

# The Visionary Drawing of Explorers

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## Abstract

*Some people who have made history with geographical discoveries and contributed to the evolution of knowledge about our planet have translated the emotion of their discoveries into drawings. In this text, we examine three examples of graphical narratives testifying to great geographical and scientific discoveries. The first is the axonometric drawing of Timbuktu by René Caillié, which presented for the first time an image of this place made mythical by the difficulty of reaching it. The second consists of the profiles and painted cards of landscapes observed by a 22-year-old Charles Darwin as seen from the sea while sailing on the Beagle between South America and Oceania, unknown worlds at the time. The third example is the geographical exploration of David Livingstone in Africa, which culminated in a very interesting drawing of Victoria Falls, which was unknown before then. This image also informs us about the explorers' specific interest in reportage drawing, given the inclusion in Livingstone's group of the graphic artist and painter Thomas Baines, who would follow the exploration to depict the most unexpected views that the group observed. What emerges is the role of drawing as an original testimony for distant observers, but also as a story of strong emotion and fascination with discovery at the limit of distorted vision, where emotion prevails over scientific data, sentiment over objective narration.*

*Keywords: drawing, discovery, narration, vision, explorers.*

## Introduzione

"The possibility of photography with artificial light was established. Nothing remained but to move on to the desired application. The underground world opened an infinite range of operations no less interesting than those on the surface"  
[Nadar 1982, p. 80].

Thus Nadar recounts his emotion around 1861 regarding the possibility of exploring the underground realm of Paris through photographs. As is known, this exploration would be a breakthrough in the history of photography and knowledge about Paris. For the first time, a mysterious, unexplored territory was presented to the world through images. The catacombs and sewers of Paris revealed their mysteries in images produced through the ingenuity of the great French photographer. Thus devel-

oped the idea that new discoveries could and should be shown through photographs; the idea that documentary photography could provide the first and most immediate access to knowledge about new worlds. The same was also true of Armstrong's photos from the Moon and the Mariner IV probe on Mars.

But how was discovery narrated before the invention of photography? How was the emotion of breaching unspoiled spaces described to the world?

Drawing was certainly a fundamental part of the iconic narration of new worlds and new realities.

The immediateness of recounting what was discovered underlies the explorers' fascination with drawing. This moved between objective reconstruction, scientific clas-

sification, and emotional imagination, placing the view of new things at the centre of a moment of immediate representation, which is often more emotional than real, and as such, visionary. "Things seen with the eye and manifestly reproduced with the hand reveal a particular type of immediacy; they are presented as relating to types of representation created directly by man" [Kemp, 1999, p. 34].

As Robert Macfarlane writes, "Notebooks and sketch-books are never only receptacles for finished thought. Their materiality shapes the nature of record. So it is that –reading them back– we can catch glimpses of perception in action, awe as it strikes, or fear at its first-point" [Lewis-Jones, Herbert 2016, p. 9]. In the history of geographical discoveries, drawing has mainly been used for drafting and adjusting geographical maps. The most direct and relevant relationship between discovery and graphical production was precisely in this field, an ancient field that has always followed man's primordial instinct, that is, to control a territory: "When a Tahitian traced a map to explain to Captain Cook what he knew about the geography of the Pacific, it was clear that he and his people were familiar with the idea of representation. In pre-Columbian Mexico, a series of footsteps was used to indicate the streets. Cortés crossed Central America following the canvas map that a cacique had given him" [Wilford 2018, p. 20].

In the cases addressed here, however, excluding part of Charles Darwin's contribution, the issue is the drawn image of places, not their transcription in plan, but the visual perception of the discoveries, the graphical transposition of the views perceived upon their discovery. The drawings by Caillié, Darwin and his companions, and Livingstone recount this emotion. The drawings addressed here present the images of new places to a public seeing them for the first time. In doing so, there is a strong 'visionary' component to this reportage. The drawings recount the fulfilment of an aspiration to know, a 'dream' realized by these authors. In this sense, the definition of 'visionary' attributed to these drawings does not refer as much to its negative meaning bordering on mental disturbance present in the Italian etymology [1] as to the English meaning of the term "visionary, which generally holds markedly positive characteristics that immediately took root. It describes someone with a clear vision of the future and how to welcome and guide it with a nearly



Fig. 1 R. Caillié, *Tonbouctou*, first version, pencil and watercolour, 1827.

