

# Lucy Atkinson's Uncle Joseph Sherrard and the Darwin connection

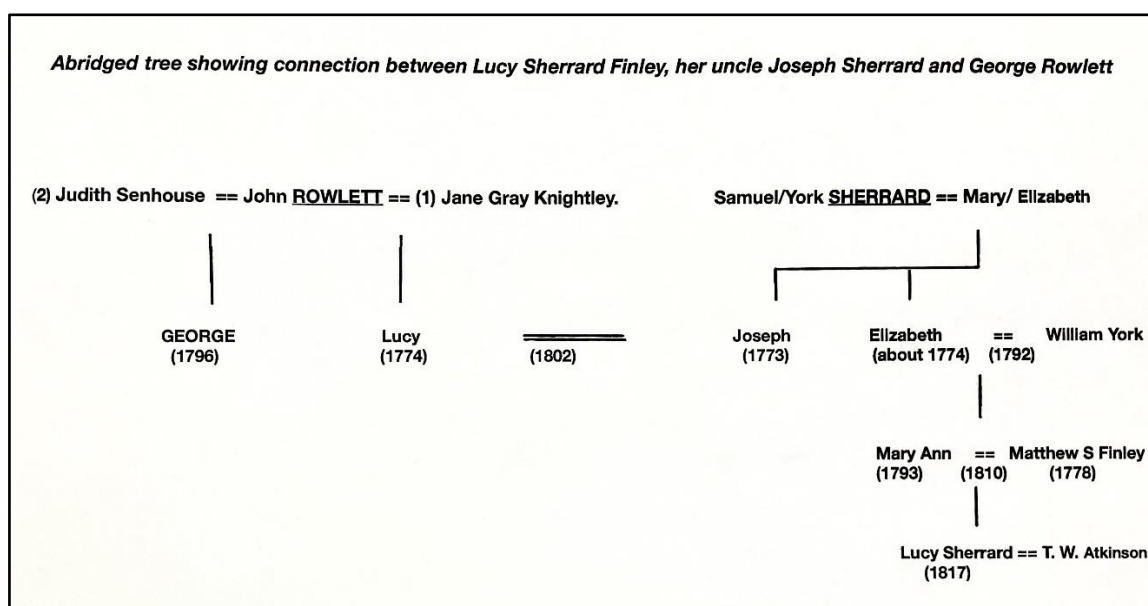
By Marianne Simpson

*Marianne Simpson, well-known to readers of this blog for her work on the early history of Lucy Atkinson's family, particularly her connection to her great uncle and pioneering mariner Joseph Sherrard – from where Lucy derived her second name – has produced another remarkable piece of work. Here she examines the extraordinary career of Joseph Sherrard's brother-in-law, George Rowlett, purser on HMS Beagle and close friend of Charles Darwin. Marianne is a direct descendant of Lucy Atkinson's brother, William Finley.*

Readers who are familiar with the story of Lucy Sherrard Finley – who married Thomas Atkinson in Moscow in 1848 - may recall that Lucy received a very substantial bequest under the terms of the 1835 will of her great uncle Joseph Sherrard. This bequest enabled Lucy to establish the independence which took her on the adventure of a lifetime through Siberia and Central Asia.

What I have now discovered is that not only did Joseph Sherrard exercise a profound influence on Lucy's life – as well as that of her mother and siblings - but he also appears to have played a significant role in the life of his young brother-in-law, George Rowlett.

In 1802 Joseph Sherrard had married Lucy Rowlett. Born in 1774 to parents John Rowlett and Jane Gray Knightley, she was baptised in St Sepulchre, Newgate in the same year. Sadly, Jane died the following year and was buried in Marylebone Cemetery on 26 November 1775.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> A witness at Lucy's marriage 27 years later was Ann Knightley Seller which would indicate that Lucy maintained a close relationship with her mother's family who may indeed have assisted in raising her.

On 2 May 1784 John Rowlett married a second time, also in St Sepulchre, one Judith Senhouse. Children of the marriage included Sarah (born 1786)<sup>2</sup>, Jeremiah (1791-1795)<sup>3</sup> and, after the family had moved to Whitechapel, Jane (born 1793) and George, who was baptised on 23 April 1797. The last two were baptised at St Mary Whitechapel, a very short distance from the family's home in Osborn Place.

