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**JOHN STOKES AND THE MEN OF THE BEAGLE —
DISCOVERERS OF PORT DARWIN**

By
Alan Powell, B.A. (Hons)., Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer in History, Darwin Institute
of Technology

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is the outcome of a very successful set of lectures of the history of the Northern Territory held at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory during July and August 1982.

Speakers covered different aspects of Territory history and illustrated the wide and varied nature of our history.

The transcripts of the lectures are being published individually in this series. No major editorial work has been undertaken, so that the lectures are presented as they were delivered by the speakers.

THE 1982 STATE REFERENCE LIBRARY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY HISTORY LECTURES

The Caledon Bay Killings

—Ted Egan (21 July 1982) —not to be published at the request of Mr Egan

The History of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory

—Bishop O'Loughlin (28 July 1982)

The Military occupation of Cox Peninsula; and Point Charles Lighthouse

—Mike Foley (4 August 1982)

The Queensland Road

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Chinese Contribution to Early Darwin

—Charles See-Kee (18 August 1982)

John Stokes and the Men of the Beagle:— Discoverers of Port Darwin

—Alan Powell (25 August 1982)

JOHN STOKES AND THE MEN OF THE BEAGLE: DISCOVERERS OF DARWIN

On 9th September, 1839, John Lort Stokes, lieutenant and assistant surveyor on Her Majesty's survey ship *Beagle* stepped ashore at Talc Head and named the harbour he saw before him Port Darwin. He wrote of that day:

“Before the veil of darkness was quite removed, we could faintly distinguish the mouth of the opening; and the sight at daylight was most cheering. A wide bay appearing between two cliffy heads, and stretching away within to a great distance, presented itself to our view. ... As we pulled in towards the eastern entrance point, the river-like appearance began to wear off, more land making its appearance towards the head of the opening. On reaching this point, Mr. Forsyth and myself climbed up the cliff while the breakfast was cooking. From the summit we had a good view of the bay... to see the eastern part of it, however it was necessary to cross to the opposite point where some talc slate, pieces of which measured four inches in length, was found imbedded in quartz. The point was called in consequence, Talc Head. The other rocks near it were of a fine-grained sandstone; — a new feature in the geology of this part of the continent, which afforded us an appropriate opportunity of convincing an old shipmate and friend, that he still lived in our memory; and we accordingly named this sheet of water Port Darwin.”⁽¹⁾

Thus Darwin owes its name to a shipboard friendship between Stokes and the young naturalist-geologist Charles Darwin who had sailed on a previous voyage of the *Beagle*. Charles Darwin was then an unknown. Stokes had no inkling of his friend's later fame and Darwin himself never set eyes on any part of the north Australian coast. Nor did he have much liking for what he saw of northern Australia, writing as he left it in 1835;

“Farewell, Australia! You are a rising infant and doubtless some day will reign a great princess in the south; but you are too great and ambitious for affection, yet not great enough for respect. I leave your shores without sorrow or regret.”⁽²⁾

Stokes did not think much of Port Darwin either. He noted — correctly — that its use as a port would be restricted by shoals and commented that the place swarmed with mosquitos, sandflies and ‘alligators’,⁽³⁾ as the early English naval explorers incorrectly called our crocodiles. However, Lieutenant James Emery found fresh water by digging a well on the northern point of the inner harbour. This caused his fellow officers to think somewhat better of the place and to bestow Emery's name on the point. Emery's successful search for fresh water seems to have been a major factor in Goyder's choice of site when he came from Adelaide to locate and survey for a Northern Territory capital thirty years later: But the *Beagle's* officers did not realise that Port Darwin was eventually to rank as the most notable of their discoveries on the north Australian coast. They were much more impressed by the Adelaide and Victoria Rivers.

