

Edgardo Civallero

# Letters from the library

- part II -



Fundación  
**Charles Darwin**  
Foundation  
GALAPAGOS



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# Letters from the library

- part II -

*Project Galapagueana*  
*Galapagueana to take away*

Charles Darwin Foundation  
Library, Archive and Museum  
Puerto Ayora - Santa Cruz  
Galapagos Islands - Ecuador - 2023



"Letters from the Library" is a regular, bilingual column published since 2020 on the blog of the Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galapagos Islands (CDF) and since 2022 on the *Galapagueana* platform. In it, the author, coordinator of the Library, Archive & Museum area of the institution between 2018 and 2023, shares the stories behind many documents in the collection.



WILD BULL SHOOTING IN THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS.

#11

## Hunting the wild bull

Not everything we store in our archives and libraries displays trustworthy information or reliably documents an event. There is, in our knowledge and memory repositories, a lot of information that is far from being "true".

And yet, even knowing it, we keep it. Because these documents reflect a very particular way of seeing, understanding and explaining the world. One that, while not always being "the truth," at least makes an effort to capture reality in a credible way.

A paradigmatic case is the one we keep in the CDF Archive. It is a newspaper page, yellowed by the years and the acidity of the paper, and framed as if it were an art masterpiece, in a probable attempt to protect it from the natural decomposition to which these materials are subjected.

It is a page from *Harper's Weekly*, a magazine published in New York between 1857 and 1916 and subtitled "A Journal of Civilization." The piece belongs to the supplement dated February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1877, and includes a huge engraving, and three paragraphs printed at the bottom.

The engraving represents the "bull hunt" in the Galapagos.

In it, we are shown a Spanish fighting bull that seems to have escaped from the Sanfermines of Pamplona or the Maestranza in Seville, charging two men dressed as explorers of Africa in the 19th century, in a forest that could very well be located in the American Rocky Mountains, or being an oak grove in Victorian England.

Obviously, the image was produced by an artist who had never set foot in the Galapagos and who was given the title of the illustration and little else. In a time when photography was an incipient technique and when transporting a camera to the "Encantadas" would have been quite an adventure (a very expensive one, too), there was no other solution than to use one's imagination... and, hopefully, some travelers' notes.

Can we blame them? The editors tried to convey to their readers a vivid picture of the events. And no matter how distant that image was from reality, I am more than sure that it achieved its goal.

The accompanying text, fortunately, provided *Harper's Weekly's* subscribers with more accurate information. Much more, by the way, than some current texts on the archipelago.

#### "WILD BULL SHOOTING

The Galapagos Islands lie in the Pacific Ocean, under the equator, about six hundred miles from the coast of Ecuador, to which country they belong. They were discovered by the Spaniards, who named the group from the great number

of land tortoises, called in Spanish *galápagos*, that were found upon them. Since that time the islands have received English names. Two hundred years ago this group became a famous resort for buccaneers, whence many expeditions against Spanish commerce were fitted out.

There are in the Galapagos group six large islands, nine of smaller dimensions, and a large number of islets, some of them being nothing but barren points of rock. The largest island, Albemarle, is about sixty miles in length and fifteen wide, with a mountain ridge rising to the height of nearly 5000 feet. All the islands are volcanic, and in general shape are similar to the majority of oceanic volcanoes, each having a large dome-like elevation, with a wide, shallow crater at the top, the sides furrowed by the streams of lava that once overflowed from the crater. Volcanic activity has apparently ceased on all these islands. The latest eruption in the group of which we have any record occurred in Albemarle Island in 1835. Owing to the low temperature of the Peruvian current, which, coming from antarctic regions along the South American coast, strikes out to the westward toward these islands, the climate of the Galapagos is very mild, considering their position directly under the equator.