George Rowlett next appears in public records in 1818 when, about to go to sea, on 30 November he signed a will leaving all his possessions to Mrs Lucy Sherrard, his eldest half-sister. In 2020 this will was sold in London for £2,800, the price realised clearly a reflection of George Rowlett's later career on *HMS Beagle*.

On 3 October 1821, the following notice appeared in *The Times*:  
"Naval Appointments. Pursers. Mr George Rowlett to *Parthian*".

All available evidence suggests that Joseph Sherrard, George's much older brother-in-law and a Purser in the Royal Navy, spent the period between 1808 and 1818 in England and it is not hard to see Joseph's hand on young George's choice of career. I say this, not only because Joseph had the opportunity but also because of what we know about George's father. In June 1784 a John Rowlett of 80 Cow Cross, West Smithfield, hosier and haberdasher, took out insurance on his property,<sup>4</sup> and, as the parish of St Sepulchre takes in Smithfield Market, this John Rowlett is likely to have been George's father. Clearly not a naval man<sup>5</sup>.

In November 1821 the *Parthian*, a brig, was reported to be in the West Indies and it was certainly in the Caribbean again in June 1824 when it captured a 36-man pirate vessel, which was subsequently discovered to have captured two British vessels and murdered their crews. By March 1826, the *Parthian* was back at Deptford.

When George Rowlett took up the *Parthian* appointment, Joseph Sherrard was recently returned from South American waters, where he had served as Purser on *HMS Creole*, a frigate and part of the so called South American Squadron. The reason for British interest in South America lay in the upheaval caused by the Napoleonic wars. From 1810, with the Spanish government immersed in the struggle against Napoleon, revolutions had broken out throughout South America, with the newly independent nations seeking British recognition as one of their prime diplomatic priorities and, as part of that, granting British commercial interests access to their ports. By 1825, when most of Latin America had achieved independence from centuries of Spanish or Portuguese rule, South America had become one of Britain's most important markets.

Joseph Sherrard relinquished his post on *HMS Creole* in the middle of 1820 and it is reasonable to assume that when George Rowlett returned to England the two naval pursers would have had much to share about their experiences - although it may be that Joseph Sherrard had seen more of South America than George Rowlett.

In 1825 the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty directed two ships to be prepared for a survey of the southern coast of South America and in May the following year *HMS Adventure* and *HMS*

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<sup>2</sup> In his will (1835) Joseph Sherrard left £100 and the miniature portrait of his wife to Sarah Rowlett.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah was baptized at St. Sepulchre and buried at St Mary Whitechapel.

<sup>4</sup> Royal and Sun Alliance Insurance Group, record held by London Metropolitan Archives.

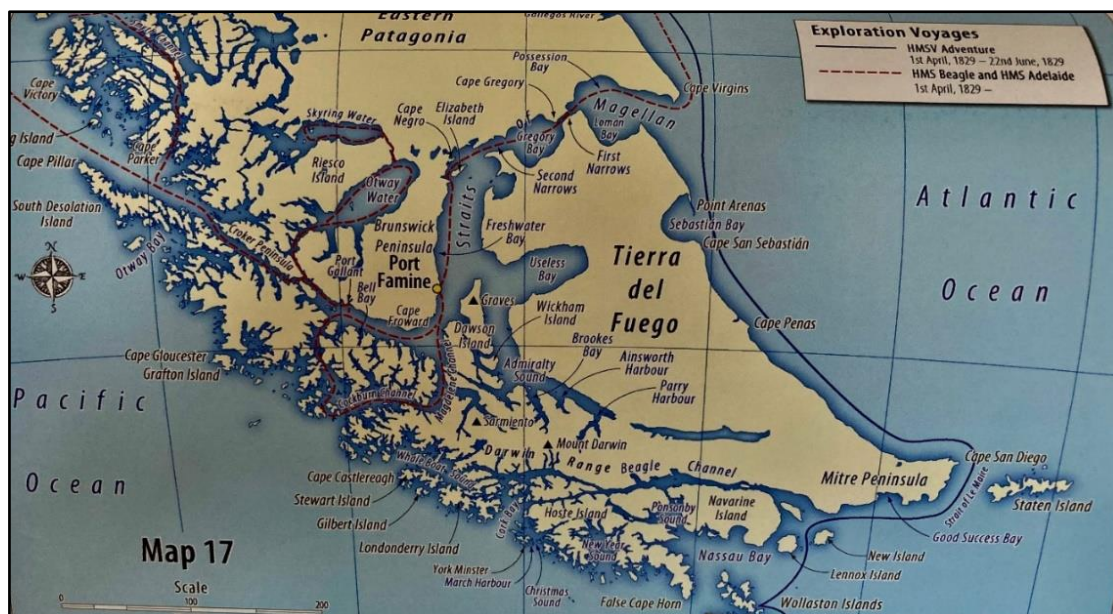
<sup>5</sup> Occurring only a month after the second marriage, he may have taken this action at the urging of his new wife.