The Larakia and Wagait peoples had lived around Darwin harbour for an unknown, but probably long, period before Stokes set eyes on it: and it is by no means certain that he was the first non-Aboriginal to discover it. The Chinese (Ming period) figurine found at Doctor's Gully in 1879 raises the question of whether some parts of the great Chinese fleets which roamed the seas of south-east Asia from 1405 to 1431 touched there.⁽⁴⁾ There is also the whole fascinating question of sixteenth-century Portugese discoveries in north Australian waters, raised by K. G. MacIntyre in his book *The Secret Discovery of Australia*.⁽⁵⁾ Again, Philip Parker King, predecessor

to Stokes in the north coast survey had sighted the harbour entrance twenty years earlier. On 28 August, 1819 he was in Shoal Bay, north of Lee Point. Sailing westward from there he noted; “to the south was a deep opening trending to the south-east of a river-like appearance”. He speculated that “the entrance may possibly form a convenient port”⁽⁶⁾ and he came close enough to see the outer part of Bynoe harbour and name it Paterson Bay (now Port Paterson). But, strangely, considering the care he had taken in surveying the Coburg Pensinsula, Van Diemen Gulf, Bathurst and Melville Islands and the Vernons — he sailed on without further investigation. Perhaps, having spent so much time in that area, he was simply impatient to move on; his Instructions directed him to investigate the whole vast coastline from Cape Arnhem to Cape Leeuwin. So Stokes and the crew of *Beagle*’s whaleboat became the first known non-Aboriginal persons to set foot on the Port Darwin shore.

Who were these men and how did they come to be there? They were part of a relatively new section within the Royal Navy — the Hydrographic Section. Until late in the eighteenth century European navigators suffered from an almost total inability to calculate accurately their longitude. For centuries past they had been able to fix latitude (i.e. distance north or south of the equator) reasonably well by observing the angle of the sun above the horizon at local noon time; but sea distances east or west of any given point can only be measured accurately when the precise time difference between the start point and the position of the ship is known; and this only became possible when Harrison developed and refined his chronometers in the 1760s. At the same time another method of determining longitude became available; Dr. Nevil Maskelyne, Britain’s Astronomer Royal, issued the first Nautical Almanac in 1767. The tables contained in the Almanac enable navigators to determine longitude through angular measurement of the moon from the sun or certain selected stars. But for accurate charting, the more precise time difference method was needed. Captain James Cook, in his great voyages of the 1770s, was amongst the first to use it successfully.

There were still problems; chronometers had to be wound carefully each day and rarely would one keep sufficiently good time to last the length of a prolonged survey voyage. Thus hydrographic surveyors carried several chronometers. Flinders, during his exploration and survey of the Australian coast, carried up to a dozen. Flinders’ brother was charged with the duty of daily winding. He succeeded in infuriating his brother and completely disorganised the expedition by allowing all of them to run down and stop. The *Beagle*, at one stage, carried 22 chronometers,⁽⁷⁾ that, surely, must come close to being a record number — and pity help the unfortunate officer who had to decide which of 22 times was the correct one!

The British Admiralty appointed its first official Hydrographer in 1795. He was Alexander Dalrymple, one of the most notable geographers of the time and, previously, hydrographer to the British East India Company. He had also been a rival to Cook for command of the *Endeavour* in 1769 and, in later years, one of the chief opponents of the proposals to establish a convict settlement at Botany Bay. Cook gained the command of *Endeavour* when Admiralty decided they could not accept the idea of a civilian controlling a navy ship. It may be suspected, too, that they could not accept Dalrymple’s arrogance and hot temper, either. These characteristics did not endear him to the Lords Commissioners when he became naval Hydrographer. Neither did accusations that he spent more time looking after

the interests of the Royal (Scientific) Society than those of the navy; and in 1808, the Admiralty replaced him with a naval officer, Captain Thomas Hurd. Dalrymple died a few weeks later, of apoplexy caused—according to rumour — by loss of his post.

Hurd set out to turn the Hydrographic survey into a fully professional service. Men like Cook and Flinders picked up their skills as best they could and the Admiralty allowed them to retain the copyright of the charts they drew; an odd practice which forced the Admiralty to repurchase the charts that they had commissioned when they wished to distribute them to naval ships. Hurd changed all of that. In 1812, the first three specially-fitted survey ships appeared on the Navy list and Hurd saw to the training of their officers. The long series of armed clashes between Britain and France, beginning with the Seven Years War (1756-63) and ending with the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, had taught the Admiralty the value of good charts. Hurd and his successors were able to build up the Hydrographic Service steadily. Fifteen ships were in service, in every corner of the world, in 1829; nineteen in 1838; twenty-four in 1850. By then, Admiralty charts had reached the position they still hold today, as the world's best.

