Henslow, and Henslow’s brother-in-law Leonard Jenyns) and that the subsequent publication of the first two volumes of the Magellan Narrative was finalized by and promoted in the name of Robert FitzRoy (thereby ignoring Captain King in relation to volume one).<sup>12</sup> Whether intentionally or not, FitzRoy ignored or played down the significant role of the hydrographer Sir Francis Beaufort, and the commander of the previous expedition Captain Phillip Parker King.

<sup>7</sup> Robert FitzRoy, Daily Journal, 24 January 1830, Darwin-Online: darwinproject.ac.uk. Also ‘Magellan Narrative’, vol. 1, p. 385.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Darwin, as a naturalist or a botanist, spent considerable time on the *Beagle* voyage examining rock types and formations.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Charles Darwin to Robert FitzRoy, 20 February 1840. Darwin-Online.

<sup>10</sup> The first expedition, 1826–30, frequently (but misleadingly) often referred to as *Beagle* 1. HMS *Beagle* was actually a supernumerary vessel to King’s vessel HMS *Adventure* and under his command. In relation to HMS *Beagle* however the voyages are distinguished by the nomenclature *Beagle* 1 (1826–30), *Beagle* 2 (1831–6) and *Beagle* 3 (1838–40).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Magellan Narrative’, vol. 2, pp. 13–14.

<sup>12</sup> The first edition copies of volumes 1 and 2 of the Magellan Narrative published in 1839 were both known as, and blocked on the spine as ‘FitzRoy’.

There was tension between FitzRoy and Darwin throughout the voyage, but many myths have developed since that time. One is that Captain FitzRoy wanted a naturalist who could prove the literal biblical story of the creation. Another is that Darwin was an atheist. And another is that Darwin's theory of evolution was contrary to a Christian view of the world. These are all misguided. FitzRoy, after his marriage upon his return to England in 1836, became a devout Christian fundamentalist. The development and final publication of Darwin's thesis challenged his strict biblical view of the creation and the immutability of species and FitzRoy vigorously took up the challenge to Darwin. The irony is that, during the voyage, Captain FitzRoy doubted the biblical explanation of events whilst Darwin embraced them. FitzRoy's subsequent bellicose opposition to Darwin, his former 'Philos', came to a head in the famous Oxford debate between Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce in 1865 when FitzRoy stood up (allegedly with a Bible in his hand) and denounced his former shipmate's theory. It is therefore consistent with his personality and his newly found religious fervor that FitzRoy would attempt to show that Darwin was on the *Beagle*, not by the Grace of God, but by the grace of Captain FitzRoy.

So who were pivotal in Darwin sailing on the *Beagle*? Apart from those in academia who were interested to appoint a suitable person in order to advance the natural sciences, there were at least four naval personnel (other than Captain FitzRoy) who could have been involved, namely the hydrographer Captain (later Sir) Francis Beaufort, the commander of the 1825–30 expedition Captain Phillip Parker King, the secretary to the Navy Board John Barrow and the under-secretary John William Croker. It will be argued that it was the first two who played the crucial role.

FitzRoy may have *proposed* that a 'well-educated and scientific person' accompany him on the forthcoming voyage. However it was normal practice to appoint a 'naturalist' on this type of voyage. Secondly, FitzRoy would have either made the suggestion and sought approval from his superiors, or the suggestion was made to him. In all probability, it was the latter.

It is worth remembering that in nearly all, if not all the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century voyages of discovery had a naturalist on board, including those of Dampier, Steller, Philibert Commerson, Admiral Lord Anson, Captain James Cook (Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander on Cook's first voyage, Johann Reinhold Forster on Cook's second voyage 1772–5 and the naturalist surgeon Anderson on the third voyage of the *Resolution* following Cook's death), William Bligh, Matthew Flinders and the Frenchmen La Pérouse, d'Entrecasteaux, Nicholas Baudin and Peron.<sup>13</sup>

The tradition continued under Captain King. In King's case, he always had a naturalist on board during his voyages around Australia, the most notable of whom was Allan Cunningham. King also took a naturalist on the first expedition to the Magellan Straits, namely 'J. Anderson Botanist', and he was ordered by the Admiralty 'to avail yourself of every opportunity of collecting and preserving Specimens of such objects of Natural History as may be new, rare, or interesting'.<sup>14</sup> Captain King put together a large collection during his voyage which, upon his return, was handed over to the Admiralty. Captain FitzRoy was certainly aware of the importance of such a person. As referred to above, FitzRoy contemplated on 24 January 1830, when the *Beagle* was in South American waters during King's first expedition, the prospect of securing a scientific person on a future voyage, presumably because on the expedition the *Beagle* (being a supernumerary vessel) did not have one.