The Galapagos were first permanently settled in 1832 by a party of exiles from Ecuador, who were sent to Charles Island, one of the most fertile of the group. At one time the settlement contained between two hundred and three hundred inhabitants, but the number has dwindled down, until a few miserable peons hold possession. Cattle, pigs, and goats were sent to the islands with the early

settlers. They have greatly increased in numbers, roaming wild in the forests, and afford excellent sport to persons who chance to land there on the rare occasion of a ship stepping to procure a supply of turtles. These were once so abundant that a single ship has been known to carry away as many as seven hundred, but of late years they have greatly diminished in number, in consequence of being overhunted, and large ones are rarely found".

Memories are like that: interlocking fragments of information that try to leave as indelible a mark as possible. It does not always matter that these fragments have a weak foundation: the really important thing is to plant a sign that allows us to remember. Somehow.

And here we are, almost a century and a half later, remembering that at some point in the past "bulls" were hunted in the Galapagos. And imagining the astonished faces of those nineteenth-century New York readers, sitting comfortably in their living rooms, imagining a reality that they would never step on but that, thanks to that illustration, entered their consciousness.

And into their memories.



April 10. Townsend and Svenson went ashore this morning to the spot where our 6 tortoises were caught. I made a brief visit and then ship sailed at 10 (N. Y. Time).

As passed between Barrington and Indefatigable there was a large flock of the common small shearwaters sitting on the water perhaps 1000.

In 3 hours we had rounded Seymour Is. and stopped opposite the passage between North Seymour and South Seymour. Here there is a small sandy islet with several patches of rocks where the sea lions abound.

Most of us visited it by launch. 3 yg sealions were caught. Saw a few small Tropidurus lizards on the island. Also oyster-catcher, yellow crowned night heron, 2 Larus fuliginosus, 1 <sup>Butorides</sup> ~~Butorides~~ striatus, a flock of 10 sanderlings, a turnstone, 4 wandering tattlers, pelicans and unfooted boobies flying over.

We then went on to where the Nourmahal had anchored off a beach.

#12

## **With a little sea lion on the lap (II). The threads that weave stories**

Almost two years ago, in the third installment of this series of letters, I wrote that the oldest collection of photos in the CDF Archive to date is the so-called "Nourmahal album", a set of paper-based photographs taken in 1930. I said that the *USS Nourmahal* was a ship of about 80 m in length, built in 1928 as a pleasure yacht for the American billionaire Vincent Astor. I commented that between March 23 and May 2, 1930, Astor brought a group of American scientists —researchers from the New York Aquarium, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden— to Galapagos, on an expedition for collecting samples. I ended by mentioning that the "Nourmahal album" showed details of that journey, and that one of the most curious images in it was the one of a sailor holding a sea lion pup on his lap.

In that post I spoke about the magic of archives: places that allow us to travel to other times and places, opening doors and windows that put us in contact with realities and unique moments — moments long gone but that come back to life, for an instant, in front of our eyes. I concluded that text by pointing out that we would probably never be able to know the name of the sailor or the origin or destination of the little sea lion.

However, documents —photos, manuscripts, articles, films, artifacts— are rarely born in isolation, devoid of connections. Those of us who work in libraries, archives and museums know, from our own experience, that we handle a mesh of knowledge and

memories: a dense fabric made up of thousands and thousands of threads that intersect to compose what we call "memory", which in turn defines what we know as "identity" and allows us to build that subjective and variable narrative we call "history."

The documents that populate our archives have links, often invisible, with many others. Discovering those connections, those tenuous threads that interweave discourses and stories, allows us to understand a particular item within the framework of a much broader and richer context. A ring of those used to mark birds is just that, a ring, with no more history than its function. Until a catalogue card appeared in a forgotten corner of the archive links that small cylindrical piece of plastic with the research of a famous ornithologist specializing in finches, and with a particular trip, and with some field notes, and with an article or a thesis, and with some photographs... By getting a context, the plastic ring ceases to be a simple little artifact without a history, and becomes part of a web of memories.

It becomes one more strand of the fabric.