With the coming of a full-time naval hydrographic service, there arose a new breed of naval officer: professional hydrographic surveyor. At first most of these men, like Cook and Flinders before them, had seen war service against the French before moving to the survey side of naval operations; but increasingly, the service came to be manned by officers who spent the whole of their professional lives as naval surveyors. P. P. King was a notable example of the former kind. Born, the son of Lieutenant-Governor P. G. King, on Norfolk Island in 1793, he entered the navy in 1807 as a 'first class volunteer', the usual method of entry for budding officers. He fought the French with distinction, earning his lieutenancy in 1814. At war's end in the following year he turned his attention to hydrography and in 1817 was commissioned by the Admiralty to take up the survey of the northern and western coasts of Australia from the point where Flinders had left it 14 years earlier. In a series of great voyages between 1817 and 1823 he made his name as a hydrographer. The Admiralty sent him to South American waters with two ships, the 330 ton *Adventure* and the 235 ton *Beagle*, in 1825. He returned to England in 1830, transferred to 'half-pay' (reserve) status and went out to Australia to take up land he owned near Penrith. He lived there, as one of the pillars of N.S.W. society, until his death in 1856.

John Stokes, by contrast, never left the hydrographic service. He was the second son of Henry Stokes, who owned an estate called 'Scotchwell' in Pembrokeshire.

There are some indications that Henry Stokes may have been a successful businessman, an occupation not then considered to be entirely 'respectable' — and, as naval historian Michael Lewis has noted, 99.6 of Royal Navy officers who entered the service between 1814 and 1849 were sons of nobility, gentry or professional men, all of 'respectable' standing.

Whatever his claims to social respectability, John Stokes managed to join the navy as a first class volunteer in 1824, at the remarkably young age of 12 years. In 1825 he transferred as a midshipman to H.M.S. *Beagle*. He stayed with her for 18 years, ending as her commander during the last two years of her Australian survey, 1841-3.

Such continuity of service on one ship would scarcely have been possible in normal naval services; both the *Beagle* and Stokes were occupied in survey work for the whole period.

Beagle was built at the Naval Dockyard, Woolwich, in 1819. She belonged to the class known as 'ten-gun brigs', "coffins, as they are not infrequently known in the service", according to Stokes and he asserted "notwithstanding which, she has proved herself, under every possible variety of trial, in all kinds of weather, an excellent sea boat".⁽⁸⁾

After 18 years in her, Stokes should have known; and the *Beagle's* service record in some of the most treacherous seas of the world indicates that he was right.

In 1825 France and England agreed to co-operate in charting the South American coast in the interests of trade. France took the Brazilian coast as her field of operations; the British, whose South American trade was mainly with Chile and Peru, took their coasts and those of Patagonia and Tierra Del Fuego. To the latter area went the *Adventure* and *Beagle* in the same year. King, on the *Adventure*, had overall command. Commander Pringle Stokes — no relation to John Stokes — captained the *Beagle*. They faced five years of grinding work on one of the wildest, coldest and stormiest coasts of the world, in ships propelled by sail alone and quite unable to drive to windward like a modern yacht. The strain wore King to a shadow and broke his health for a time — a major reason for his decision to swap the life of a naval surveyor for that of an Australian country gentleman in 1830. Pringle Stokes was worse affected. He committed suicide in his cabin and command of the *Beagle* passed to Robert Fitzroy.

Fitzroy continued to command the *Beagle* when she was sent back alone to South America in 1831. John Stokes went with him as mate and assistant surveyor, on the voyage that was eventually to make the *Beagle* the most famous survey ship of all time, because the young Charles Darwin shipped on her and, during the voyage, gained the ideas which later led to his theories on the evolution of the primates including man. From Darwin's letters and journals, a vivid picture of Robert Fitzroy can be had. He came from the nobility. His father was General Lord Charles Fitzroy; his mother a daughter of the Marquis of Londonderry; and he was first cousin to the Duke of Grafton. The ducal house of Grafton was notable for a strain of eccentricity — some said madness — and Robert Fitzroy, it seems, was no exception. He has been well portrayed in the BBC television series on Darwin and the voyage of the *Beagle*; charismatic leader, magnificent seaman, man of great courage and endurance, generous friend — yet subject to prolonged bouts of black depression and despair. He pursued the survey of Tierra del Fuego with great determination; but after three years, his crew had had enough. In October 1834 the *Beagle* rested in the Chilean Port of Santiago while Fitzroy planned a return to Tierra del Fuego. Charles Darwin wrote to his sister "It is kept very secret, lest the men should desert; every one so hates the confounded country".⁽⁹⁾ Fitzroy thought better of it and decided to return to England via the Galapagos Islands and southern ports of Australia. *Beagle* arrived back in England in November 1836

Fitzroy went ashore and never returned to active service. He became, briefly, a Member of Parliament in 1841, entered New Zealand history as one of that country's more disastrous governors from 1843-1845, served later on the Board of Trade and committed suicide in 1865.