Fig. 2 R. Caillié, *Tonbouctou*, second version, pencil and watercolour, 1828.

prophetic character; it describes someone who shows an extraordinary imagination, a powerful creative vein. The great inventors and politicians, the most inspired and inventive artists thus become visionaries" [Visionario, etimologia e significato] [2]. The drawings presented here in their development are a revelation both for those making them and for a public unaware of the places described, who could finally appreciate the images, even with the author's decisive emotional filter. As Berger says, "the drawings present hospitality to the invisible companion at our side" [Berger 2017, p. 132].

### *Timbuktu* by René Caillié (1827–1828)

René Caillié had a strange destiny: passing into history as the first European to return alive from Timbuktu, the mythical city, the door to the Sahara. His expedition was particularly interesting with respect to organization and risk, since he was travelling alone and his scant drawings constitute precious documentation, since they were the first of this legendary city to be seen in Europe. Born in France in 1799, René Caillié lost his parents at an early age and at 16, he embarked on a French military ship for Saint Louis, in French West Africa. Two years later, he returned to Africa to sail up the Senegal River with a British mission, and in 1824 he was back in Saint Louis, developing the idea of reaching Timbuktu.

Being familiar with the indigenous populations of Western Africa and their adversity to French expeditions, he decided to travel alone, pretending to be an Arab and renouncing the vast court of black porters that the Europeans normally flaunted. Based on his idea about the expedition, he obtained financing from the French governor of Saint Louis for an 8-month stay with the nomadic people of Southern Mauritania, where he learned Arabic and Islamic customs. Following this, he decided to self-finance the trip to Timbuktu, but he became aware of a 10,000-franc award from the Société de Géographie of Paris for the first person who could provide original information about the city. After working in Sierra Leone and Guinea to earn enough money for the expedition, he left from Kakony, near Boké on the Nunez River in Guinea. He moved east to Senegal, then crossed the Upper Niger River at Kouroussa. Here the trip was interrupted. Caillié fell sick and remained where



Fig. 3 A. Earle, *Negroes fighting, Brazil, 1824.*

Fig. 4 C. Martens, *Sketch from the album of drawings in Devon, 1828–1932.*



Fig 5 C. Martens, *Fuegian Beagle Voyage*, 1834.

he was for five months, from 3 August 1827 to 9 January of the following year, in the village of Tiémé, in today's Ivory Coast. He left for Djenné in Mali, where he stayed until 23 March. From there, he proceeded to Timbuktu via boat on the Niger River. On 22 April he reached the city he had always dreamed of: "Finally we have arrived happily in Timbuktu, just when the sun touched the horizon, I saw this capital of Sudan that had been the goal of all my desires for so long. And upon entering this mysterious city, the object of searches by the civilized nations of Europe, I was overcome with an inexpressible feeling of satisfaction: I had never experienced anything like it and I was extremely happy" [Caillié 1999, p. 212]. The city is described in its form and brick building consistency, as well as in its more anthropological and cultural aspects. The textual description is accompanied by some small plans and a wonderful watercolour axonometric drawing that constitutes, in fact, the first clear image of this city. The axonometric watercolour drawing is organized as a sum of small, more or less cubic building blocks and other domed volumes similar to huts/tukuls. Some important volumes of significant size emerge at the centre. Everything around it is sand (fig. 1). The drawing was produced in two versions, one following the other, in which the layout of the buildings is intensified, and the gestures of the passers-by are modified, a true second version (fig. 2). Caillié's axonometric drawings clarify the urban morphology and support his verbal description in the report book: "The city of Timbuktu might be three miles long; it forms a sort of triangle. The houses are large, higher, and have no more than a ground floor; for some, a cabinet was mounted above the entrance. They are built of somewhat round bricks, rolled in the hands and dried under the sun; down to the height, the walls resemble those in Djenné. The streets of Timbuktu are clean and rather large, enough for three riders to pass. Ahead and behind, one sees many straw huts that are nearly round, like those of the Fulani herdsmen; they serve as lodging for poor people and slaves that sell merchandise on behalf of their masters" [Caillié 1999, p. 219].

In contrast to the common European idea that wanted Timbuktu to a fantastic city, an El Dorado of Africa, Caillié assesses its qualities objectively; he finds its defects and hides no delusions. First of all is its location, already practically in the desert, sand everywhere, the impossibility of turning this centre into a productive pla-



Fig. 6 J. Lort Stokes, *Killing a Kangaroo*, 1848.