*Beagle* were lying in Plymouth Sound ready to execute these orders. Phillip Parker King<sup>6</sup> was Commander and Surveyor, Senior Officer of the Expedition, and George Rowlett, was the *Adventure's* Purser. King described the *Adventure* (20 officers) as “a roomy ship of 330 tons, without guns, lightly though strongly rigged, and very strongly built” and the *Beagle* (11 officers) as a “well-built little vessel of 235 tons, rigged as a barque and carrying six guns”. The two vessels sailed in May 1826, reaching Rio de Janeiro in August. Commander King's orders were as follows:

“An accurate survey should be made of the southern coast of the peninsula of South America from the southern entrance of the River Plata, round to Chiloé, and through Tierra del Fuego.” King was also “to avail yourself of every opportunity of collecting and preserving specimens of such objects of natural history, as may be new, rare or interesting...”.

In December they approached the entrance to the Straits of Magellan. King wrote, “Our approach to the entrance to the Strait, although attended with anxiety, caused sensations of interest and pleasure not easily to be described.” He continued, “The officers and crews of both ships were healthy and elated with the prospect before them; our vessels were in every respect, strong and seaworthy, and we were possessed of every comfort and resource necessary for encountering much greater difficulties than we had any reason to anticipate.”

In January 1827 the two ships reached Port Famine which was henceforth established as their headquarters. Tents were pitched and the decked boat hoisted out and hauled on shore, to be coppers and equipped for the survey. The ships' crews were able to catch fish, geese and wild duck to supplement their diet. In the night they heard unusual sounds, later discovered to be surfacing whales. They proceeded to survey the area west of Port Famine and, Purser Rowlett being named as among those on the survey vessel, it was clearly during this survey that a cape in Admiralty Sound was named for him. The expedition subsequently returned to Rio de Janeiro in May 1827.



Map of *Beagle*, *Adelaide* and *Adventure's* route at the tip of South America<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Parker King (1791-1856) was born on Norfolk Island, his father being Philip Gidley King who, in 1800, became the third governor of New South Wales. Phillip Parker King is remembered not only for his extensive explorations of the Patagonian coasts, but also of the Australian coasts.

<sup>7</sup> Map from Abbott, Brian Douglas, “Phillip Parker King 1791-1856: A Most Admirable Australian” (2012)

After a break which also allowed opportunity for fresh provisions, the two ships, also now accompanied by another survey vessel - *HMS Adelaide* - returned to Port Famine on 18 January 1828. Here King decided that, due to its size and difficulties with manoeuvring, the *Adventure* was not suited to surveying work and should remain at Port Famine (it was probably this factor which later determined that the *Beagle* should undertake the second expedition under FitzRoy). King then gave Pringle Stokes, captain of the *Beagle*, orders to survey the western coasts up to the 47th degree while he sailed in the *Adelaide* to explore St Sebastian's Channel. In surveying the area south-east of Dawson Island, King recorded the following:

"Between Fitton Harbour and Cape Rowlett are high mountains, two of which, more conspicuous than the rest, we named "Mount Sherrard" and "Curious Peak"."

This suggests that not only was George Rowlett (although attached to the *Adventure*) with King on the *Adelaide* but also that such was the esteem in which Rowlett held his brother-in-law that he suggested the mountain be named for him.



*View of Cape Rowlett looking down Admiralty Sound, by PP King, about 1827.*

King returned to Port Famine in April. Heavy rain and bad weather followed, the tents were nearly inundated, the fresh ground water was destroyed and the men became very despondent. Several died from scurvy and, indeed, King added the name of Purser Rowlett to the list of those suffering from the disease. King wrote: "The monotony of the men's occupations, the gloomy appearance of the country and the severity of the climate all tended to increase the number of sick, as well as the unfavourable symptoms of their diseases."