In 1838 the Admiralty decided to send the *Beagle* to complete King's survey in north Australian waters. The Lord Commissioners were particularly interested in the old question which had excited explorers of that coast since the Dutch first hit on it in 1606; were there great rivers which led into the unknown interior of the continent? The river mouths of north Australia are exceedingly difficult to pick out from seaward side. Flinders' otherwise excellent surveys of the Gulf of Carpentaria are remarkable for missing nearly all the major streams; King had discovered the East, West and South Alligator Rivers yet missed the three major rivers of the Northern Territory, the Victoria, Adelaide and Daly. The new commander of the *Beagle*, John Clements Wickham, was left in no doubt that he was to miss nothing. "You will leave no likely opening unexplored, nor disist from its examination until fully satisfied" he was told. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Wickham was another of the navy's highly competent hydrographers. He entered the navy in 1812, served under King in the *Adventure* from 1827-30, became first Lieutenant of the *Beagle* under Fitzroy and took command for the Australian voyage in 1837. Stokes sailed with him as lieutenant and assistant surveyor, a post he owed largely to Fitzroy who told the Lords of the Admiralty;

"Mr. Stokes has been my assistant — by my own choice — during eight long years of rough and trying work. I know not the man I should prefer to him in a professional way — as surveyor or in a private capacity as a staunch and sensible friend".⁽¹¹⁾

Under Wickham's command the *Beagle's* men did indeed find the two major navigable rivers of the Northern Territory, the Victoria and the Adelaide, and they explored both thoroughly to the limits of tidewater. Reports from the *Beagle's* officers were mainly responsible for the events which led to A.C. Gregory's exploration of the Victoria River region in 1855 and for South Australian interest in the Northern Territory which led to annexation, the disastrous settlement at Escape Cliffs and the successful one at Darwin.

Early in 1841 Wickham's health broke down. He retired on half-pay in March of that year, married in Sydney towards the end of 1842 and was appointed a police magistrate in New South Wales. From 1857 to 1859 he was the Government Resident in Brisbane. Thereafter he lived in the south of France and probably died there in the early 1870's. More should be known of him. He played a notable part in the northern survey.

Wickham's retirement left the way open for Stokes to take command of the *Beagle*. He was 33 years old. For the next two years he completed the north Australian survey. When the *Beagle* sailed for England in 1843, the age of significant north coast discoveries was over, with the sole exception of the Daly River; and that stream, with its concealed, shallow approach from Anson Bay had to wait another 22 years before white men found it.

The naval hydrographic service was a small one and it threw men together for long periods of time; the *Beagle's* five year voyages were not unusual. Inevitably, tensions arose. Official accounts of voyages, by Fitzroy, King and Stokes say almost nothing directly of personal relationships. But the less restrained civilian, Charles Darwin, raised the lid a little in writing of Fitzroy's black temper, and in telling his sister Caroline:

“I take the opportunity of McCormick returning to England, being invalided i.e. being disagreeable to the captain and Wickham. He is no loss. Derbyshire is also discharged the service, from his own desire, not choosing his conduct, which has been bad about money matters, to be investigated”.⁽¹²⁾