Fig. 7 S. Covington, *The Iron Pot Light at the entrance to the River Derwent, Tasmania*, 1836.

ce. "Although one of the largest cities I have seen in Africa, Timbuktu has no other resources I than the salt trade; its soil is not at all suitable for cultivation. It draws from Djenné all that is necessary for supplies – millet, rice, plant oils, cotton, fabric from Sudan, eggs and confections, candles, soap, pepper, onions, dried fish, pistachios, etc." [Caillié 1999, p. 220].

After a stay of 15 days, René Caillié joined a caravan expedition that, crossing the Sahara, reached Fez on 12 August and from there he travelled to Tangier, where he embarked for France. He was awarded in Paris by the Société de Géographie and won the 10000 francs for being the first European to convey precise information about the city of Timbuktu. He would also receive the Legion of Honour, a pension, and other recognitions, not the least of which was the publication of his travel journal in 1830. At the age of 31, Caillié was already a celebrity in the field of geographical exploration. Unfortunately, he died shortly thereafter, in 1838, from tuberculosis. Still today, his images of Timbuktu are poetic, unforgettable icons of this mysterious, fascinating city.

### Darwin's Voyage around the World on the *Beagle* (1831–1836)

For the second voyage of the brigantine HMS *Beagle*, from 27 December 1831 to 2 October 1836 in Terra del Fuego and the East Indies, the captain Robert Fitzroy asked Francis Beaufort, a hydrographer in the navy, to find a cultured gentleman with a scientific bent who would be interested in doing research during the trip and who would also make an interesting travel companion. Word spread among the professors at Cambridge and, through personal connections, Charles Darwin, then 22, was designated as scientific guest on the voyage [3]. The ship crossed the Atlantic Ocean, made hydrographic surveys along the coast of part of southern South America, then crossed the Pacific Ocean, reached Tahiti and Australia, and ended by circumnavigating the globe [4]. Planned for a duration of two years, the mission lasted nearly five. Darwin did not travel alone, but at his side were always different technicians specialized in surveying and also some artists.

One of these was Augustus Earle, a talented British painter who had documented the living conditions in the places visited by the *Beagle* on the first part of the

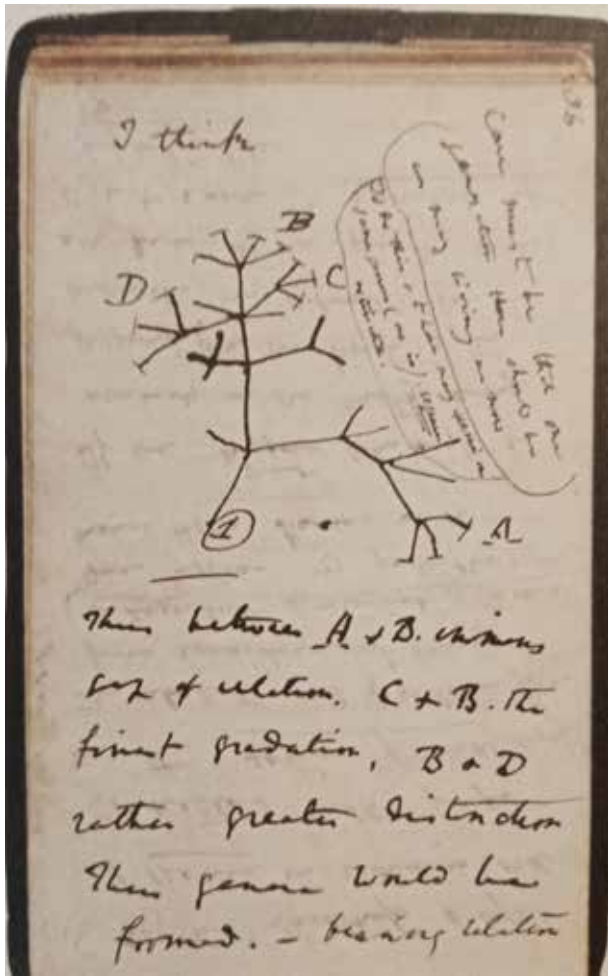


Fig 8 C. Darwin, page from a travel notebook with a drawing of the Tree of Life, undated.

trip (fig. 3), having to abandon the trip in Montevideo in 1833 due to ill health. Darwin had this to say about him: "Earle makes an excellent guide, as he formerly lived some years in the neighbourhood: it is calamitous how short & uncertain life is in these countries: to Earle enquiries about the number of young men whom he left in health & prosperity, the most frequent answer is he is dead & gone" [Viens 2012, p. 42]. Earle worked alongside Darwin, illustrating what he classified and catalogued. Captain Fitzroy himself noted in the ship's log: "We men have trapped an abundance of fish, or should I say, entire schools: we just had to pull up the net at the right time (the start of the tide). Since most of these animals were unknown to the naturalists, Mr Earle drew them carefully and Mr Darwin stored them in fish bowls" [Darwin 2018, p. 116].