The *Beagle* which had set off again in March to sail around Cape Froward and westerly to Cape Pillar sought refuge in June at Port Otway. Stokes recorded that, "Nothing could be more dreary than the scene around us. The weather was that in which the soul of man dies in him." They were again detained at Channel's Mouth "by the worst weather that I have experienced; we rode with

three anchors down, and the top masts struck...". On attempting to clear the Sound, Stokes was forced to cut adrift and sacrifice the 28-foot yawl, the loss of which was second only to a complete loss of the *Beagle*. When the *Beagle* finally got back to Port Famine, it was under the direction of Lt. Skyring, Captain Stokes having succumbed to depression caused by the anxieties of the command of such a perilous journey. On 1 August, having not left his cabin in four weeks, Stokes shot himself, dying 12 days later. King wrote, "Thus shockingly and prematurely perished an active, independent and most energetic officer, in the prime of life. The severe hardships of the cruise, the dreadful weather experienced and the dangerous situations in which they were so constantly exposed..."

The impact of this death of a senior officer on the companies of all three ships can only be imagined. The *Adventure*, *Beagle* and *Adelaide* left Port Famine on 16 August. The toll on the health of the officers and men had been so great that, on the day of departure, King was the only officer able to keep watch on the deck of the *Adventure*. When they reached Montevideo (where a welcome gift of Seville oranges brought succour to those suffering from scurvy) there were only ten able-bodied men on the *Adventure* capable of keeping her under sail. While George Rowlett survived these very challenging conditions, it could well be that it was his experience at Port Famine<sup>8</sup> that fatally undermined his constitution and contributed to his early death.

The *Adventure* sailed south again from Rio de Janeiro on 27 December 1828. In April 1829, they were at Cape Horn, the weather "squally with snow". They then experienced the full force of the Southern Ocean, a westerly wind driving the ship approximately 200 miles off course before they could correct their position. They finally reached Valparaíso in June 1829 and by the end of August were at San Carlos, Chiléo, where the *Adventure* met up with the *Beagle*, now under the command of Captain Robert FitzRoy. Chiléo provided respite from the freezing conditions to which the men had been subjected. The *Adventure* "was made snug" and the officers (who would have included George Rowlett) were permitted to reside in the port. For light relief, officers and crew put on a performance of Sheridan's play "The Rivals".

Chiloé, which had been occupied by Spain in 1550, had been "formerly shrouded from notice" by the king of Spain, i.e. kept secret. Now the area was being opened up for trade, and King felt that Chiloé, from its position of 42° south, "may be termed the key of the Pacific". The 1828 census disclosed a population of 43,000 inhabitants. It was as the *Beagle* set its direction for Chiloé that George Rowlett was to breathe his last five years later.

The *Adventure* was in Valparaíso in early 1830 and back at Port Famine in April. After setting up tents on shore, they had to fire muskets over the heads of a threatening group of about 80 Fuegian Indians. King wrote, "weakly manned vessels passing through this Strait should always avoid them, if they are numerous... I consider the sling in their dexterous hands to be equal to a musket of ours."

All three ships met up in Rio de Janeiro on 2 August 1830, the *Beagle* having completed further challenging survey work in conditions similar to those encountered by Stokes earlier. The *Adventure* and *Beagle* then struck out across the Atlantic, reaching Plymouth on 14 October 1830. They had been absent from England for four and a half years.

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<sup>8</sup> The name was derived from the disastrous experience of an attempted Spanish settlement in the 1580s.

In 2008 the Chilean Naval Department erected a memorial at Port Famine. It noted King's work as "worthy of the highest praise... gaining a place among the best navigators and explorers who contributed to the knowledge of the southern maritime territory of Chile and America. His contribution should be considered at least similar in importance to the preceding discoveries and explorations of Fernando Magellan and Juan Ladrillero". Although principally remembered for his part in the *Beagle's* subsequent voyage, George Rowlett significantly also played a part in this voyage and, while some officers and crew were lost for various reasons over the four years, he saw the expedition through from start to finish.

The *Beagle* was re-commissioned on 4 July 1831 and, after extensive rebuilding, including raising the upper deck, finally left England just after Christmas 1831. As Darwin wrote of his voyage, "The object of the expedition was to complete the survey of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, commenced under captain King in 1826 to 1830 – to survey the shores of Chile, Peru, and some of the islands in the Pacific – and to carry a chain of chronometrical<sup>9</sup> measurements round the world." FitzRoy had also found a need for expert advice on geology during the first voyage and sought "a person qualified to examine the land, while the officers and myself would attend to the hydrographs" - which is how 22-year-old Charles Darwin came to join the expedition.

