Did Darwin change his mind about the Fuegians?

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Shocked by what he considered to be the savagery he encountered in Tierra del Fuego, Charles Darwin ranked the Fuegians lowest among the human races. An enduring story has it, however, that Darwin was later so impressed by the successes of missionaries there, and by the grandeur they discovered in the native tongue, that he changed his mind. This story has served diverse interests, religious and scientific. But Darwin in fact continued to view the Fuegians as he had from the start, as lowly but improvable. And while his case for their unity with the other human races drew on missionary evidence, that evidence concerned emotional expression, not language.

Introduction

‘The language of these people, according to our notions, scarcely deserves to be called articulate. Captain Cook has compared it to a man clearing his throat… ’ So wrote Charles Darwin, in his popular account of the Beagle voyage of 1831-6, recalling the speech of the native inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America. Nowhere else in the world, Darwin supposed, was humankind to be found in so wretched a state.1 Nearly 40 years later, the memory of the Fuegians, and his own reaction to their naked, paint-streaked, tangle-haired savagery, was still vivid. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, he wrote in the Descent of Man (1871), ‘for the reflection at once rushed into my mind – such were our ancestors’.2

But, toward the end of his life, did he come to think he had judged the Fuegians too harshly? The notion of a large, late change of mind about them has been circulating for more than a century. In 1888, in an influential lecture on the origin of language, the Canadian-American ethnologist Horatio Hale applauded Darwin for the ‘noble candor’ that had led him to admit and correct his mistake about the Fuegians.3 Similar statements flourish today. They can be found, for example, in a recent issue of the magazine of the South American Mission Society, quoting from letters where Darwin praised the missionaries in Tierra del Fuego for achieving far more than he would ever have predicted.4 Scientists too acknowledge a belated repentance. In the Tierra del Fuego region, conservation specialists have been developing a ‘biocultural’ approach that takes seriously local natural knowledge. To underscore the richness of that knowledge, the project scientists point out that a 32,000-word dictionary compiled by a nineteenth-century missionary, Thomas Bridges, ‘made such a strong impression on Darwin that he radically transformed his point of view’, revising upward his estimate of Fuegian intellectual powers and seeking afresh for the roots of human racial unity.5

Like the notorious tale of Darwin’s deathbed conversion to Christianity, this story of a near-deathbed conversion to a more enlightened view of what his generation called the ‘lower races’ has proved tenacious. And as with the former, the evidence for the latter is, we shall see, uncompelling.6 But in considering it we have the chance to take up a number of worthwhile questions. There is, most obviously, the question of Darwin’s attitude to race, the subject of a major new study from Adrian Desmond and James Moore.7 There is too the question of the real relationship, to be examined in detail below, between the missionary Bridges and Darwin. Bridges did help Darwin to mount what he saw as a novel argument for human racial unity. But Bridges’ Fuegian dictionary (also mentioned in the missionary magazine article) had nothing to do with it. And then there is the question of how Darwin’s positive remarks about missionaries and Fuegians came to be so well known and charged with significance. The answer will serve as a reminder – timely in the wake of the 2009 anniversary – that, for all their differences, religious and scientific agendas can converge in celebration of Darwin. Ours is not, it turns out, the first age to be reassured that ‘Darwin loves you’. Even if you’re Fuegian.8

What Darwin learned from Bridges

We begin with Thomas Bridges (Figure 1) – a small, straight man, who believed in God’s providence and was

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unafraid of risk’, in the words of a later visitor to Patagonia. Born in Britain in the early 1840s and orphaned at a young age, Bridges was adopted by an Anglican missionary who, in 1856, brought the boy and the rest of the family to Keppel Island, in the western Falklands. On behalf of the Patagonian Missionary Society (predecessor to the South American Missionary Society), they aimed to make a success of a recently founded, Fuegian-directed mission settlement on the island. By that time, Tierra del Fuego itself had defeated several attempts to establish a settlement there. The new plan was to attract Fuegian visitors across to the Falklands and shower them with kindness, so that, gradually, word would spread back home of the missionaries’ benign intentions. Civilizing and Christianizing would follow in their turn. An important part of the plan was the learning and teaching of languages – and here Bridges excelled. He quickly became the chief interpreter, especially into and out of the language of the Yamana or Yahgan people. (Darwin’s term ‘Fuegian’ is misleading; there were several tribes on the archipelago, each speaking a different language.)