There are also hints of personal tensions in the official accounts. The crew list of the *Beagle* under Wickham’s command suggests that two of the lieutenants, James Emery and Henry Eden, were senior to Stokes but without his survey experience. Both left the ship in the month when Stokes received the command. However, professional affinity and shared hardship also brought about close friendships. Charles Darwin, inclined to be snobbish and reserved when he first joined the *Beagle*, very soon told his family; “I like the officers much more than I did at first, especially Wickham and young King and Stokes”⁽¹³⁾ and commended them as “evidently ... a very intelligent, active, determined set of young fellows”.⁽¹⁴⁾ He even struck up firm friendships with the ship’s artists, Augustus Earle and Conrad Martens, neither of whom would ever have entered his social circle in England. Coincidentally both men became major figures in the history of art in early Australia. Earle, en route from London to India in 1824, was stranded on Tristan da Cunha for eight months. Rescued by the *Admiral Cockburn* he was put ashore at Hobart and, making the most of his accidental arrival in Australia, he moved to Sydney, painted the portraits of successive governors Brisbane and Darling and became the leading portrait and landscape painter of New South Wales until he departed to continue his wanderings in 1827. He joined the *Beagle* in October 1831. Illness — perhaps brought on by what Darwin called “the frank licentiousness of his manners”⁽¹⁵⁾ forced him to leave the ship at Montevideo in August 1832.

Conrad Martens, 31 years old, son of a German father and an English mother, took Earle’s place on the *Beagle*. His watercolours illustrated the *Beagle’s* voyage until October 1834, when he left her in the Chilean Port of Valparaiso. In May 1835 he arrived in Sydney. He spent the rest of his long life in Australia producing hundreds of fine sketches and landscape paintings. He is probably best known for his studies of Sydney harbour. He remained a lifelong friend of Charles Darwin. So did John Stokes.

An enduring thread of friendship and interconnections runs through the lives of the early hydrographic surveyors. P. P. King’s father, Phillip Gidley King, had governed New South Wales from 1800 to 1806 and had done all he could to help Mathew Flinders with his survey voyages of 1801-3. Flinders became a family friend and is said to have introduced King’s son to the Admiralty hydrographer, Captain Hurd. From that meeting stemmed King’s later survey career. P. P. King did not forget his debt to Flinders. In 1853, as a member of the N.S.W. Legislative Council, he pushed through the grant of a pension to Flinders’ daughter and grandson. That pension paid for the grandson’s education and laid the basis for his later fame as the eminent archaeologist, Sir Flinders Petrie. Another grandson of King’s, Phillip Gidley King, son of P. P. King, sailed as a young midshipman on the *Beagle’s* 1831-6 voyage, leaving the ship in the latter year to join his father in Australia. He is the “young King” referred to by Darwin as a friend; and the King family estate outside Sydney became a second home to the officers of the *Beagle* whenever they were in that port during the six years of their Australian voyage.

John Septimus Roe, P. P. King’s lieutenant and friend during his northern survey voyages of 1817-22, also befriended the *Beagle’s* officers. Roe had been with Gordon

Bremer on the *Tamar* when Bremer founded the ill-fated Fort Dundas settlement on Melville Island in 1824; but, like King, he saw better opportunities in Australia than in the Royal Navy. In 1829 he went on to half-pay, and sailed with Stirling on the *Parmelia* to become one of the founders of Western Australia, Surveyor-General of that colony for 42 years and a leading citizen of Perth. The Swan River settlement, ten years after its founding, was not much of a place — “You might run it through an hourglass in a day”, according to a navy quartermaster—⁽¹⁶⁾ but Roe’s influence and hospitality helped to make it a pleasant port of call. So did the local belles who, according to one of the *Beagle’s* young officers, Crawford Pasco, saw very little of eligible young men and found the *Beagle’s* visits quite sufficient excuse to hold a ball.⁽¹⁷⁾

Whatever romances may have blossomed in Perth, they did not end in marriage; but John Wickham was not the only officer of the *Beagle* who married an Australian girl. In 1841 John Stokes married Fanny Jane, daughter of Major Marlay of the Port Phillip district. She returned to England with him with their son, Australian-born in 1843. Crawford Pasco, too, married an Australian girl, but he was rather more leisurely about it. Their engagement lasted 10 years while he roamed the world in naval service. At least when he did marry her he settled down, as a police magistrate in Melbourne.

The camaraderie of the surveying service had its practical uses to the *Beagle’s* officers. P. P. King and John Roe were excellent sources of advice on everything from tides to native customs on the north coast. When Stokes had to leave his young wife in Sydney for long months while he was away in the north, the King family drew her into their social circle and looked after her with kindness. In 1842 Roe urged Stokes to quit the navy and take the post of Deputy Surveyor-General under him. Stokes wavered but eventually refused. Roe also offered a post in his office to another of the *Beagle’s* officers, Lieutenant Lewis Fitzmaurice, when he had the misfortune to shatter his ankle with an accidental musket shot. Fitzmaurice preferred England and a naval pension, but another of the *Beagle’s* officers, Benjamin Helpman, did take a government post in Western Australia.