In January 1832 the *Beagle* arrived at Cape Verde Islands. George Rowlett (quoted by FitzRoy) wrote:

" We procured some indifferent horses and rode to Ribeira Grande...formerly the residence of the Portuguese governor...We passed through the fertile and beautiful valleys of Achao and San Martin, and enjoyed drinking some of the finest water we had ever tasted...No person who has only visited the port of Praya can form the slightest idea of the beauty of the interior country; it exceeded anything I had seen, either in Brazil, or in the West Indies."

Darwin also left an account:

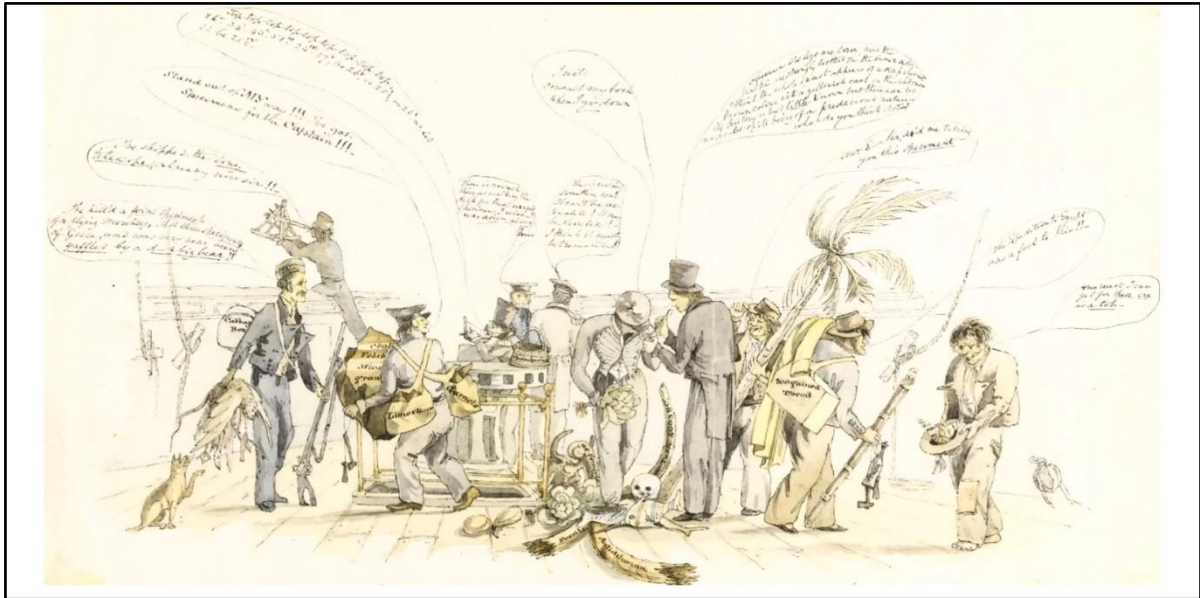
"Rowlett, Bynoe<sup>10</sup> and myself started early in the morning on a riding expedition to Ribera Grande. We went to Praya to get our horses and there had our breakfast. The greatest shopkeeper in the place was our host. He is an American and has married a Spanish woman...After we had finished our coffee in his large and airy rooms, we mounted our ponies...The road to Ribera for the first six miles is totally uninteresting and till we arrived at the valley of St Martin the country presented its usual, brown appearance: here our eyes were refreshed by the varied and beautiful forms of the tropical trees. The valley owes its fertility to a small stream and following its course paw paw trees, bananas, and sugarcane flourished - I here got a rich harvest of flowers and still richer one of freshwater shells - After having watered our active and sure-footed little horses, we again commenced climbing. In the course of an hour we arrived at Ribera and were astonished at the ruins of a large fort and cathedral.

"The town is situated at the foot of a high black precipice through which a narrow and abrupt valley has cut its way... Having procured a black padre for a guide and a Spaniard who had served in the peninsular war for our interpreter, we visited a collection of buildings...we then returned to the "Venda" and eat [sic] our dinner - to see which operation a concourse of black men, women

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<sup>9</sup> Accurate marine chronometers, needed to determine longitude, had only become affordable since 1800.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Bynoe was the surgeon.