In the early 1860s, around the time that young Bridges took over as head of the Keppel mission, he received a list of queries from Darwin – not, it seems, because Darwin had addressed these to Bridges (a total unknown), but because Bridges was there, and Darwin, using his connections, had sought the help of the Patagonian Missionary Society in getting his queries to the missionary best placed to answer them. For Darwin, of course, fact-finding by correspondence, indeed by questionnaire, was nothing new. The queries he now sent were of three kinds. Most concerned the emotional expressions of the Fuegians and Patagonians. Did they nod their heads to indicate ‘yes’ and shake them to indicate ‘no’? Did they blush, and if so, what made them blush? And so on, for astonishment, anger, fear, dejection, contempt, and other emotions – nine queries in all. ‘Any information on the manner of expression of countenance of any emotion in savages would be curious’, commented Darwin, ‘and I believe is a subject, which has been wholly overlooked.’ He added: ‘The only satisfactory method to collect information is to make notes at the time.’ There followed a query on the Fuegian notion of ‘feminine beauty’ and three on various aspects of the local animals, domesticated and wild.

After Bridges’ replies arrived in early 1867, Darwin spent the next few years effectively working his way backward through them. His major preoccupation throughout the mid-1860s was with animal and plant variation under domestication; and his two-volume work on the subject, published in 1868, contained a note quoting Bridges’ testimony on how the Fuegians – compared with whom, Darwin noted, ‘[h]ardly any nation is more barbarous’ – took care to ensure that their best female dogs fed well and bred with the best male ones. From the late 1860s to the early 1870s his attention turned squarely to humankind. In The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871), Bridges – albeit unnamed – turned up once again in the notes, as having observed that Fuegian men prefer the looks of European women. (That was not the answer Darwin was looking for, since his sexual-selection theory of racial differentiation depends on each human group having its own standard of beauty; he speculated that either Bridges was in error, or was reporting on the attitudes of that small number of Fuegians ‘who have lived for some time with Europeans, and who must consider us as superior beings’.)

‘Not all the missionaries in the world…’ Bridges does not show up again in the Darwin record until near the end of Darwin’s life. On 18 March 1881, an old friend from the Beagle voyage, Bartholomew James Sullivan – Lieutenant in those days, Admiral Sir now – wrote Darwin a long letter, mainly summarizing a talk that Bridges, visiting England, had given at a recent meeting of the South American Missionary Society. Sullivan had been active in the Society from early days. Over the years, he had kept Darwin informed of its efforts, indeed had acted as intermediary on Darwin’s behalf to get the 1860 expression queries to South America. And Darwin, loyal friend, had always responded encouragingly to Sullivan’s reports. The March 1881 exchange kept to the usual format. But since it went on to serve as evidence for a late, and
language-related, reversal on Darwin’s part regarding the Fuegians, it merits a closer look. 16

Sulivan’s letter began with Bridges’ report that the tradition of native thieving had come to an end at the mission (long since relocated from Keppel Island to Ushaia, in the heart of Tierra del Fuego). Sulivan next turned to language, beginning with an amusing story that Bridges had told to illustrate the difficulties facing the translator. Only after many years, Bridges recalled, did he realize that the natives were singing not the Yamana equivalent of ‘Praise God’ but – because his father had tried to find the Yamana word for ‘praise’ by patting an especially praise-worthy fellow on the shoulder – ‘Slap God’. From there Sulivan recounted in some detail the particulars of Yamana vocabulary (several thousand words were now known) and grammar. ‘Bishop Ryan & several clergymen’, wrote Sulivan, ‘were quite astonished at the perfect character of the language, – and its comprehensiveness. Bridges said it had more inflections than even Greek has, and more words than English.’ The letter closed with remarks on the relations of the various native languages of the region, an update on the mission’s continued thriving (more cottages, more cultivated land, more cattle grazing), and the news that the shouts that had greeted the Beagle voyagers had not, as they had supposed, meant ‘give me’, but ‘be kind to us’. 17

Although Bridges by this time had finished a draft of his Yamana-English dictionary, he reckoned it needed improvement, and spent the rest of his life working on it. (At his death in 1898, it was still unpublished. It migrated into print only in 1933, by which time, as its editors pointed out, both the language and its speakers had virtually disappeared.) 18 So when, on 20 March 1881, Darwin composed his brief letter of reply, all he knew about Bridges’ work was what Sulivan had relayed. The paragraph of Darwin’s that touched on the Fuegians reads in full:

The account of the Fuegians interested not only me, but all my family. It is truly wonderful what you have heard from Mr. Bridges about their honesty and their language. I certainly should have predicted that not all the Missionaries in the world could have done what has been done. 19

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16 On Sulivan, see the biographical entry in the Correspondence of Charles Darwin, cited note 10, p. 704. On the Society as having ‘no warmer friend’ than Sulivan, see Young, R. (1900) From Cape Horn to Panama. Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent (London), p. 135; also p. 30 for his role in setting up the Keppel mission. The Sulivan–Darwin correspondence can be sampled at the Darwin Correspondence Project website, http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/home; see, e.g., B. J. Sulivan to C. Darwin, 25 December 1866 and Darwin’s reply on 31 December 1866.