We therefore face the basic question that is addressed in this article, namely who initiated the search for a naturalist and who was responsible for Darwin's acceptance of an offer to sail on the *Beagle*? Who initiated the approach to Professor Peacock in the first place? It is more

<sup>13</sup> See Glyn Williams, *Naturalists at Sea / Scientific Travellers from Dampier to Darwin*, New Haven, CT, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> 'Magellan Narrative', vol. 1, p. xvii.

than likely that Professor Peacock's enquiry emanated directly from the hydrographer Francis Beaufort, and not Captain FitzRoy. Captain FitzRoy, as the master and commander, would have had the privilege of making an offer, but any such offer would be subject to the approval of his superiors. It is more than likely that the initial approach was not instigated by Captain FitzRoy. However, if a doubt remains about who instigated the enquiry, it is clear that it was not Captain FitzRoy who persuaded Darwin to sail but Captain Beaufort and Captain King. It is clear that Charles Darwin was not convinced that he should go after his initial meeting with Captain FitzRoy. As will be seen, it was only after Charles Darwin met Francis Beaufort and Captain King, including a dinner with Captain King (on or about 9 September 1831) when Captain FitzRoy was not present, that Darwin elected to accept the offer.

So, what transpired?

The commissioning of the *Beagle* for a return voyage to South American waters in 1831 commenced with the earlier orders given to Phillip Parker King in 1826. He was the third (and only legitimate) son of Philip Gidley King who, at the time of his son's birth on 13 December 1791, was the lieutenant governor of Norfolk Island. P. P. King 'went to sea' with the Royal Navy in 1807, saw action and was commended during the Napoleonic War and received his commission as a lieutenant on 28 February 1814. As a result of the close familial connections with Sir Joseph Banks and Matthew Flinders and a crucial introduction to Banks, the hydrographer Captain Hurd and Rear-Admiral Bligh on 24 November 1811, King received an appointment on 8 February 1817 to complete Flinder's exploration and survey of the Australian coast. This task was completed by King on 25 April 1822 after five arduous voyages, following which he returned to England well respected by his peers with a wealth of experience as a naval commander and surveyor, and some notoriety. He spent two years at the Admiralty producing 26 charts of his Australian work. In 1824, he was elected to the Royal Society and the Linnean Society, and was a valuable member of various associations including the Royal Geographical Society and the Zoological Society.

In 1825, the Admiralty directed that King (then 34 years of age) have overall command of an expedition to the southern waters of South America and the Magellan Straits, including HMS *Adventure* and HMS *Beagle*. His Orders were received on 16 May 1826, and the expedition sailed from Plymouth on 22 May 1826. The expedition (initially involving the *Adventure* and the *Beagle*, but subsequently with the *Adelaide* and the *Hope*, and various supernumerary craft) was engaged for more than four years in exploring and surveying the hitherto relatively unknown labyrinthine coastlines, waterways, sounds, bays and passages of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego including the Magellan Straits and around the treacherous Cape Horn. The maritime and climatic conditions were horrendous. The pressure on the men was enormous, and to such an extent, that the then commander of the *Beagle*, Captain Pringle Stokes, committed suicide on 1 August 1828 at Port Famine (present day Puerto del Hambre) suffering from 'the mariner's curse' after enduring a long and hazardous voyage through the Magellan Strait to the Pacific Ocean. King returned to Rio de Janeiro, the South American Station (the area port of command), with a firm plan that Lieutenant Skyring, who had ably discharged both his surveying responsibilities and who had taken control of the *Beagle* during the illness of his commander, should succeed to her command. However, the senior station commander Admiral Sir Robert Otway had other plans and he promoted a flag lieutenant officer, Robert FitzRoy, to the command of the *Beagle* (but under the overall command of Captain King), hence setting off a series of events that would have monumental consequences.