Charles Darwin and crew members deal with specimens on board HMS Beagle. Watercolour cartoon by Augustus Earle – Sotheby's

and children had collected. Certainly, the whole scene was most amusing, our companions, the blacks were extremely merry, everything we said, or did was followed by their hearty laughter.”

At the beginning of February Darwin again recorded that he, Bynoe and Rowlett “started by daybreak on a riding excursion to St. Domingo...At the foot of a pyramidal hill of scoriae I tied up my pony to examine the rocks...The road here makes so little impression on the barren soil that we here missed our track and took that to Fuentes...Fuentes is a pretty village with a small stream and everything appears to prosper well...We left Fuentes and passed along a narrow, wild road to St. Domingo...We had an introduction to a most hospitable Portuguese who treated us most kindly, and feasted us with a most substantial dinner of meat cooked with various herbs and spices, and orange tart...”.

By the beginning of March they had reached Bahia, Brazil and Darwin noted that, “Today Rowlett and myself went to the city and he performed the part of Cicerone<sup>11</sup> to me.”

On 7 September, Darwin recorded the following expedition out of Buenos Aires in his diary:

“In the morning, the captain, Rowlett, the pilot and myself started with a pleasant breeze for the settlement: it is distant, about 20 miles...By heeling the boat over, so that the edge was on a level with the water, it did not draw more than a foot of water. Even with this, we had much trouble in getting her along as we struck several times on the bottom. In the evening we arrived at the creek, which is about four miles distant from the settlement...There were several of the wild gaucho cavalry, waiting to see us land; they formed by far the most savage group I ever beheld...As the evening was closing in, it was determined not to return to the vessel by the night; so we all mounted behind the gauchos, and started at a hard gallop for the fort...The war is carried on in the most barbarous manner. The Indians torture all their prisoners and the Spaniards shoot theirs. A

<sup>11</sup> guide

Spanish friend of Mr Harris<sup>12</sup> received us hospitably [and] we rode to the boat early in the morning.”

Around 24 September 1832, while off the coast of Patagonia, Augustus Earle painted the watercolour cartoon, advertised for sale by Sotheby’s in 2015 with an estimate of £70,000 (see above. Darwin centre of picture). On the same date Darwin recorded that Rowlett, who had been sent in the *Beagle*’s schooner to the River Negro to try to procure fresh provisions, “after a very bad passage of six days...brings back an excellent account of Rio Negro - Nothing could exceed the civility of the Governor and the inhabitants.”

On 27 November FitzRoy recorded:

“[With] arrangements and observations being satisfactorily completed, a sufficient quantity of provision on board to last eight months, at full allowance, and an extra supply of iron and coals for the forge, in case of any serious accident, the *Beagle* sailed from Montevideo.”

On 8 January 1833, Darwin recorded:

“We doubled Cape Horn on the 21st, since which we have either been waiting for good, or beating against bad weather, and now we actually are about the same distance, viz.100 miles, from our destination. There is, however, the essential difference of being to the south instead of the east.”

He continued on 13 January: “the gale does not abate: if the *Beagle* was not an excellent sea boat... we should be in distress... At noon...the sea filled our decks, so deep, that if another [breaking sea] had followed, it is not difficult to guess the result... It is a disheartening reflection that it is now 24 days, since doubling Cape Horn, since which there has been constant bad weather, and we are now not much above 20 miles from it.”

In March 1833 the *Beagle* arrived at the Falkland Islands. FitzRoy wrote: “in a cove called Johnson Harbour... was a wrecked ship, with her masts standing, and in other places were the remains of two more wrecks. We anchored near the beach... and from a French boat, which came alongside, learned that the *Magellan*, French whaler, had been driven from her anchors during the tremendous storm of 12–13 January [and] that her crew were living on shore under tents.”

Charles Darwin wrote in his diary: “1 March: We arrived in the morning at Port Louis [Falklands]. The first news we received was to our astonishment, that England had taken possession of the Falkland Islands, and that the flag was now flying...”. Second lieutenant Sullivan<sup>13</sup> wrote in a letter home: “We got into a snug little cove, where we pitched the tents, secured the boats, and got dinner underway. The weather cleared up a little, so as to enable us to get a few things dry... we were fortunate to find plenty of wreck wood on the beach, and we had a glorious fire, around which we sat singing till 10 o’clock at night, when a heavy, hail shower drove us into the tents. We all then crowded into one tent, and went on singing till 12.”