That is what happened recently with the photo of the sea lion pup. Reviewing the special collection of the CDF Library I discovered, a few months ago, a typewritten copy of the field diary of one of the scientists who participated in the *Nourmahal's* trip to Galapagos. The careful notes reflect the day-to-day life of that researcher, an American ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History. And among them appears the following, noted on April 10, 1930:

"In 3 hours we had rounded Seymour Island and stopped opposite the passage between North Seymour and South Seymour. Here there is a low sandy islet with several patches of rocks where the sea lions abound. Most of us visited it by launch. Three young sealions were caught."

There is no other mention of captures of sea lions in the entire diary. Thanks to some writings scribbled in a field notebook almost a century ago, I found out that that pup in the photo of the "Nourmahal album" was born on that strip of sand that we call "Mosquera Islet", between the Seymour Islands.

If I pulled on that strand, I could probably track the animal, and know where its days ended. I could even find out the name of the sailor who held it in the picture. Because his role, ship's carpenter, appears in the same diary, in the entry for May 1, 1930:

"Photos of menagerie on upper deck. Bronson drawing legs of tortoise (suspended). Ship's carpenter holding sea-lion".

This is how dense and rich are the memory frames that are woven inside the archives.

Although sometimes the threads are lost, or destroyed, and with them part of the fabric, the context, and the memory disappears. Hence the vital importance of archives. And of each and every one of the materials that those archives treasure.



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#13

## **The librarian's footprints**

It happened about three years ago. In a corner of the desk I use in the library of the Charles Darwin Research Station, I found an old card.

"Gayle Davis Merlen. Head of Publications and Library."

I have already learned that every bit of paper inside the Darwin Foundation Library, Archive & Museum has a story behind it. And I've learned to pursue those stories, to unearth them, to discover them... It so happens that this one in particular was familiar to me. The card belonged to one of my predecessors: the woman who, among many other things, organized the Darwin Station library back in the 1970s.

Gayle came to Galapagos in a unique way. As many of us, I suppose.

Apparently, around 1974 she began a master's degree in zoology at the University of Wisconsin. At that time she was working as a registrar at the University Museum of Zoology (UWZM), under the direction of William G. Reeder. For her master's thesis she decided to combine her background in zoology, her artistic skills, and her interest in museums, to create a zoological exhibit. Her academic adviser told her that the Smithsonian Institute was looking for someone to develop this type of work for an interpretation center located at the Charles Darwin Research Station, in the distant and

exotic Galapagos Islands. That center was a collaborative project between the Smithsonian and the Peace Corps.

Gayle agreed. In September 1976, she arrived on Santa Cruz Island, at a scientific station which had just inaugurated a dozen years earlier. Those who knew her say that the arid landscape, with those candelabra cacti here and there, reminded her of the deserts of the southwestern United States, one of her favorite places in her homeland.

Before her arrival at the Station, there weren't too many educational exhibits there for tourists. That was one of the reasons for the emergence of the "interpretation center" project: to establish an activity related to environmental education. Gayle immediately went to work developing educational content for visitors. She drew up an action plan and produced panels, posters, and other documents on geology, biology, evolution, introduced species, conservation... In an era where computer technology was not at all accessible, she did it all by hand, handcrafted. For three years.

This is how the current Van Straelen Interpretation Center was born.

She never finished her master's degree. She decided that it was much more fulfilling to live and work in / for a unique environment than to pursue an academic degree.

Gayle was the CDF's first librarian. She was also in charge of making translations, editions and, above all, of the publications, especially the CDF's *Annual Report*. In the late 1980s

she was an advisor to the library, and in the early 1990s she was still collaborating directly with it, as "Head of Library".

A beautiful series of slides that we keep in the "Merlen" collection of our audiovisual archive shows her last years, writing or reading in the company of a blue-footed booby, in her house in Puerto Ayora. Her portrait presides over the library. Her writing continues to appear every now and then in the documents we take care of in the archive. And her card, the one that appeared in a hidden corner, is always on my desk.

To remind me whose heir I am.



#14

## Palimpsests

Academic texts on history of the book say that during the Middle Ages, when Europe wrote on parchment and paper was still nothing more than an exotic resource in the hands of the Arabs, those thin sheets of leather were used and reused until the surface of the material refused to receive a single more stroke of ink. For parchment (at least the good quality one) was made from the skin of calves, usually neonates. And that was not a very common element in peasant societies for which a dead calf (and especially a newborn) was a real misfortune, a terrible loss, and who therefore cared for their animals better than their own children.