The expedition resumed its work in the southern waters of South America. Although King expressed his disappointment at the unfairness of the situation concerning Skyring, he outwardly supported FitzRoy and would later say that FitzRoy's appointment was as a result of his abilities (and by implication not his aristocratic birth). However, although King maintained his own counsel, it soon became clear that FitzRoy had an arrogant and

independent manner, a quick and irrational temper and was a difficult subordinate to control. After rendezvousing at Valparaiso, King directed FitzRoy to return to Montevideo conducting surveying operations along the southern coastline of Tierra del Fuego and around Cape Horn, whilst King returned through the Magellan Straits. A series of events then occurred which were to have long term consequences: During FitzRoy's survey work, local Fuegians misappropriated a valuable whaleboat which FitzRoy attempted to recover but in desperation took some Fuegians hostage. It became clear that the whaleboat would not be recovered. FitzRoy displayed the independence of spirit (or even arrogance) that formed part of his complex character, and determined to take four of the hostages back to England. He subsequently justified that decision for various reasons, including a desire to teach the hostages the English language and thereby render future communications more effective.

In fairness, FitzRoy always made it clear that he would return the hostages to their native land at his own expense if the Admiralty was not prepared to commission another voyage. The vessels were re-united at Rio de Janeiro, and the expedition sailed for England on 6 August 1830 without any indication from FitzRoy to his commanding officer Captain King of the presence of the hostages on the *Beagle*. King was presented with a *fait accompli* after the vessels had left Rio de Janeiro when FitzRoy wrote to King from the 'Beagle, at sea, Sept. 12, 1830' to advise him of the fact that he had four Fuegian hostages on board and to acquaint King with the circumstances of their detention.<sup>15</sup> One can only wonder how King must have felt - he did not commit his thoughts to paper. The expedition reached Plymouth on 14 October 1830, and on 19 October 1830 John Barrow from the Admiralty confirmed that the Admiralty would 'not interfere with Commander FitzRoy's personal superintendence of, or benevolent intentions towards these four people, but they will afford him any facilities towards maintaining and educating them in England, and will give them a passage home again.'<sup>16</sup>

FitzRoy's official duties on the *Beagle* ceased in March 1831 when (in FitzRoy's words) Captain King wrote to 'the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty expressive of his approbation of the part I had taken, under his direction, and recommending me to their Lordships'.<sup>17</sup> It seems that FitzRoy had hope, based on conversations with Captain King, that his survey work in the *Beagle* would continue.<sup>18</sup>

There were delays during which FitzRoy introduced the Fuegians to English life including an audience with the king and Queen Adelaide. As no indication was received from the Admiralty that a return voyage would be commissioned, FitzRoy chartered a private vessel to return the Fuegians. However, an uncle intervened and made representations at the Admiralty, following which FitzRoy was advised that he would be given the command of the *Chanticleer* to return to Tierra del Fuego. The *Chanticleer* was found to be 'not quite fit for service', and on 27 June 1831 the Admiralty commissioned FitzRoy to command the *Beagle* for a return voyage to South America in order to return the Fuegians. The orders were subsequently expanded to include a circumnavigation of the globe conducting surveying, meteorological, chronometric and other observations. Lieutenants Wickham and Sullivan were appointed on the same day.

However, it should be emphasised that the initial plan was for the *Beagle* to return the Fuegians to Tierra del Fuego, and to convey a Christian missionary to work with the Fuegians. The sole purpose of returning the Fuegians to Tierra del Fuego would not at that stage have raised the question of a naturalist on board. It was as an afterthought that the *Beagle* engage in further survey work. As FitzRoy himself said:

<sup>15</sup> Magellan Narrative, vol. 2, pp. 4–7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 13.