Stokes noted that of the 14 officers, 42 seaman and 8 marines who sailed from England on the *Beagle* in 1837, only John Wickham, himself, the ship’s surgeon Benjamin Bynoe, the Boatswain Thomas Sorrell and two marines had served in both the ship’s previous voyages.⁽¹⁸⁾ Bynoe harbour is the surgeon’s memorial. He seems to have been a resourceful and adaptable man, respected by officers and crew. He was certainly durable. When last traced, in 1861, he was still at sea in the naval service. Unfortunately, the fate of Thomas Sorrell and the two long-serving marines is unknown, though one of the latter may have been John Brown for whom Stokes found a post ashore when the *Beagle* returned to England. A junior officer, Alexander Osborne, had served on the 1831-6 voyage. He, like so many educated men in that age of sentiment and savagery, tried his hand at poetry, as the following sample from the Stokes Papers testifies:

“Happy the crew commanded by the brave,
May they glide o’er in peace the mighty wave:
Success attend them whereso’er they roam
Let them again review their native home,
Oh Heaven! keep them from all danger free
Oh guide them safely o’er each boisterous sea

Protect them power of Infinity.
 Be kind ye zephyrs, billows cease your roar,
 E'er waft them gently to each far off shore;
 And when each Strait's surveyed; explored each sea,
 Gallant bark! again we'll welcome thee
 Loud in applause to manifest her joy
 England shall welcome too the brave Fitzroy".⁽¹⁹⁾

The verse may border on doggerel, but the warmth of feeling is sincere and, no doubt, flattery didn't do Osborne's career any harm either.

But, Osborne, like Fitzmaurice, had the misfortune to be severely wounded by the accidental firing of a musket and he was invalided from the navy in 1839. A letter of 1840 shows he was still in touch with Stokes then. By 1849 he had disappeared from the navy list.

Perhaps the most unlucky of the *Beagle's* officers was Lieutenant Graham Gore. He came from a line of seafarers; his grandfather had sailed under Captain Cook and his father with William Bligh. He himself had served extensively on Asian stations and had been on a polar voyage. In April 1841 he came down from India to join H.M.S. *Herald* at Sydney, only to find that his ship had left Australian waters. He volunteered to join the *Beagle* in place of Lieutenant Emery.

In Stokes' words he "proved himself throughout the remainder of the voyage of the greatest value, both to the service and the friend who here seeks to do justice to his worth".⁽²⁰⁾ Like all other wind-driven survey ships that worked on the north coast of Australia the *Beagle* returned south during the Wet each year. During part of 1842 the ship spent some months in surveying the Tasmanian coast. It seems that Gore met the island's governor, Sir John Franklin. Franklin, a noted polar explorer, had also served as a midshipman under Mathew Flinders and he gave the *Beagle's* men a great deal of help. At that time he was planning for his return to England and further polar exploration. Gore sailed back to England in the *Beagle*. Stokes strongly recommended him for promotion. Stokes noted that all the ship's junior officers received promotion soon after the *Beagle* paid off, but, to his great disappointment, Gore did not and, as Stokes put it "was compelled to seek it by a second voyage to the North Pole".⁽²¹⁾ In 1845 he sailed in the *Erebus* with Franklin in search of the North West Passage. In 1846 he was promoted to the rank of Commander. He could never have known it. He died in the Arctic ice with the rest of the expedition.

Another ex-officer of the *Beagle*, James Sullivan, eventually became Admiral Sir James; Stokes did well too. On 18 October 1843 he paid off the *Beagle's* crew at Woolwich Naval Depot and himself left the ship he had served in for 18 years.