Therefore, in the monasteries where the medieval codices were made, reproduced, translated, and transcribed, parchment was saved by continuously reusing it. Previous texts and drawings were scraped off, the surface was sanded (with shark skin, pieces of horsetail or sand glued on leather) and writing, drawing, and painting were done again. The problem is that the very nature of the inks of that time (powerful iron gall compounds, or products based on heavy, even toxic, minerals) made complete erasure, if not impossible, at least quite difficult. That didn't stop well-intended monastic scribes from swiping their quills over those surfaces over and over again. The end result is known today as a *palimpsest* (from Greek "scratched again"): text on text on text, in successive layers that reveal, with a little effort, the previous ones.

*[The phenomenon also occurred with Egyptian papyri, Asia Minor scrolls, Mesoamerican amatl paper codices, and Indochinese bamboo manuscripts. The only ones that were saved from the palimpsestic problem, due to the very plastic nature of their materials, were the Mesopotamian clay tablets and the Greco-Roman wax plates].*

No: at the CDF Library, Archive & Museum we do not keep any of those valuable old documents. However, we do have materials that, with a little open-mindedness, can be considered palimpsests. I am referring to the frames (cardboard, plastic, metal, glass) of some of the more than 17,000 slides that we maintain in our audiovisual collection.

Some of the series that make up those collections are about 40 years old, and they were passed from hand to hand and from person in charge to person in charge throughout those four decades. The original author had placed some essential data in the frame of the slide (usually a location and a name), and his / her successors added elements. In most cases they wrote alpha-numeric or numerical codes that allowed the identification of the object, but that, after some reorganization, were crossed out or partially covered with white ink (of the kind used to correct the mistakes of the old typewriters) and altered, sometimes more than once. Scientific names were also corrected, especially when the photographer was not a scientist and was not familiar with the spelling of Latin binomials.

Other times the description or the place was corrected, since many authors or curators wrote in Spanish despite not being native speakers of that language and, therefore, spelling errors were appalling. There are occasional fights over authorship, and in a

couple of cases, an author who used to sign with a married surname deleted the last element of her name to return to her maiden designation.

It is needless to point out the amazing variety of colors, pen types and calligraphies; the abundance of stamps overlapping other stamps; the many dates that correct other dates... Some slide frames are a frightening mess in which it is very difficult to put some order. Which info is the earliest? Which one is reliable? It is necessary to review other sources to contrast every bit of information encoded around the sensitive photographic film.

After that, one can try to imagine the long process (a process of decades) that led to that framework exhibiting all those marks: battle scars that did not disappear and that will continue to tell their story as long as they manage to stay there.



#15

## **Little wings falling like flakes**

In the CDF Archive, it is not unusual to open a box or lift a folder and witness a small (or large) amount of dust falls: the disintegration of a tiny dune that had settled over the years among unseen papers and forgotten brochures. For allergy sufferers, as it is my case, it is a real ordeal that not even the most sophisticated face masks can prevent. However, after more than twenty years in this profession, I consider those small accidents to be occupational hazards: a minor problem that I have to deal with.

However, what falls from those boxes is not always dust. Or bits of concrete and dry paint. Or fungal spores. Or droppings from geckos, cockroaches or mice. Sometimes, shaking a book or flipping an artifact may deliver an avalanche of unexpected material.

Such a thing happened to me three years ago, while checking one of the many packages that still remain closed in our archive. This one, in particular, had been isolated and quarantined by one of my predecessors nearly a decade ago, and hadn't been opened since. I considered that any pests that the box might have contained in the past would be dead by now, and I began to carefully peel back the several layers of plastic wrap that covered it. I assumed I was going to get the usual slap of dust and excrement, so I protected myself as best I could with gloves and a mask.