When Earle left the trip, he was replaced by Conrad Martens, a landscape painter eight years younger than his colleague and a fine sketcher, as can be seen in many of his travel notebooks with pencil and watercolour drawings housed at the State Library of New South Wales (fig. 4). Martens became sincere, lifelong friends with Darwin, a friendship that lasted even after his on the *Beagle* (fig. 5) ended at Valparaíso, Chile in late 1834. Together with these two artists, another two figures very close to Darwin influenced him during the trip. The first of these was second official John Lort Stokes (fig. 6), a navy official and explorer who also had great artistic capacities and shared the stern cabin with Darwin. The second was Syms Covingt, a violin-playing sailer taken aboard as the scientist's personal assistant, who would follow him beyond the adventure of the *Beagle*. He was also an able drawer, who left behind some elegant sketches from the bridge of the English brigantine (fig.7).

In this framework, it is clear how Charles Darwin's geographical and cultural interest met with the artistic experiences he was developing within, stimulating him to produce some excellent watercolour maps and profiles of the coast. Darwin produced 15 travel notebooks: Cape de Verds, Rio, Buenos Ayres, Falkland, B. Blanca, St. Fe, Banda Oriental, Port Desire, Valparaiso, Santiago, Galapagos, Coquimbo, Copiapó, Despoblado, and Sydney. The notebooks are full of annotations and reflections on the most varied topics, from geology to zoology, botany, ecology, meteorology, ethnography, anthropology, archaeology, and even linguistics. Together with the-



Fig. 9 C. Darwin, *Profile of the Chilean coast, with geological annotations and colour wash, 1934.*

se scientific notes, there are also financial documents, purchase lists, reading notes, essays, and items from his personal diary together with maps, drawings (fig. 8), and well-made profiles of the coast (fig. 9) observed from the sea, often with geological annotations. In this case, the drawings are for classification and captions and rarely does he linger on the ecstatic view; they tend more towards scientific notations. Darwin seems to leave the visual communication of the places they discovered to his more capable travel companions, limiting himself –which is no small matter– to drawing in a pragmatic, methodological way, while leaving an exciting production rich in experimentation to produce a testimony that remains one of the most important contributions to the history of contemporary scientific knowledge.

### Africa Coast to Coast by David Livingstone (1851)

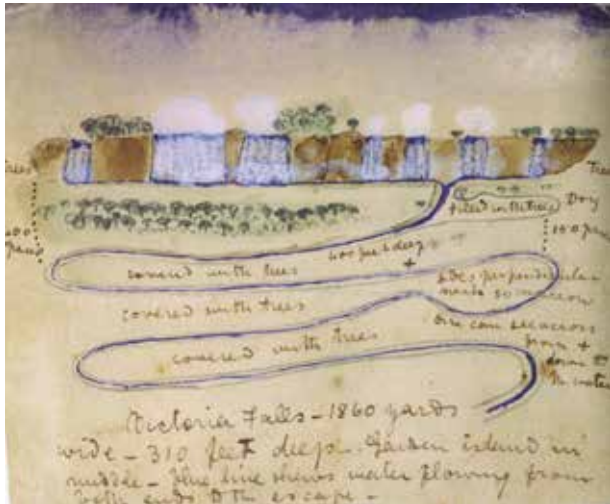
David Livingstone is probably the most famous English explorer of Africa. For Livingstone, one cannot speak of a single trip. His life was entirely focused on continuously venturing out on new African explorations, at the cost of seeing the deaths of his best friends, his wife Mary Moffat, and many dreams, from the creation of missions that were then closed due to illness, aggression, and the impossibility of management, to the dream of sailing the Zambezi River, broken by the awareness of the presence of great numbers of rapids, waterfalls, cataracts, etc. The most lively and even the longest part of Doctor Livingstone's life was spent on his African voyages. It is not by chance that upon his death, his body was transported more than a thousand miles through semi-unexplored territories by his two loyal assistants Chuma and Susi, to be returned to England and buried in Westminster Abbey, while his heart remained in Africa, buried in the place of his death, Lake Bangweulu.