When it was decided that a small vessel should be sent to Tierra del Fuego, the Hydrographer of the Admiralty was referred to for his opinion, as to what addition she might make to the yet incomplete surveys of that country, and other places which she might visit.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the Hydrographer Francis Beaufort was intimately involved from the beginning with the decision to expand the *Beagle's* orders to include another hydrographical expedition and of necessity he would have formulated those plans before consulting with FitzRoy. It follows that he almost certainly would have initiated the search for a naturalist.

The *Beagle* was commissioned on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1831, and the fit-out for the expedition commenced. Captain FitzRoy *then* recorded:

Anxious that no opportunity of collecting useful information, during the voyage, should be lost; I proposed to the Hydrographer that some well-educated and scientific person should be sought for who would willingly share such accommodations as I had to offer, in order to profit by the opportunity of visiting distant countries yet little known, Captain Beaufort approved of the suggestion, and wrote to Professor Peacock, of Cambridge.<sup>20</sup>

The formal orders were issued by the Commissioners for the Admiralty on 11 November 1831 when no reference was made to the collection or investigation of items relevant to natural history. This time gap was consistent with naval practice as the formal Orders were usually given immediately prior to the vessel putting to sea. The Orders referred to the Hydrographer's Memorandum, and Beaufort's lengthy instructions are replicated in FitzRoy's Narrative.<sup>21</sup> Captain Beaufort did not refer to a search or enquiry concerning natural history at all, but specifically instructed FitzRoy to search and enquire about auxiliary items which were 'of a purely nautical character'.<sup>22</sup> It is important to remember that Captain King was working at the Admiralty at that time and he was in close contact with the Hydrographer Francis Beaufort.

Returning to the events following the commissioning on 27 July 1831, the exhaustive publication of Darwin's correspondence<sup>23</sup> makes it clear that Professor Peacock first wrote to his friend Professor Henslow on 6 or 13 August 1831 concerning the appointment of 'a naturalist for the expedition'; he mentioned Henslow's brother-in-law, Revd Leonard Jenyns, as a potential person, but nothing about Charles Darwin.<sup>24</sup> The position was offered to Jenyns but he declined as he was not prepared to leave his parish of Swaffham Bulbeck. Professor Peacock then approached his friend Professor John Henry Henslow as a possible candidate.

It is certain that the approach by Francis Beaufort to his friend Professor Peacock, and the subsequent approach by Professor Peacock to Professor Henslow, was made independently of Captain FitzRoy. If it was otherwise then surely FitzRoy would have said so. It is most probable that Francis Beaufort, and not Captain FitzRoy, instigated the initial enquiry.

On 24 August 1831 Professor Henslow first wrote to Darwin and raised the subject. Although not a student of Henslow, Darwin was known as 'the man who walked with Henslow'. He pointed out that he considered Darwin to be the most suitable, and also added that FitzRoy 'would not take anybody, however well qualified as a naturalist, who was not a gentleman'. On or about 26 August 1831 Peacock also wrote to Darwin in which he said that the delay in posting his letter:

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 24- 40.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Burkhardt, ed., *Charles Darwin: The Beagle Letters*, Cambridge, 2008. Also Darwin Correspondence Project: [www.darwinproject.ac.uk](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk)

<sup>24</sup> *The Beagle Letters*, p. 17.

... has given me an opportunity of seeing Captain Beaufort at the admiralty and of stating to him the offer which I have made to you: he entirely approves of it & you may consider the situation as at your absolute disposal.<sup>25</sup>

*It is significant that Professor Peacock should have said that he had seen Captain Beaufort. If FitzRoy was the instigator of the search for a scientific person then surely Professor Peacock would have seen or written directly to Captain FitzRoy.*

Charles Darwin wrote to Professor Henslow from Shrewsbury on 30 August 1831 to advise that:

My Father, although he does not decidedly refuse me, gives such strong advice against going – that I should not be comfortable, if I did not follow it.<sup>26</sup>

Darwin's father noted on the following day that 'Charles has quite given up the idea of the voyage'.<sup>27</sup> It is well known that Darwin then discussed the matter with his uncle Josiah Wedgwood II (the father of Darwin's future wife Emma) who intervened with his father, recommending acceptance if not too late. Darwin raised eight issues to be considered including whether there was 'some serious objection to the vessel or expedition'.<sup>28</sup> This aspect would be very important when considering King's and Beaufort's contributions.