Opening the box, I came across a set of papers severely attacked by what, based on the type of damage, seemed to be some kind of beetle. I immediately understood my former colleague's reason for isolating that container and those documents. After that, I confirmed my initial suspicions after a quick examination: anything that had been living inside the book was no longer alive.

It was the early morning, and the rays of the sun were barely filtering through the blackened windows of the archive. I placed the box on my huge, sturdy work table, and pulled out the documents in a single stack. And then, from that mass of half-devoured papers, a drizzle of small flakes broke off, from which the outside light cast a myriad of iridescent gleams.

They were wings.

Hundreds of tiny beetle wings.

Literally hundreds. They fell like minuscule helicopters, covering my table, my gloved hands, my blue shirt, my chair, my computer keyboard... It was a real snowfall of transparent chitin fragments floating in the still air of the Archive, landing one next to the other, covering everything.

Once the documents were removed, I discovered that the bottom of the box was a dense conglomeration of excrement and dark, decomposed exoskeletons, practically ground up. The wings, however, were intact, with their original structure and shine.

There is nothing more worrying, for someone in my profession, than an attack of insects. Molds can be eliminated by controlling humidity and temperature, vertebrates can be poisoned... But insects, or, rather, invertebrates, are terribly resistant and full of tricks; not in vain have they survived where other living beings have become extinct. It's not always easy to get rid of them, and I can easily imagine the horror of my predecessors facing this kind of calamity.

*[In fact, there is a very curious report I keep in our collections, which describes the different species found in the CDF Library more than twenty years ago, after placing several traps on shelves and corners. I remember my open mouth and raised eyebrows when I realized that, at some point in CDF's history, the space in which I work today was home to two dozen of different invertebrates whose main food was the materials that I have to take care of].*

The fact is that, despite the enormous rejection that insect invasions and attacks can cause me, I can't help but recognize that they are fantastic and beautiful creatures. And, somehow, I felt that what in the past had been a terrible invasion of hundreds of tiny cellulophagous beetles had been transformed, by the mere passage of time and life, into a small spectacle.

I spent a lot of time sweeping, cleaning, and trying to remove those wings. I never quite got it. From time to time, one catches my eye with its shine from a corner of the archive. Like the one in the picture that illustrates this entry, which appeared recently.

And it reminds me that, by a simple physical law, nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed: some old papers, probably useless, had been converted, by the magic of biology, into a wonderful rain of tiny shiny flakes.





#16

## Story of a death in a duel with pistols

It is well known that the Galapagos Islands are worthy of some dark pages —one could even say macabre— in the Great Book of History: The deeds of Briones (the "Pirate of the Guayas"), the uprising of the workers of Floreana and San Cristóbal islands against their employers, the cruel penal colonies, the still unresolved disappearances in Floreana, the shipwrecks and their stories of survival... Death, like everywhere else, lurks around the corner on the islands; however, in this somewhat magical and somewhat desolate territory, it seems to acquire novelistic overtones.

An episode not too well known included within those sad annals of the archipelagic history is that of the duel of Officer Cowan. That name, Cowan, was immortalized in the Galapagoan geography — specifically, in a bay, a cape and a volcano located on the northwestern coast of Santiago Island. However, very few know the origin of that name. Something that, to be honest, could be said of a good part of the islands' place names.

History forces us to go back in time to the mid-nineteenth century, the time when European and American whalers and furriers conscientiously plundered the coasts and currents of the Atlantic and, faced with their evident exhaustion, sought new territories and virgin spaces where to sink the fangs of their greed. The Pacific, the vast South Sea, a true *terra incognita* until a century before, was the perfect candidate, so the great powers began to compete for the control of those waters. The newly independent

American nations had a certain advantage, since they controlled the eastern shores of that Ocean, but that was not going to discourage countries like Great Britain or the United States, used to get what they wanted the good or, more often, the bad way.

In 1816, American captain David Porter arrived in the Galapagos, commanding the *U.S.S. Essex*, with the purpose of "cleansing" the region of British whalers (the competition) and assessing its value as a hunting ground. Porter travelled the archipelago, captured several English ships and, in his diary, gave an account of the necessary details... and many more: back then, as it is still the case today, the American seaman was unable to hide his amazement at the wonderful biodiversity that paraded, unconcerned, in front of his eyes.