Livingstone's travels served as an opportunity to write a large number of travel notebooks. These small notebooks are full of notes and text written in a thick, orderly calligraphy. At times there are drawings, these also often supported by written considerations in the margins. The drawings are made with ink and watercolour, and lend merit to a certain drawing ability. There are often maps, plans that summarize the routes taken, giving rise to geographical curiosities that constitute the main push for him to move around such unexplored territories.

In this perspective, the main voyage Livingstone made was probably the one in 1851. This was the trip in which 'His 8000-km journey encompassed the first authenticated crossing of the continent from coast to coast by a European' [Lewis-Jones, Herbert 2016, p. 160]. The goal of this trajectory was to open easier itineraries across the African continent to favour exchange and trade with Europe, supporting the routes with the great water basins and verifying their navigability in the perspective of an easier passage from the eastern coast, where the Europeans arrived, to the western, which was rich and unspoiled. As mentioned above, Livingstone travelled more than 8000 km. He started at the mission in Chobe moving towards Linyanti, in today's Botswana, and from there to Luanda in Angola, on the Atlantic coast. From here, the true expedition began upon the return to Quelimane in Mozambique. The route covers more than 4500 km, cutting Africa from the Atlantic coast to the Indian Ocean and crossing Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique and making first contact with the Zambezi River, which would then be the object of further explorations in 1858.

On this long, articulated path, Livingstone also made the most celebrated discovery of his career, the Mosi-oa-Tunya, which he renamed Victoria Falls in honour of the Queen of England. Returning some years later for a second visit in August 1860, he made an excellent

Fig. 10 D. Livingstone, Page from the voyage notebook with the drawing of Victoria Falls, Pencil, pen, and watercolour, 1860.



drawing of the same waterfall (fig. 10). It is an unusual drawing. The falls are seen in elevation and offer the view of a wide face of water, elements of bare rock alternating with rivulets that collapse in the drop, and vegetation all around. A sort of plan starts at the bottom of the falls that presents the sinuous path of the river, its sharp bends, its zig-zag path.

For a short part of his exploratory career, Livingstone was accompanied by a person of ambiguous reputation but extraordinary graphical capacity: the artist Thomas Baines. English by birth but raised in South Africa, Baines garnered a bit of fame as a narrative artist of events in the Frontier Wars of 1842 and some trips on the Orange River in 1848 and Australia in 1852. In 1858, he was asked to join Livingstone's expedition on the Zambezi and he embarked on the trip with the role as drawer and manager of the provisions stock. This second task would be fatal in his relationship with Livingstone because he was accused –no one knows whether with pretext or not– of stealing some canvases from the stock to make portraits while Livingstone was laid up with malaria. He would be distanced from the expedition, but some of his drawings (fig. 11), even those made later in the same area of exploration, are certainly the most interesting graphical reportage of the cultural overview of explorations close to the world of David Livingstone.

## Conclusions

These three experiences of travel and discovery, documented through texts, notes, and annotations but also many drawings, define an educational role and the spread of knowledge, central to the drawing. The drawings of Timbuktu or Victoria Falls, in particular, convey visual knowledge of those places and lead to an immediate response to the thirst of visual curiosity about such places. Before photography, which would completely revolutionize reportage, drawing was the favoured medium for spreading images of new explorations. It is not by chance that these voyages, starting with the particular case of Callié, were made with an entourage of drawers called precisely to visually recount the emotion of the places.

This had already occurred, for example, with Goethe's trip in Italy from 1786 to 1787. He was accompanied by



Fig. 1 | T. Baines, *Mangroves at a fork with the Kongone River, Zambezi*, watercolour, 1859 November 22.



artists of a calibre such as Hackert, Tischbein, or Kniep, who shared the practice of drawing on a daily basis. "As soon as our shapely innkeeper hangs the three-burner brass lamp and says "good night", we gather round and set out the sketches and drawings made during the day. Then the discussion opens: if this subject would not perhaps have been taken from a more favourable point of view; or if the character has been guessed; finally, about all the initial general requests one can judge starting with the first sketch. Counsellor Reiffenstein has the ability to organize and preside over these meetings with astuteness and authority. But this laudable intuition is particularly due to Jacob Philipp Hackert, who has the art of drawing and painting nature with incomparable taste. Artists and amateurs, men and women, old and young, he left no one in peace, but encouraged everyone to put themselves to the test based on their qualities and strengths, himself setting a good example. This custom of coming together and entertaining a society, counsellor Reiffenstein knew how to faithfully continue even after his friend left and now we see how nice it is to keep alive the interest and activity of each individual person" [Goethe 2010, 138].