Darwin wrote to Beaufort on 1 September 1831 accepting the offer (although he subsequently recanted to some extent), and said that he would travel to Oxford on the following day to see Professor Henslow. On the same day, Francis Beaufort wrote to FitzRoy to advise:

I believe my friend Mr Peacock of Triny College Camb has succeeded in getting a 'savant' for you – A Mr Darwin grandson of the well known philosopher and poet – full of zeal and enterprise and having contemplated a voyage on his own account to S America. Let me know how you like the idea that I may go or recede in time.<sup>29</sup>

*This is a letter from an officer guiding the appointment to an officer intended to receive the benefit; it was not to an officer arranging it.* It is also interesting that Darwin was said to have been contemplating a voyage on his own account to South America.

As it transpired, Henslow countenanced Darwin to be cautious with his acceptance, and, on 4 September 1831, Darwin wrote to his sister: 'I write as if it was settled: but Henslow tells me, by no means, to make up my mind till I have had a long conversation with C. Beaufort & FitzRoy'.<sup>30</sup> This is exactly what then transpired. Darwin met FitzRoy on several occasions and was charmed by him: Darwin described FitzRoy as '*my beau ideal of a Captain.*'<sup>31</sup>

However, in the following days it is clear that there were a number of important events. On 9 September 1831, Darwin wrote to his sister Susan. It was clear that he had met several times with Captain Beaufort (who confirmed Darwin would be on the books for victuals), spent a day with FitzRoy and also crucially that:

I have just been with Cap King, FitzRoy senior officer last expedition: he thinks that the expedition will suit me. Unasked he said FitzRoys temper was perfect. He send his own son [*sic*] with him as midshipman.

On the same day Darwin wrote to Henslow and discussed what should happen to his Natural History collections in due course:

---

<sup>25</sup> *The Beagle Letters*, p.19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



... but about my collections, Cap. Beaufort said his first impression was, that they ought to be given to the British Museum: but I think I convinced of the impropriety of this & he finished by saying he thought I should have no difficulty so that I presented them to some public body, as Zoological & Geological &c – But I do not think the Admiralty would approve of my sending them to a Country collection, let it be ever so good - & really I doubt myself, whether it is not more for the advancement of Nt. Hist. that new things should be presented to the largest & most central collection – But we will talk of all this & many other things when we meet, - which I think would be early the week after next, - Mr Yarrell has been quite invaluable to me ; so very good natured & such very good advice: But (the)y all say Cap. King will be of the greatest use.’ (emphasis added).

*Significantly*, in a postscript, Darwin wrote: ‘I have just been with Cap King Fitzroy senior officer during the last expedition & he has given me much good advice: but I am afraid he must have swept the Coast almost clear’.<sup>32</sup>

Two points need to be made in relation to those comments. Firstly, King had experienced some serious problems with the disposal of his natural history collections towards the end of and following the last expedition. The collections had languished at the British Museum in an undescribed state causing King (and Darwin) considerable anguish. King and Darwin had a mutual interest in the collection and both must have made some pertinent observations about that issue.

Secondly, there was the question of safety which obviously concerned Darwin and his family. Captain King’s son, Philip Gidley King, had been a captain’s servant and then volunteer first class on the first expedition. In his Memoirs written in about 1894, Philip Gidley King recorded that in ‘about October 1831’ (it was obviously slightly earlier) the Admiralty had again appointed Captain Robert FitzRoy to the *Beagle*

... for the purpose of continuing the surveys of the former commissions and for conveying the Fuegians back to Terra del Fuego – My father was in lodging in — Street [blank in the MSS] and sent for me to go to him. I found him in bed with a cold but he looked up at me in his nightcap (he always wore one) and said without any preamble ‘Captain Fitzroy has offered to take you with him in the *Beagle* for another cruise in the Straits of Magellan’. I said ‘What do think of it, Sir.’ He replied ‘You know as well as I do about it’ (meaning of the prospects in the Service) so I said ‘Well father I’ll go’.<sup>33</sup>