In that same diary (published in 1815), the captain gave the account, very casually and even concealing the terms, of a duel. The fact was not allowed within the British navy (Porter himself mentions it as "a practice which disgraces human nature"), but it was the usual custom of the time: to resolve differences with knives, sabers or pistols. The reason for the dispute was not recorded by Porter, but apparently it occurred between two of his officers, who landed in James Bay, in Santiago, in broad daylight, surely accompanied by their trusted people, and tried to settle their problems with gunpowder and lead.

As a result, one of the officers, Lieutenant John S. Cowan, was killed by the third shot. He was buried by Porter in the vicinity of a spring that was then widely used by sailors

passing through the Galapagos, which is still located at the foot of the hill known as "Pan de Azúcar". The following inscription was placed on his grave:

Sacred to the memory  
of Lieut. John S. Cowan,  
of the U.S. Frigate Essex,  
who died here anno 1813,  
aged 21 years.

His loss is ever to be regretted  
by his country;  
and mourned by his friends  
and brother officers.

In the map of the islands that he made to document his journey (and which was published only in the second edition of his diary, in 1822), Porter used the surname of his subordinate to name a bay, "Cowan's Bay", open to the west of Santiago, inhabited by boobies and frigatebirds, soaked by the island's drizzles and always bristling with the blowing of the winds. The name seems to have spread, later, to the cape and to the mountain.

For some time, Cowan's tomb became a visitor's site: a kind of place of pilgrimage, a true landmark in the landscape of Santiago Island. In fact, the cross that marked its location is mentioned by several chroniclers and travelers for at least half a century after

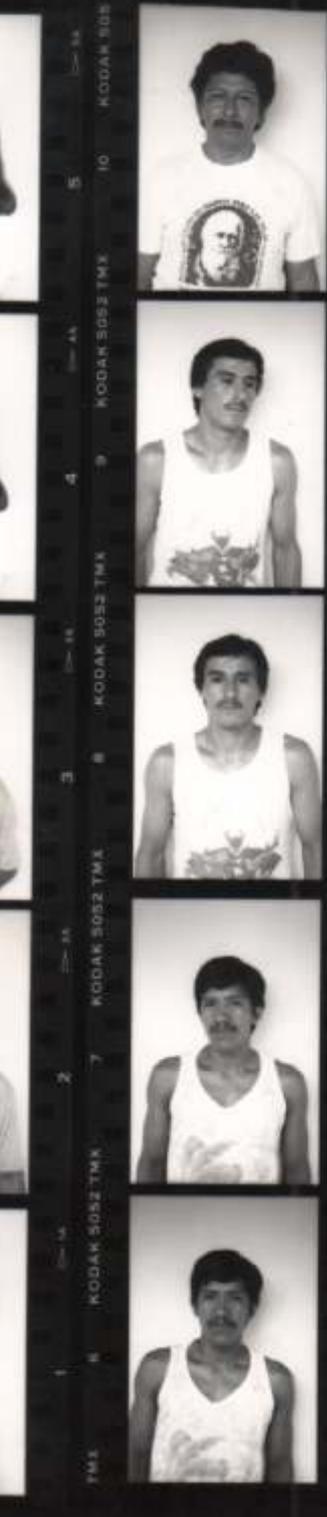
the duel took place (an example are the notes of naturalist John Scouler, in 1825). However, at a certain point it seems to have disappeared, since no one mentions it again...

...until 1965. Then, Norwegian settler Jacob Lundh, one of the first inhabitants of what is now Puerto Ayora and "unofficial historian" of the islands (in addition to being the original owner of the land where the Charles Darwin Research Station stands today) wrote a short text for the Charles Darwin Foundation entitled *Notes on the Galápagos Islands*. There he wrote down a story that, apparently, circulated among the old workers of the salt mine that, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, operated in Santiago. Lundh, quoting the words of Hugo Egas Zevallos (son of Darío Egas Sánchez, original owner of the west side of the island and of the mine), said that, in 1926, the salt workers had found, near the spring of "Pan de Azúcar", a mummified corpse.