19 C. Darwin to B. J. Sulivan, 20 March 1881, in the private collection of J. A. Sulivan. Although I have seen a transcription of the full letter, I have quoted from the extract (which presents very minor differences) published in Darwin, F. (1887), The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, 3 vols. John Murray (London), 3, p. 128.
The lowdown on the lowdown for Darwin

In the passage above Darwin seems to say: in the light of the latest about Fuegian improvement and the Fuegian language, I can see that I must have been mistaken about Fuegian lowliness. But that is not quite what he says; and even if he had said that – and in other, less famous correspondence from the time, Darwin more or less did say that – there remains the question of whether the old man is to be trusted about the young man’s views. To take first the question of improvement: there is no sign that Darwin ever doubted that ‘savage’ and ‘barbarous’ peoples could be bettered, Fuegians included. I believe, he had written, in a note in his Beagle account, that ‘in this extreme part of South America, man exists in a lower state of improvement than in any other part of the world’. The phrase ‘lower state of improvement’ is important; it signals, as Stephen Jay Gould stressed, both the bottom-dwelling position to which Darwin assigned the Fuegians and his belief that they were nevertheless redeemable. In the same note, Darwin went on to suggest that, if the Anglicized Fuegians he had got to know on the Beagle – York Minster, Jemmy Button and Fuegia Basket – were anything to go by, Fuegians were capable of far more than one might guess from the poor state of Fuegian arts (Figure 2).

Nor was Darwin ever dubious about the good that missionaries could do in helping those without civilization to acquire it, even in Tierra del Fuego. Support for missionizing was a Darwin-Wedgwood family tradition that, along with hatred of slavery (the two went together), Darwin upheld all his life. His very first publication, co-authored with the Beagle captain Robert FitzRoy, was a defence of missionaries against their critics, including Beagle elect me an honorary member of your society’. (Note the

It must have struck Darwin as interesting indeed to learn that ‘ymmerschooner’, in his transcription, meant ‘be kind to us’, and not ‘give me’. In the Beagle memoir, he had complained of how the Fuegians had kept up their yammerschooner so incessantly that he had come to hate the ‘odious word’. It is one thing for him to have conceded a mistake there. It would have been something else entirely, however, for him to have gone along with the


22 On missionary activities and antislavery campaigning as expressions of the same Christian-humanitarian culture that, through his family, shaped Darwin, see Desmond, A. and Moore, J., Darwin’s Sacred Cause, above cited note 7, esp. pp. 8, 55–58, 101, 261.


25 Sullivan, B. J. (1885) ‘Mr Darwin and the South American Missionary Society’, Daily News, 29 April, p. 6, and C. Darwin to B. J. Sullivan, 30 June [1870], cited note 24. Jonathan Hodge has suggested to me—and an anonymous reviewer agrees—that Darwin may also have been surprised that such good civilizing work was done in one or two generations, as he expected (see, e.g., his B notebook, 3–4) that serious, adaptive, permanent changes require many generations to take place.

26 On Darwin’s ‘linguistic predilection’, see Browne, Charles Darwin: Voyaging, above cited note 25, pp. 250–251, quotation on p. 251; also C. Darwin (1845), Journal of Researches, above cited note 26, p. 222. FitzRoy had made some progress with the vocabularies of the peoples of southern South America; see the word lists in Narrative of the Surveying Voyages, above cited note 1, appendix to vol. 2, pp. 135–142.

clergyman on the ‘perfect character of the language’ as Bridges had disclosed it. In that era, what often lurked behind such talk – not least when it emanated from clergyman – was a desire to show that humankind did not have a Darwinian, up-from-the-ape origin. In the Descent Darwin had confronted the argument directly. ‘The perfectly regular and wonderfully complex construction of the languages of many barbarous nations’, he wrote, ‘has often been advanced as a proof, either of the divine origin of these languages, or of the high art and former civilisation of their founders.’ But regular construction proved no such thing, Darwin continued, firstly because languages are not products of art—not, that is, constructed methodically, with forethought—and secondly because naturalists reserve the term ‘perfection’ for those high degrees of functionality and specialization which if anything make for irregularity. Adopt the naturalists’ usage of ‘perfect’, and the apparent problem disappears. Low peoples speak lowly languages, in keeping with evolutionary theory – and Fuegians included.30