Captain King dined with FitzRoy, and his brother Charles FitzRoy. Sir Charles FitzRoy subsequently became governor of New South Wales and Phillip King and his son Philip subsequently renewed their acquaintance with him in New South Wales.<sup>34</sup> It is probable that Philip Gidley King Junior was also at this dinner. The dinner was followed by another attended by Charles Darwin.<sup>35</sup> The dinner was on or around 9 September 1831. There is no evidence that Captain FitzRoy was present, although Philip Gidley King Junior certainly was present. If FitzRoy had been present then Philip Gidley King (junior) would have said so as FitzRoy was to be his commanding officer on the forthcoming voyage. King gave assurances about the risks involved in a voyage around the globe. Philip Gidley King (junior), in some notes which he prepared in 1894 concerning the *Beagle* and his life-long friendship with Darwin, was firmly of that opinion: He suggested that it was his father’s decision to send him on the second expedition that led to Darwin joining the vessel:

<sup>32</sup> *The Beagle Letters*, pp. 38-9.

<sup>33</sup> P.G. King junior, Memoirs, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS 770 CY Reel 1411, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> The reference for that dinner needs to be confirmed but it is almost certainly in the Memoirs or Autobiography of Philip Gidley King (1817–1904).

The circumstances under which Mr Darwin came to entrust himself to the little vessel and to place himself under Captain Fitzroy's care are so well related that nothing further can be said on the subject but the one convincing circumstance that determined him to join the expedition was that Capt. King had determined to send his son with it and thus it was that Mr. Darwin embarked in the *Beagle* as naturalist.<sup>36</sup>

It seems that Darwin, and his family, concluded that if it was safe enough for Captain King to have taken his eight-year-old son on the first expedition, and was now prepared to allow his son to return, then it would be safe enough for Darwin to go also.

It is clear that Darwin was well acquainted with King; he wrote to his sister from Lima, Peru, on 3rd September 1835 and said:

We all on board are looking forward to Sydney, as to a little England: it really will be very interesting to see the colony which must be the Empress of the South. – Capt. King has a large farm, 200 miles in the interior. – I shall certainly take horse & start'.<sup>37</sup>

It is highly unlikely that Darwin would be so forthright in wishing to visit King unless he had already formed a close acquaintance with him, but it is possible to take this even further and suggest that Darwin may not have agreed to join the *Beagle* but for King's intervention and assurance. Charles Darwin did visit King when the *Beagle* arrived at Port Jackson and he stayed with King at his property known as Dunheved at St Marys overnight on his return from a trip to Bathurst during which they discussed topics of mutual interest well into the night.

Philip Gidley King Junior was only fourteen years old when he embarked on the second voyage of the *Beagle* as a young midshipman. The voyage led to a life-long friendship between P. G. King and Charles Darwin:

After being a few days at Sea I found a firm friend in the person of Mr Charles Darwin to whom my fancy was to relate my experiences in my former voyage. That he took a liking to me was proved by his getting Captain FitzRoy to allow me to live on Shore with him at Rio de Janiero where I helped him in his butterfly and beetle hunting.<sup>38</sup>

Darwin continually sought out King's company when King was not on watch and he was to share Darwin's cabin for five years. The great friendship between Charles Darwin and Philip Gidley King junior, which clearly extended to Phillip Parker King, endured for the rest of their lives. The friendship supports the view that P. P. King played a major role in Darwin's embarkation. Darwin wrote to P. G. King junior on 21 February 1854 and said:

I can hardly tell you how pleased I was, about a week ago, to receive your letter dated the 26th October. I lead a rather solitary life, & in my walking very often think over old days in the *Beagle*, & no days rise pleasanter before me, than sitting with you on the Booms, running before the trade wind acrof [across] the Atlantic. Often & often have I wished to hear a little news of you. How changed we are since those days, you with three children, & I with seven, of which the oldest is above 14.<sup>39</sup>

Darwin wrote to P. G. King on 16 November 1854, and asked King to write to him with more news of himself and his family for 'the remembrance of those days when we used to sit and talk on the boom of the *Beagle*.' It would stay with him until his death. However, Darwin was not in good health:

<sup>36</sup> King Family Letters 1844–1869, Notes by P. G. King the younger, Mitchell Library, Sydney FM4/6900.