A corpse still wearing the remains of a blue uniform with gold braid. The uniform of British naval officers.

They said that when they touched it, the fabric fell apart. No one was sure that this was Cowan's body. But... can we speak of certainties in the legendary history of Galapagos?





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#17

## **Glances from the other side of time**

Libraries, archives and museums are institutions that manage knowledge and memory. In recent times, with information becoming the engine of a new socio-political paradigm and a consumer good that feeds many national economies, the heritage and identity part of the work of these spaces has been somehow forgotten and neglected. But it has not disappeared, nor has it ceased to be important. The memories of societies and entire generations are still stored, organized, protected and accessible there, on shelves, hard drives and boxes.

Working in a space of knowledge and memories can be "magical", if you'll excuse the well-worn expression. Although this work is surrounded by certain stereotypes that can frighten many —the silent libraries, the dusty archives, the museums full of dead presences—, it is actually an exciting activity, which crosses disciplinary and thematic borders and, at the same time, brings past and present (and future...) into contact.

Probably this last aspect was the one that caught me when, at a time already quite distant in the past, I decided to dedicate myself to these tasks. I soon understood that the limits between library, archive, museum, biological collections, oral sources and other knowledge management spaces are terribly blurred; that, ultimately, everything is connected; and that, through these infinite connections, which are sometimes very

obvious and other times not so much, all those documents that we strive to preserve do nothing but tell a story.

Our story.

And that narrative, more complex than any imaginable fabric, is made up of millions of small fragments, of voices that share their experiences and their steps, their mistakes and falls, their discoveries. All these materials open a window to the past and put us in direct contact with who we once were, or with our ancestors: the closest and the farthest ones.

Probably that feeling of direct contact with bygone times is stronger with photographs. Since we human beings seem to have a strong tendency to look at the camera when we are photographed, to look at a photo —on paper or digital, black and white or color, slide or negative— is to look into the eyes of people who may not even be with us anymore...

*[A similar thing happens when one is confronted with paintings or sculptures, including those produced many centuries before the Christian era. The glances are still there: in other materials, in other formats, but they are there. And what we consider "works of art" are also documents: elements that codify knowledge and memory].*

Personally, it happens to me that when I come across those glances, those smiles (or the lack of them), those gestures, those postures, I feel that there is someone speaking to

me from the other side of time. Someone who tells me "I am here". Because... why do we photograph ourselves, if not to leave a memory of ourselves, a testimony of a precise moment in our personal stories? Why, if not to leave something to the future that survives us, that says that we were here and that that's how we were?

I had that feeling recently, reviewing some black and white photographic plates that we keep in the audiovisual collection of our archive, and that I ended up including in the *Galapagueana* edition of April / 2022. It is a series of images somewhat similar to the ones that we use in Argentina for official documents. Apparently, someone took portraits of CDF staff using that kind of format. All those faces were there, looking at me from that plank. Some of them had serious countenances: they were probably summoned to the photo shoot in the middle of their tasks, and they were tired, even not willing to be photographed. Others were smiling faces: they even contained a laugh... All those people were looking at me through a window that crossed time, they greeted me from the other side of oblivion, they insinuated that behind their images there were loves and worries and laughter and tears and a lot of work, and a family, and illusions perhaps, and dreams and hopes, surely. They were people who walked the dirt paths of the Charles Darwin Research Station, just as I do today; in fact, their work made it possible for me to actually tread those paths.

It is worth remembering all this every time we have in our hands a bit of history, of knowledge, of memory. They are the 4 small but essential threads that make up our identity and our current reality. They are part of the reason we are here, now. It is necessary to conserve them and, even more, to know them.

Especially if we consider that, at some point in the future, those who will be looking at the world from a piece of paper or from a screen will be us.





#18

## **The hands of the artist**

There are stories that are not written.

