

What I did on holiday

The Voyage of the Beagle by James Taylor

Conway, 192 pages, RRP £20

 BBC History Bookstore £16



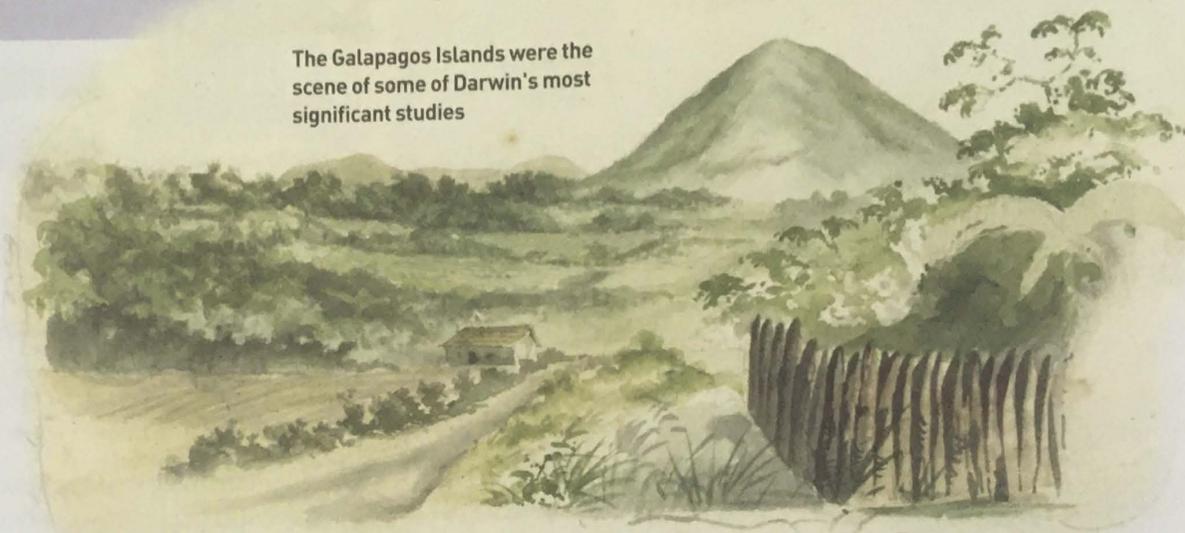
IN 2009, the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his great

work, *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin's life and achievements will be retold and reassessed as never before. Much of what Darwin became and achieved was a result of the offer by Captain Robert FitzRoy to travel as naturalist on the Royal Navy surveying ship, *Beagle*, on her mapmaking journey to the southern half of South America and subsequent circumnavigation of the globe. Darwin himself wrote that "The voyage of the *Beagle* has been by far the most important event in my life

and has determined my whole career". And indeed it did. During the voyage, which Darwin spent mostly onshore, he tirelessly studied the geology and zoology of the lands visited. He discovered many features about the history of South America, such as the fact that horses lived there in ancient times before they were re-introduced by Europeans.

Darwin collected, examined and catalogued thousands of specimens from plankton to South American ostriches. He discovered the fossil remains of previously unknown creatures that were intriguingly reminiscent of the creatures, like sloths and armadillos, that live exclusively in South America. From his long horseback expeditions and detailed interviews with local peoples he

The Galapagos Islands were the scene of some of Darwin's most significant studies



learned about the distribution of species in different regions and how some species were gradually replaced by neighbouring, very similar species.

Many people will have heard of the voyage of the *Beagle*, but the full story is still too often obscure or misleadingly told. And this is perhaps not surprising. The subsequent fame of Darwin's visit to the Galapagos and the mid-20th-century naming of 'Darwin's finches' have led many to believe that the voyage of the *Beagle* was aimed at taking Darwin to the Galapagos where he promptly discovered evolution. In fact the story is quite different – and far more powerful and rich than such popular accounts would allow. James Taylor's superb new book is a welcome addition to recent

attempts to tell a more detailed and visually engaging history. Indeed thanks partly to Taylor's background in maritime art the book is so beautifully illustrated with high-quality colour reproductions – and the captions provide information readers will not find elsewhere – that there is some danger that some might neglect the compelling story they illustrate. The book brings together a wonderful mixture of old and new illustrations and information about the voyage from widely scattered sources creating a work that will fascinate old Beaglers and landlubbers alike. No Darwin bookshelf would be complete without this book. **H**

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