The official voyaging accounts of 19th century British naval officers were notably impersonal documents — for instance, nowhere in Stokes' account of his Australian voyages is there the least hint that he had acquired a wife and child in Australia — but he could not entirely repress his feelings when he wrote of the final parting:

"After giving the men their certificates, I loitered a short time to indulge in those feelings that naturally arose on taking a final leave of the poor old *Beagle* at the same place where I first joined her in 1825. Many events have occurred since my first trip to sea in her: I have seen her under every variety of circumstance, placed in peculiar situations and fearful positions, from nearby, the antarctic to the tropic; cooling ~~ing~~ ^{ed} by the frigid clime of the extreme of South America, or

parched by the heats of North Australia; under every vicissitude, from the grave to the gay, I have struggled along with her; and after wandering together for eighteen years ... I naturally parted from her with regret".⁽²²⁾

Stokes remained ashore for some time. In 1846 he was promoted to Captain and in the following year was sent in the steamer *Acheron* to survey the coasts of New Zealand. The governor there, George Grey, was an old friend. In 1837 the *Beagle* had carried him from England to Capetown on his way to mount an exploration of the desert areas of north western Australia and had met him again when harsh conditions forced him back to the coast. Stokes and the *Acheron* remained in New Zealand waters for four years; but north Australia kept its leading place in his imagination. He dreamed of it as a second England of the future, forecasting that "ere long the now level horizon would be broken by a succession of tapering spires rising from the many christian hamlets that must ultimately stud this country"⁽²³⁾ and his surviving correspondence shows that during the 1850s he lobbied the British government and the Royal Geographical Society extensively to plant settlements in north Australia in order, as he put it, to "prevent the French taking the wind out of our sails there".⁽²⁴⁾ The French, by then, had shifted their interests to the Pacific; and British governments were more interested in trade treaties backed by the might of the British navy than in acquiring new colonies of their own. But Stokes' lobbying did help to set off the events which led to A. C. Gregory's expedition from the Victoria River to Queensland in 1855-6. That expedition in its turn led to South Australian settlement of the Territory. Perhaps it is just as well that Stokes never saw north Australia again after 1842. I doubt, even if he were able to see it now, whether he would recognise his "christian hamlets" in the Territory's towns.

Stokes seems to have been ashore, living on his Scotchwell estate, for most of the 1850s. He surveyed the coast of Devon between 1859 and 1862. That was his last active surveying role. He was promoted to Rear-Admiral in 1864, retired in 1870, was elevated to Vice Admiral (on the retired list) in 1871 and to Admiral in 1877. He died at Scotchwell on 11 June 1885.

Stokes came close to being the epitome of the 19th century British naval surveyor. A modern hydrographic surveyor, Lieutenant-Commander G. C. Ingleton, has assessed him as "a most lovable personality" and "one of the best and most scientific of the early marine surveyors".⁽²⁵⁾ Much of the work done by the *Beagle* on the north coast is still incorporated in charts today and his delightful personality comes out in his letters and seeps through the pages of his official voyaging narrative, even in his fondness for dreadful puns such as his remark, (after explaining to his British readers that Australian bush houses were roofed with bark stripped from nearby trees) that "the approach to human habitation is not announced by the barking of dogs but by the barking of trees!"⁽²⁶⁾ Near death from an Aboriginal spear-thrust, he could even find wry humour in surgeon Bynoe's pious hope that the wound might not prove fatal. He saw no loss to a commander's dignity in trying his hand at taming a dingo, in eating 'alligator' (crocodile) meat "by no means bad", he said⁽²⁷⁾ or in allowing the crew to use the ship's telescopes for spotting girls as the *Beagle* drew into Swan River after months at sea. His crew had much to thank him for. He paid strict attention to diet and cleanliness, thus keeping them healthy except, as King and Flinders had found before him, for dysentery picked up when the ship visited Timor. He took pleasure in camping with them when the *Beagle's* boats explored the northern rivers, yarning and smoking around the fire at night; and in that age of severe Service discipline he was notably humane. The *Beagle's* log book

shows that only two men were flogged during his command, both lightly and both for serious offences.

In this age when nothing appears to be beyond doubt, the certainty of Stokes' vision appears remarkable. He had a naive and absolutely unshakable faith in British Christian civilisation and in the worth of the work he was doing. In July 1839 the *Beagle* called at the new settlement of Port Essington. Bishop Broughton had sent up a prefabricated church and as Stokes watched it being erected he reflected:

"It is highly characteristic of our countrymen, that where with other nations, the tavern, the theatre, the dancing house, are among the earliest buildings in a new settlement, with us everywhere the church is first thought of ... It seems, indeed that wherever the flag of Britain floats, there is made known the Word of God in all its purity; and, as an empire has been vouchsafed us on which the sun never sets, the extent of our influence for good in this respect is incalculable. We may venture to express our sincere hope, that our country will ever continue to enjoy this noble supremacy." (28)

Alas for British purity! The church blew down in the great cyclone of November 1839 and was never rebuilt.