A conversion myth for the times, theirs and ours

The clergymen would yet have their say. In April 1885—3 years after Darwin’s death—the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less, spoke before the annual meeting of the South American Missionary Society. He noted how the Society ‘drew the attention of Charles Darwin, and made him, in his pursuit of the wonders of the kingdom of nature, realise that there was another kingdom just as wonderful and more lasting’.31 What brought the Archbishop’s remark to a wider audience were letters sent to the Daily News. On 24 April it printed an article digesting three of them, all affirming Darwin’s long support for the Society’s efforts and his oft-expressed amazement at their success with the Fuegians. One of the letters, from the Society’s current secretary, referred to Darwin’s correspondence with Sullivan, who was in turn prompted to write. ‘Mr Darwin had often expressed to me his conviction that it was utterly useless to send missionaries to such a set of savages as the Fuegians, probably the very lowest of the human race’, recalled Sullivan, in a letter published on 29 April. He went on to quote retraction after retraction from Darwin, starting in the late 1860s and continuing at regular intervals for the rest of his life. Among the retractions was the one from March 1881, quoted in full.32

Soon other newspapers picked up the story. Readers of the 30 April Leeds Mercury, for example, learned that Sullivan’s letter had exposed ‘Mr. Darwin’s complete conversion to a belief in the power of Christian missionary effort to elevate the most degraded savages’. Nor was Darwin a mere spectator when it came to Christian virtue. By acknowledging his error, he had shown ‘the simplicity and candour which were the beautiful accompaniments of his vast intellectual power and strength of purpose’.33 Horatio Hale would praise Darwin in very similar terms 3 years later. He may have come across a second- or third-hand newspaper account of Suli- van’s letter.34 Another possibility was that he read it in The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, which came out in Britain in 1887 and in the United States in 1888. The editor, Darwin’s son Francis, had included the letter, he explained, in hopes of setting the record straight about his father’s connection with the Society.35 No such luck. Indeed, with Hale, the 1881 Darwin-Sullivan exchange started a parallel life among those scientific workers concerned, for one reason or another, to portray race-hierarchical science as out of step with the times. In Hale’s case, Darwin’s reversal on the Fuegians took its place within what Hale, along with many others, saw as a fundamental shift in biology away from a Darwinian understanding of evolution. Gradual change was out – and with it, the notion that some races occupy lower points than others on an incrementally arisen linear scale. For Hale, the different human races had to be understood as inheritors of the same mental capacity, since that capacity was fixed for all time when, in a single, sudden leap, modern speaking humans evolved out of speechless ancestors.36

Does it matter that, in all probability, Darwin never changed his mind about the (improvable) lowness of the Fuegians? One might think that the enterprisers of mission-aries and scientists stand or fall on their merits, whatever Darwin would have thought. And even the most worshipful of his admirers will admit that, by the light of present-day science, Darwin got lots of things wrong, so the possibility of another mistake should hardly be surprising. The stakes are considerably higher, however, for anyone concerned to understand what Darwin wrought and how science and society have changed since his time. Darwinian biology no longer orders the human races hierarchically, of course. But it once did. Learning to live without the myth of a raceegalitarian Darwin is a long way from learning what brought about the change. But it is a step in the right direction.37

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30 Leeds Mercury, 30 April 1886, p. 4.
31 James Moore has uncovered surprisingly strong links in the 1880s between English evangeli-cals and their counterparts in Toronto, where Hale – who lived in Clinton, Ontario – gave his lecture. See Moore, J., The Darwin Legend, above cited note 6, pp. 88–89, 115–17. These may account for attentiveness among Toronto’s newspapermen to just the sort of pro-evangelical Darwin story doing the rounds in English newspapers in 1885.
32 ‘Mr. Darwin and the South American Missionary Society’, above cited note 20 (24 April) and note 24 (29 April, from Sullivan).
33 Leeds Mercury, 30 April 1886, p. 4.
34 On Darwin’s Descent argument against the existence of high languages among otherwise low peoples, see Radick, G. (2008) ‘Race and Language in the Darwinian Tradition (and what Darwin’s Language-Species Parallels have to do with it)’, Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences 39, pp. 359–370, esp. 359–363. The quotation is from Darwin, C., Descent of Man, above cited note 2, 1, p. 61. We should note a further wrinkle in the Fuegian case: In Darwin’s view, the Fuegians were degenerate descendents of more advanced ancestors, like the peoples he had seen further north in South America. So such ‘perfection’ as Bridges had found in the Fuegians’ language showed that their language had, along with everything else, declined in complexity.
36 ‘Mr. Darwin and the South American Missionary Society’, above cited note 20 (24 April) and note 24 (29 April, from Sullivan).