<sup>37</sup> Frederick Burkhardt and Sydney Smith, eds, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Cambridge, 1985, vol. 1, p. 466.

<sup>38</sup> P. G. King junior, *Memoirs*, *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> King Family Letters, p. 328.

I grieve to say that my health is so indifferent twice lately I could not resist seeing old friends (one was when Wickham & Co came here) and the excitement made me ill afterwards.<sup>40</sup>

In a letter from Darwin to P. G. King dated 24 April 1869, Darwin said: ‘I remember the friendship of no one on board the *Beagle* with more pleasure than yours’.<sup>41</sup>

The relevance of recounting the close association between Charles Darwin and Philip Gidley King junior is that that latter would not have made the observation about Darwin and his family being assured by Captain King of the safety of Darwin’s proposed embarkation unless it was true.

The concentration on FitzRoy’s role in Darwin embarking on the *Beagle* certainly arises from FitzRoy’s assertion that he was the instigator and facilitator of the offer to Darwin and his acceptance of it. It has been suggested that FitzRoy’s approach may have been driven by his peculiar personality and (at least after 1836) his conviction as a Christian fundamentalist. In fairness, there may also be other factors of an *historiographical* nature whereby there was a concentration on Captain FitzRoy alone, solely because he became the master and commander of a vessel that had been engaged in the most famous voyage of natural history. For example, *FitzRoy of the Beagle* was written by H. E. L. Mellersh and published in 1968.<sup>42</sup>

It is not clear whether H. E. L. Mellersh was a descendant of Arthur Mellersh, a midshipman on the second voyage of the *Beagle*, but he probably was a descendant. However, the author obviously concentrated on Captain FitzRoy, and paid little attention to Beaufort’s or King’s involvement in Darwin’s appointment. He made several mistakes about important events concerning King, and some that he had written deserves some revision. One example relates to the decision by FitzRoy to take the Fuegian hostages back to England. As stated above, King was not informed of their presence on the *Beagle* when FitzRoy joined King at Rio de Janeiro in 1830 before they sailed for England. The Captain’s Letters<sup>43</sup> from King would have included a report to the station commander at the very least when in Rio de Janeiro if he had been so informed. It is clear that King was informed after the vessels had put to sea on their return to England. Why was that so? Mr Mellersh makes no reference to that very important issue. FitzRoy’s strange behavior on that occasion fits with his superiority and arrogance displayed by him throughout his life. King for his part was never critical of that action; indeed, even after FitzRoy’s controversial time as governor of New Zealand, and he remained loyal to him. In the record of King’s last night alive in February 1856, when he dined on the *Juno* in Sydney Harbour, King was reported to have defended FitzRoy’s time as governor in New Zealand with his fellow officers.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to say whether King’s lack of any criticism of FitzRoy in 1830, or subsequently, was due to his reluctance to criticize a fellow officer, or an aristocrat. King’s formality was his nature: He was a naval officer of the old school who was circumspect about his feelings for his fellow officers, was self-effacing about his achievements, rarely if ever expressed a personal criticism of anybody and kept his own counsel.

Notwithstanding Captain FitzRoy’s important role as the master and commander of the *Beagle* in approving an offer made to Charles Darwin to accompany him, it is submitted that Captain FitzRoy was not pivotal in initiating a search for a suitable candidate, selecting Charles Darwin as a suitable person, and certainly not crucial in Darwin’s decision to accept the offer. That accolade should be for Sir Francis Beaufort and Captain Phillip Parker King.

<sup>40</sup> King Family Letters, pp. 330–32.

<sup>41</sup> Letter of Charles Darwin to P. G. King junior: King Family Letters, p. 334.

<sup>42</sup> H. E. L. Mellersh, *FitzRoy of the Beagle*, New York, 1968.

<sup>43</sup> A complete copy of the relevant Captain’s Letters has been checked.