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Robert FitzRoy

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Robert FitzRoy was a British commander responsible of the HMS Beagle expedition between the decades of the 1820s and 1830s. His travel journal, published in 1839, compared the Iberian catholic colonisation of South America, and the expansion projects of the British Empire.

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Professor of History of International Relations at the Fluminense Federal University, Brazil. Research fellowship CNPQ level 2. Graduated, Master and PhD in Social History at the University of São Paulo. The PhD thesis focused on Robert FitzRoy in the British Navy and as an imperial agent. It establishes comparisons and connections between the strategies of territorial occupation with the use of the military in New Zealand and Argentina in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Robert FitzRoy (Ampton, 1805 - Norwood, 1865) was a commander of the British *Royal Navy*, part of the generation of men who mapped the globe with ships, kept watch over the seas, and made Great Britain the hegemonic power of the nineteenth century. He was principally active in the South Atlantic, but he also had an important role in the politics and debates about the future of the Empire.



Robert FitzRoy

Born into a family of the British political elite, among his uncles was a duke (Grafton) and a marquis (Londonderry). The latter was one of the most important politicians in the 1810 and 1820s, Lord Castlereagh, Secretary of State of War and Colonies and representative of the United Kingdom at the Congress of Vienna.

FitzRoy was admitted to the British Royal Naval College in Portsmouth in 1818 and made a lieutenant in 1824. Soon afterwards he was commissioned for missions in the Mediterranean and in 1827 was transferred to the South Atlantic squadron. In the following years he became captain of *HMS Beagle*. He commanded this expeditionary ship until 1830 and on its following voyage, between 1831 and 1836.

As an agent of the British Empire he participated in an immense knowledge enterprise, producing maps and nautical charts. The sending of HMS Beagle and dozens of other vessels on expeditions to the South Atlantic in those years demonstrated an alteration in the place occupied by the region in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Previously it had been closed to foreigners by the Iberian crowns but after their independences the new states opened to foreigners, especially the British and their investments.

During *HMS Beagle*'s first voyage, FitzRoy captured and brought to Britain four natives from Tierra del Fuego to be catechized, 'civilized' by Anglican pastors. This action, a reinterpretation of the old Catholic evangelizing strategies, dialogued with the strength conquered by the movement for the abolition of slavery and the rise of the religious and moral discourse associated with it: the humanitarianism.

FitzRoy acted on the Court and the Admiralty for a new expedition by HMS Beagle to bring back to Tierra del Fuego one of the 'civilized' natives, baptized as Jemmy Button, accompanied by an Anglican missionary. This was the historic voyage on which the naturalist Charles Darwin was embarked.

Shortly after landing, the indigenous man abandoned the missionary. The failure of this mission is interesting to understand the efforts made to create a new type of conversion of Amerindian peoples, the difficulties in relations between Europeans and indigenous peoples, and the resistance strategies adopted. It was a clear and direct refusal of a type of relationship which assumed a moral, religious, civilizational, and knowledge superiority. It refused also the reinforcement of political, economic, and social hierarchies which replaced Spanish with British, little different to the indigenous peoples.

However, Robert FitzRoy's role in the establishment of bridges and connections between Great Britain and Latin America was not limited to this failed attempt. Nor should he be seen only as the captain who sailed with Charles Darwin. The naturalist was just one - and certainly at that moment not the most important - man embarked on that ship.

FitzRoy was always linked to politics and spent more than two years writing "*Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of H.M.S. Adventure and Beagle*", published in 1839. The book presented the reports of the *Beagle*'s two voyages, including the writings of previous commanders (Phillip Parker King and Pringle Stokes).

His work circulated widely at the time and is marked by his place of enunciation, showing his Western European, British, Anglican, and nobility filters. Following the model of travel accounts of that time he described the nature and societies visited, offering interpretations and constructing narratives. He established comparisons between what he described as the incapacity of Iberian Catholic colonization, with the possibilities and duties of a new British and Anglican colonization in the unexplored Oceania.

In describing Brazil, his criticisms centered on slavery, bringing into his narrative the discourse of the political and religious group to which he was linked. His writings were part of a new generation of accounts, no longer only centered on the exuberance of nature and its economic possibilities, but also on the incapacity of local elites to manage their natural resources, as they were morally inferior.

In the case of Argentina, his criticisms were aimed at the political instability, disputes between the local elites, and the exploitation of indigenous peoples. In the effort to reinforce the new place of Great Britain in the post-Napoleonic world, he drew on a series of stereotypes about Spain to narrate its old colonies, describing them as marked by backwardness, religiosity, ignorance, and mysticism.

He was a typical man of the Empire, narrating to his countrymen and contemporaries, using the account of his journeys for domestic and international political purposes. He constructed a narrative of South America in which he presented little interest and disposition to learn from the peoples visited, but made much effort to reinforce and legitimate the new place of Great Britain in the world and defend the expansion of the Empire.

In producing what were considered for practically a century the most precise nautical charts of the extreme south of the continent, he ignored the indigenous knowledge and names of places and baptized them with references to Britain and his own family. The Beagle Channel, Mount Darwin, the Londonderry islands, and Cape Castlereagh reinforce today the memory of his passage, as well as FitzRoy Peak, baptized by the Argentinean Francisco 'Perito' Moreno in 1877 in honor and recognition of the mapping made by him in the region.

Charles Darwin named a species of conifer *Fitzroya patagonica* and a cetacean as *Delphinus fitzroyi*. However, the publication of "On the origin of species" in 1859 demarcated a rupture between both, since the naval commander was extremely religious. The burden of having invited the naturalist on the

expedition is alleged to have been one of the central motives for his suicide in 1865.

FitzRoy was a British man of his time. He reached high rank in the Navy, becoming vice-admiral, was governor of the colony of New Zealand, and was one of the most important men behind the British occupation of that archipelago. His account of the voyages of *HMS Beagle* allowed him become a member of the *Royal Society*, a key figure in the innovations of naval techniques at the time, and to be one of the greatest references about voyages circumnavigating the globe, with examples of his book being found in the libraries of European and American navies.

He was one of many men from the Empire to circulate in Latin America in the nineteenth century and to become a reference in different areas. His writings encouraged many others to visit and become active in the region, despite the recurrent discourse about political instability, economic instability, and general inefficiency.

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