Stokes had all the explorer's zeal to be first; as he put it, to sail "waters unfurrowed by any preceding keel ... to ascend a hill and say that you are the first civilised man that has ever trod on this spot", (29) and when his boat's crew miraculously survived the bursting of a gun without major damage he wrote with obvious sincerity;

"Our preservation can only be attributed to Him whose eye is on all his creatures ... Without intending to be presumptuous, we may be permitted to believe that we were spared partly on account of the service on which we were engaged — so beneficial to humanity, so calculated to promote the spread of civilisation which must ever be the harbinger of Christianity." (30)

Holding such views, it is not surprising that he viewed the Aborigines as raw material for conversion to black Britons — or rather, black servants of what he termed "a superior class of beings". (31) He took a great interest in the Aborigines and wrote with considerable perception; "If we would understand, truly, what our savage brethren are like, we must penetrate into the woods and the wilds where they are to be found; we must mingle with them in the exercise of their domestic avocations; we must see them as they are". (32)

His British ethnocentricity prevented him from seeing them as they were. But his humanity prompted him to deal with them gently. He was horrified and ashamed to hear of the Tasmanian massacres; he never allowed his men to fire on Aborigines or to show aggression towards them; and, vigilant in the cause of avoiding conflict, he himself was the only man of the *Beagle's* crew unlucky or unwary enough to be speared by the blacks.

A great deal has been said about the *Beagle's* officers. Much less can be said about the seaman. They wrote no official accounts, journals, diaries or even letters, since most of them would certainly have been illiterate. They were no longer subject to the press gangs as they had been during the Napoleonic Wars — all of the *Beagle's* crew were volunteers — but naval discipline was still harsh and the pay, 1 pound 14s a month for an Able Seaman in 1837, was less than wages obtainable in New South Wales at that time, though good compared to English standards. Few men made the navy a career Service as did the officers; and most of those who did were men who

had risen to some rank, like Thomas Sorrell, boatswain of the *Beagle*. British seamen were to be found in every port of the world; and a ship signing off men in Australia could reasonably expect to sign on others there. It has been noted that Sorrell was the only seaman on the *Beagle's* third voyage who had served on the earlier two, and the turnover of crewmen during the ship's five years on the Australian coast was high. The *Beagle* left England with forty seamen, 21 Boys First Class and 13 Boys Second Class served in her during the voyage. Remarkably few were Australians. All the seaman are listed as British-born, except for 1 Canadian, 1 Bermudan, one Jamaican and one American. Two of the Boys were Sydney-born; all the rest were British. One other person may have been Australian-born; H.C.B. Marlay, aged 15, shipped as a clerk from Sydney in April 1841 and left the ship before she sailed for England early in 1843. It is tempting to speculate that he might have been a relation, perhaps a brother to Stokes' first wife and that Stokes was indulging in a little nepotism; but confirmation is lacking. The youngest Boy was 12, the oldest seaman 45 and 70 of the men were aged between 20 and 29 years. Only four or five were veterans in their 40s, with 15 - 20 years of service. Perhaps reflecting the necessity for agility in rapid sail handling aloft, nearly all were under 170 cm in height, and, not surprisingly, only 13 were married. Most of them signed off in Sydney; but Adelaide, Melbourne, Port Dalrymple, Hobart and Swan River were also ports where men left the *Beagle*. There is no easy way of knowing how many of them stayed in Australia as did some of their officers. They were the muscle and sinew of the northern survey; as is so often the case in history, those who did much of the work remain unknown, just names on a Muster sheet.

What of the *Beagle*? Her fate is uncertain. After her return to England in 1843 she was handed over to the Customs Service. G. C. Ingleton says she was eventually stationed at Southend, and was sold out of government service in 1870 for the sum of 525 pounds; ⁽³⁴⁾ but Mr. Marsden Hordern, who has been researching the *Beagle's* Australian voyage for some years past, believes that craft referred to by Ingleton is a later ship of the same name and that the *Beagle* of Stokes and Darwin was destroyed at a much earlier date. ⁽³⁵⁾ It is a pity. She was one of the great ships of north Australian history.

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