

Official Opening of the “On the Origin of Species” 150th Anniversary Exhibition
Address by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory
Northern Territory Library, 10 September 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be here. I am in awe of the fact that I have held in my hand a real first edition of this marvellous work. I have for more than thirty years treasured my own facsimile of the first edition, excellent in every way, but the real thing is quite another thing.

I have during this “Year celebrating Charles Darwin” consumed many, many books and diaries by and about him and the theme of my speech tonight is the influence of madness and suicide on the writing of the Origin of Species.

HMS Beagle was a Cherokee class 10-gun brig-sloop – named after a breed of hunting hound. Launched on 11 May 1820, she was one of six ships the Royal Navy built to undertake surveying using the newly developed chronometers that made it possible to measure longitude. Only 90 feet long, this sailing ship carried more than seventy passengers and crew.

The Beagle had three famous voyages, the third of which included the survey of the north coast of Australia. 170 years ago yesterday, the Beagle lay at anchor outside Darwin harbour and a whaleboat under the command of Lieutenant John Lort Stokes entered the harbour. The harbour made a favourable impression and he and his Commander, John Clements Wickham, named the body of water “Darwin Harbour” after their shipmate on the second voyage of the Beagle, Charles Darwin. This was twenty years before the naturalist published the famous work we are celebrating.

John Stokes is commemorated in many of our local place names, but there is another Mr Stokes I want to speak about. The first voyage of *HMS Beagle* set sail in May 1826 in the company of *HMS Adventure* on a hydrographical survey of South America. *HMS Adventure* had also been used by Captain James Cook during his second circumnavigation of the globe and was one of the first two ships to cross the Antarctic Circle on 17 January 1773.

On this voyage, the Beagle was captained by Pringle Stokes whose journal has been recently acquired by the State Library of New South Wales. Captain Stokes encountered fearful weather in dangerous conditions off Port Famine in the Strait of Magellan. He locked himself into his cabin for fourteen days, then shot himself, survived in delirium for a few more days, then died!

Command of the Beagle was given to Flag Lieutenant Robert Fitzroy. Fitzroy was the first person ever to pass the Royal Navy examination with 'full numbers' (100%). But his family had a history of insanity and his uncle, Viscount Castlereagh, had committed suicide under the stress of overwork. On return to London, Fitzroy was appointed to command *HMS Chanticleer* but due to her poor condition, the Beagle was substituted for a second voyage to Terra del Fuego. She underwent extensive refitting and twenty-two chronometers were taken aboard as well as five *Sympiesometers*, a kind of mercury-free barometer.

Fitzroy determined to request that someone sail with him who was not part of the naval hierarchy, but to whom he could confide his thoughts and feelings. Various arrangements fell through until he asked his friend Captain Francis Beaufort, "father of the Marine Beaufort Scale" (a system for estimating wind strengths without the use of instruments), to assist with some suggestions. Charles Darwin's name was put forward. He was training to become a rural clergyman but was also a gifted amateur naturalist. Despite opposition from his father, Darwin determined to go and supported by his uncle, Josiah Wedgwood II, this became possible.

For most of the time, Darwin and Fitzroy got on well, although Darwin's emerging views annoyed the strict literalism of the Bible practised by Fitzroy. They sailed from Plymouth, England, on 27 December 1831 and their voyage is well known. After amazing discoveries in South America, they continued on to New Zealand's Bay of Islands and then to Sydney.

Despite heroic efforts by some in Australia to propound a view that his observations here were somehow seminal in the development of Darwin's thesis, (the observation of the duck billed platypus being the most noted), he was mostly unimpressed by what he saw. Indeed, he was quite depressed to find upon arrival in Sydney that there were no letters from his dotting sisters or, indeed, anyone else.

The voyage went on from Sydney to Hobart Town, where Darwin celebrated his 27th birthday, then westwards to Albany, and the ship arrived back in Falmouth, Cornwall on 5 October 1836 after almost five years at sea. Charles Darwin never went to sea again but made his home at Down House for forty years. It was there that he was startled to receive a manuscript from the naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace for his perusal. It proposed that natural selection was the process by which species evolved.

As Charles Darwin noted in his introduction to *On the Origin of Species: My work is now nearly finished; but as it will take me two or three more years to complete it, and as my health is far from strong, I have been urged to publish this Abstract. I have been more especially induced to do this, as Mr Wallace, who is now studying the natural history of the Malay archipelago, has arrived at almost exactly the same general conclusions that I have on the origin of species.*

Charles Darwin's publication had been delayed, amongst other things, because he feared the very reaction which it caused in November 1859. Joseph Hooker and the biologist Thomas Huxley were his champions. But Fitzroy, by this time a Rear Admiral, became his chief antagonist. On one occasion, unable to suppress his outrage, he disrupted a lecture on Darwin's theory and waving a Bible loudly exclaimed: *This is against God's word.* Five years later, perhaps in despair, Fitzroy did in fact commit suicide.

Some commentators suggest that Wallace was bitter towards Darwin for trumping his trump card. This was not so. In his masterful work *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace describes a butterfly perfectly camouflaged and precisely adapted to its environment. He notes: *If such an extraordinary adaptation as this stood alone, it would be difficult to offer any explanation of it; but although it is perhaps the most perfect case of protective imitation known, there are hundreds of similar resemblances in nature, and from these it is possible to deduce a general theory of the manner in which they have been slowly brought about. The principle of variation and that of "natural selection", or survival of the fittest, as elaborated by Mr Darwin in his celebrated Origin of Species, offers the foundation for such a theory.*

Charles Darwin died on April 19, 1882 and, against his wishes, and his wife's wishes, he was afforded a state funeral at Westminster Abbey. It was attended by scientists, philosophers, naturalists, admirals, dukes and dignitaries. And amongst the pall bearers at Darwin's funeral were Hooker, Huxley and Wallace.

The madness and suicide of Pringle Stokes was the catalyst for Fitzroy seeking a companion for the second voyage of the Beagle. Serendipity put forward Charles Darwin and from it came this amazing work *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. It therefore gives me great pleasure today, here at the Library of the Northern Territory, to officially launch this exhibition commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Charles Darwin's publication.