In the case of these great discovery missions, however, drawing not only represents the pleasure of documenting the trip; it also holds pre-eminent educational value. What is drawn is then presented to the public as a testimony and from it metabolized as an icon of new worlds and new knowledge. The interesting aspect, however, is that this spread of images is based on subjective experiences, ecstatic expressions of those who painted surprising experiences, coveted views, fulfilled aspirations. Reportage drawings are never neutral; they are experiential, subjective, imbued with emotion. These three experiences allude to many others: the drawn explorations of the Amazon by Maximilian de Wied (1815–17) and Hercule Florence (1826–29); the drawings of mythical ascents in the mountains, such as Edward Norton's expedition to Mount Everest in 1924 or those of the Rocky Mountains by Arthur P. Coleman at the beginning of the 1900s; the explorations in idealized territories of Maghreb and beyond, typical of orientalist painting. Drawings, therefore, are at once a scientific report and emotional discovery, data and sight, certainty and legend. In this dichotomy lies one of the most interesting applications of narration via paper, pencil, and colours.

## Notes

[1] The Treccani dictionary says: "visionary (f. [der. of vision].) -1. One who has vision, supernatural visions, or visual hallucinations: a holy man, a fanatic v.; a paranoid v. subject; a mentally feeble and v. girl; as a noun: a v.; v. often play the role of angels in the literature. 2. extension. One who imagines and believes real things that do not correspond to reality, or who makes unrealizable drawings; a dreamer: v. politicians, reformers; and as a noun, being, or being considered a v.; How can you believe that v.? 3. In the language of art criticism, one sometimes speaks of v. painting or v. art in general to characterize (as an objective judgement) figurative works produced by artists, mostly self-taught, schizophrenic, or nevertheless affected by mental illness. In film criticism, instead, the term is used with reference to directors with a particular capacity to create situations and images that are fantastic, unreal, and with a strong visual impact (regarding v. talent, one speaks of, for example, the director F. Fellini with his film *Satyricon*)" [Treccani n.d.].

[2] "Visionaries are ahead of their time, always thinking creatively. You could say that a visionary can envision what the future holds and come up with solutions that fit that picture. Those wild ideas aren't always met with appreciation though. Skeptics think that visionaries aren't grounded in reality. And usually the visionaries tell them to stop being so shortsighted!" [Vocabulary n.d.].

[3] In his ship's log, Captain Robert Fitzroy clarifies Darwin's recruitment: "Concerned about not losing any opportunity to collect useful information, I suggested that the hydrographer go in search of a scientific, educated per-

son who would want to share the lodgings I had to offer, in order to profit from this visit to far-away, little-known countries. Captain Beaufort approved this suggestion and wrote to Prof. Peacock at Cambridge, who spoke with a friend, Prof. Henslow, who indicated Mr Charles Darwin, grandson of the poet Dr Darwin, as a young man with promising talent, keen on geology and well understood, passionate about all areas of natural history. As a consequence, I invited Mr Darwin to be my guest on board, who accepted with some conditions. Authorization was obtained for his embarkment, and the order was given by the Admiralty for him to be added to the ship's records for the purposes of supplies. The conditions requested by Mr Darwin were that he would be free to quit the *Beagle* and the expedition at any moment he chose, and that he would pay the just subsistence costs aboard my vessel" [Darwin 2018, p.12].

[4] The *Beagle* visited the Cape Verde Islands (January 1832), Brazil (April–July 1832), Montevideo and Buenos Aires (July–November 1832), Tierra del Fuego and Cape Horn (December 1832 – January 1833, February 1834), the Falkland Islands (March–April 1833, March–April 1834), Patagonia (April 1833 – January 1834), the western coast of South America (Chiloé, Valparaíso, Lima: June 1834 – July 1835), the Galápagos Islands (September–October 1835), Tahiti (November 1835), New Zealand (December 1835), Australia (Sydney, January 1836; Tasmania, February; King George's Sound, March), Cocos Islands (Keeling, April 1836), Mauritius (April–May 1836), Cape Town (May–June 1836), and Saint Helena and Ascension (July 1836).

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