Darwin stories

Crossing the Equator

by Anna M. Bullard
Entries from Charles Darwin’s diary aboard HMS Beagle in February 1832 in the Atlantic Ocean off the northeast coast of South America.

14th Every body is alive with the anticipation about Neptunes appearance, & I hear of nothing but razors sharpened with a file & a lather made of paint & tar, to be used by the gentlest valet de chambre.

16th In the evening the ceremonies for crossing the line commenced: The officer on watch reported a boat ahead. – The Captain turned ”hands up, shorten sail”, and we heaved to in order to converse with Mr Neptune. The Captain held a conversation with
him through a speaking trumpet, the result of which was that he would in the morning pay us a visit. —

17th We have crossed the Equator, & I have undergone the disagreeable operation of being shaved. About 9 o'clock this morning we poor "griffins", two & thirty in number, were put altogether on the lower deck. — The hatchways were battened down, so we were in the dark & very hot. — Presently four of Neptunes constables came to us, & one by one led us up on deck. — I was the first & escaped easily: I nevertheless found this watery ordeal sufficiently disagreeable. — Before coming up, the constable blindfolded me & thus lead along, buckets of water were thundered all around; I was then placed on a plank, which could be easily tilted up into a large bath of water. — They then lathered my face & mouth with pitch and paint, & scraped some of it off with a piece of roughened iron hoop. —a signal being
given I was tilted head over heels into the water, where two men received me & ducked me. —at last, glad enough, I escaped. — most of the others were treated much worse, dirty mixtures being put in their mouths & rubbed on their faces. — The whole ship was a shower bath: & water was flying about in every direction: of course not one person, even the Captain, got clear of being wet through.

18th At last I certainly am in the Southern hemisphere, & whilst enjoying the cool air of the evening, I can gaze at the Southern Cross, Magellans cloud & the great crown of the

Charles Darwin, age 31, four years after the voyage.

South. — In August quietly wandering about Wales, in February in a different hemisphere; nothing ever in this life ought to surprise me.

Captain Robert FitzRoy wrote in his 1839 book about the voyage: "The disagreeable practice alluded to has been permitted in most ships, because sanctioned by time; and though many condemn it as an absurd and dangerous piece of folly, it has also many advocates. Perhaps it is one of those amusements, of which the omission might be regretted. Its effects on the minds of those engaged in preparing for its mummeries, who enjoy it at the time, and talk of it long afterwards, cannot easily be judged of without being an eye-witness."

Captain Robert FitzRoy, age 31, at the end of the voyage.
The HMS *Beagle* was a 10-gun brig that was extensively modified before FitzRoy’s second voyage to S. America in Dec. 1831. On that voyage a total of 10 officers, 4 midshipmen and volunteers, 38 seamen and boys, 8 marines, and 8 supernumeraries (including Darwin) were aboard when is sailed from Plymouth harbor.

**Credits:**

Cover, world map
https://www.davidrumsey.com/blog/2010/1/7/19th‐century‐maps‐by‐children

*Beagle* in Australia
https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/on‐this‐day/2014/03/on‐this‐day‐charles‐darwin‐departs‐australia/

Crossing the Line
https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?
objectId=3401495&partId=1&people=126264&peoA=126264‐2‐23&sortBy=producerSort&page=1

Charles Darwin
https://www.wired.com/2009/04/darwinmarried/

Captain Robert FitzRoy
http://darwin‐online.org.uk/content/frameset?pageseq=72&itemId=F1598&viewtype=side


FitzRoy text from FitzRoy, R. 1839. 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. Proceedings of the second expedition, 1831–36, under the command of Captain Robert Fitz‐Roy, R.N. London: Henry Colburn.