The *Beagle* left the Falklands in April and headed north. On 31 August 1833 Darwin recorded that “I rode to Punta Alta in order to superintend the excavation of the bones”<sup>14</sup> and on 3 September

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<sup>12</sup> The pilot

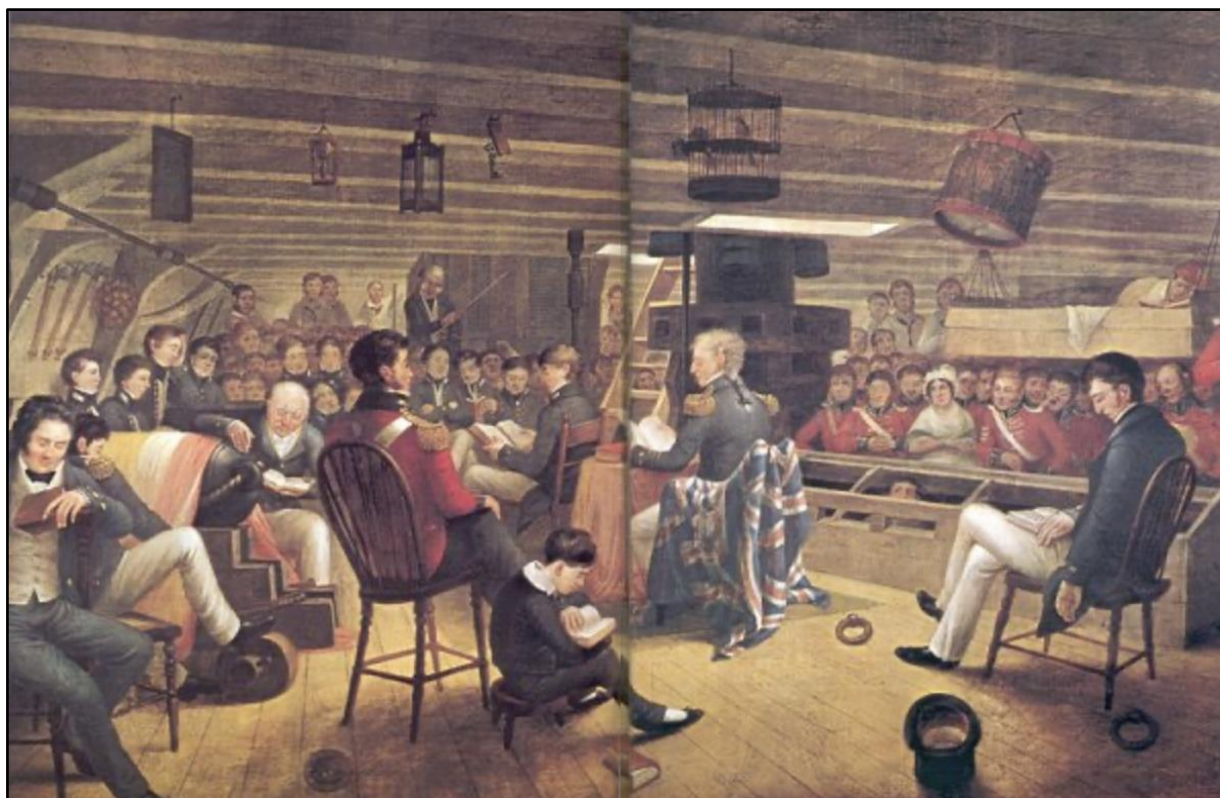
<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, H N, “Life and letters of the late Admiral Sir Bartholomew James Sullivan” (1896).

<sup>14</sup> He had found the bones two days previously.



“Harris and Mr Rowlett went to the Creek, from thence in the Yawl on board - in the road they would pick up my servant and the bones.”

After some months doing detailed survey work and re-equipping in the vicinity of the Rio Negro (Uruguay) the ship returned to the south in December 1833, with a supply of provisions and coals, sufficient for at least nine months. They reached Port Desire on 23 December and Darwin has left the following account of Christmas Day: “After dining in the gun room, the officers, and almost every man in the ship, went on shore. The captain distributed prizes to the best runners, leapers, wrestlers. These Olympic games were very amusing; it was quite delightful to see with what schoolboy eagerness, the seamen enjoyed them.”



*Bible reading in the gun room, HMS Beagle, about 1833, watercolour by Augustus Earle, National Maritime Museum*

On 29 January 1834, having passed the First Narrow, Darwin records, “Went on shore with the captain and met with a very kind reception. These Indians have such constant communication with the sealers, that they are half civilised; they talk a good deal of Spanish and some English.” He continued that the next day “a large party went on shore to barter for mantles etc...The first demand was for firearms, and of course not giving them these, tobacco was the next....An old woman, well known by the name of Santa Maria, recognised Mr Rowlett as belonging formerly to the *Adventure* and as having seen him a year and a half ago at the R. Negro.”

On 7 February 1834, having by now reached Port Famine, Darwin recorded:

“The day has been splendidly clear...If Tierra del could boast one such day a week, she would not be so thoroughly detested, as she is by all who know her - I made the most of it, and enjoyed a

pleasant stroll with Mr Rowlett, and Martens<sup>15</sup>. There is little fear of Indians, we found a wigwam however which was not very old.”

After an onshore expedition by the captain and a number of officers<sup>16</sup> around the Santa Cruz River in April/May, the *Beagle* again returned to Port Famine on 1 June, Darwin recording, “I never saw a more cheerless prospect; the dusky woods piebald with snow, were only indistinctly to be seen through an atmosphere composed of two thirds rain and one of fog...”. They left Port Famine a week later, on the 11th passing Mount Skyring and all the Furies, reaching the Tower Rocks at sunset where, in FitzRoy’s words, “with a fresh, north-west wind [we] stood out into the Pacific, with every inch of canvas set which we could carry.”

On the 26th, the penultimate day of George Rowlett’s life, they were at latitude 43° and longitude 75°, steering towards Chiloé. The next day FitzRoy recorded:

“On the 27th, we witnessed the last moments of Mr Rowlett’s existence in this world. He had long been sinking under an internal complaint of which it was impossible to cure him, except by a vigorous and uniform mode of treatment, to which he was not willing to conform, until too late: but his illness had no relation whatever to the service in which he had been employed. He was much regretted by all of us, having been a kind, honourable friend. The following day we committed the body of our deceased companion to the seaman’s grave, that “ever changing and mysterious main”.”

And, from Charles Darwin:

“Mr Rowlett was in his 38th year; the oldest officer on board; he had been on the former voyage in the *Adventure*; and was in consequence an old friend to many in this ship; by whom, and everyone else he was warmly respected. On the following day, the funeral service was read on the quarter deck, and his body lowered into the sea; it is an awful and solemn sound, that splash of the waters over the body of an old shipmate.”

We may at least know he died in good hands. Writing about the deaths of some seamen the previous year, FitzRoy recorded that, “the affectionate kindness of Mr Bynoe on this, and indeed every other occasion, when his skill and attention were required, will never be forgotten by any of his shipmates.”

Perhaps the cause was tuberculosis. Keevil wrote “Pulmonary tuberculosis first began to manifest itself in these expeditions shortly after leaving the tropics for colder latitudes, as can be seen in the accounts of Cook’s and Vancouver’s voyages, but its virulence in the latitude of the *Beagle* channel is remarkable.”<sup>17</sup>

The beneficiary of George Rowlett’s will, his half-sister Lucy Sherrard, had already predeceased him, dying in Deal, England in October 1832 in her 58th year. And Joseph Sherrard, her husband, was to die ten months after George Rowlett, in April 1835. It is possible that George had advice of Lucy’s passing but hard to know whether Joseph knew of George’s sad end. Joseph wrote his

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<sup>15</sup> Conrad Martens (1801-1878) left the *Beagle* in the second half of 1834 and, after making his way to Sydney, went on to become the foremost watercolour artist of the Australian colonial period.

<sup>16</sup> George Rowlett was not included, perhaps a reflection of his illness.

<sup>17</sup> Keevil, J. J., *Journal of the history of medicine* (Winter, 1949) (JSTOR)

second will two months before his death and George, the little boy in whose education and career Joseph and Lucy had clearly taken a keen interest, is not mentioned in it. But the Rowlett and Sherrard names endure in the landscapes of Tierra del Fuego.

And the *Beagle* - sailed on to the Galapagos and into history.

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