And yet they are there.

It happens frequently with illustrations. Memories are hidden under the undecided strokes of a pencil. Behind the soft layers of watercolor that make up the feathers of a bird or the petals of a flower. Beneath the small ink-filled nibbles left by a nib.

One holds those drawings or those paintings years, decades later, and is unable to find those hidden stories, to read them. He only sees the final result, which dazzles: the composition, the bright or muted tones, the lights and shadows, the profiles, the details...

And the signature. Always the signature, usually on the bottom right, leaving proof —at least— that there was someone behind all that. Sometimes the name is shortened to an initial: that "A." which hides whether the person was an "Antonio" or an "Alejandra" — or an "Alexandra", or an "Alessandra".

Sara Santacruz always signed like this. "Sara Santacruz". And there are a good number of illustrations with that rubric in the art collection of the archive of the Charles Darwin

Foundation. They are usually copies. Or photocopies. Original illustrations are rare. Sara's are ink drawings: a linear, careful, patient work. Its themes are very broad, ranging from iguanas and cormorants to opuntias, with the entire range of Galapagos flora and fauna between these two extremes. She even had time for some humorous illustrations. That's the name of the folder in which I found them, at least: "humor". Some funny, mischievous vignettes, scribbled quickly.

At the time, all those images appeared illustrating books, and articles, and reports that populate the shelves of our library. Sara Santacruz was one of the most prolific illustrators in the history of science in Galapagos. Her contribution was huge, valuable, important, and aesthetically interesting.

And that's it.

For me, the professional collector of dusty memories, the story ended there. I felt unable to scratch the surface of those papers and look beyond.

Until, in our audiovisual collection, I found a slide that allowed me to do so.

The photograph was taken by Donald Sutherland in 1993 at the Charles Darwin Research Station, and is labeled "Sara Santacruz at work."

Now I know that Sara drew on a table, horizontally. That she used Faber Castell colored pencils (I assume that she used them when she could afford them) and that she

sharpened them either with a blade or with one of those traditional sharpeners provided with a little box to collect the wood chips. That she used slides to prepare her images, and that she observed those slides through one of those old viewfinders that no longer exist: those that used the sun as a source of illumination, and that only those of us who lived with those types of supports knew. That she also colored with watercolors, and that she prepared several originals until she was satisfied with one. That she listened to music while she worked, and that she spread out on the table until she occupied all the available space.

Now I have a story. The story behind the drawings. A bit of time, a moment from the past, a fragment of life concentrated on paper.

Next time I come across an illustration with the familiar signature and strokes, I will be able to read beyond the image. And I will see the artist's hands, and the pencils, and the cassettes, and the Galapagoan afternoon filtering through the windows.



#19

## **On chairs and terraces**

There they were. Two white chairs. Foldable. Of plastic. Leaning, both, against the wall in a corner of the museum of the Station.

Yeap.

In all honesty, they were two objects whose simplicity, their lack of any possible secrets and interesting stories, were so obvious to me that I never even bothered to touch them. In fact, I confess that at some point in the recent past I assumed that they did not even belong to us: that they were items that we were taking care of for someone else. "Gathering dirt", as we would say in my homeland.

Until the time came to put some order in the messy museum space and, when I moved them, already determined to get rid of them for good, I discovered that they had tags attached to their backs. Tags that read "Library – E. Knight."

We weren't keeping them for anyone: they were ours. Inventoried by an "E. Knight", who could not be other than Elizabeth.

Elizabeth "Betsy" Stiles Knight worked as a librarian and archivist at the CDF back in 2010-2011, and then did a short period of overtime in 2013. Unlike past colleagues, I

know her name and her face because we keep a photo-tribute of her in our library: Elizabeth could not win the battle against cancer, which took her in 2017. And, again differentiating herself from other past colleagues, because she left detailed reports of her work, texts with dreams and projects, and a good number of tasks completed. In fact, if we have a moderately structured historical archive at the CDF today, it is thanks to her. After Gayle Davis, she was the person whose work has most influenced my current reality as the person in charge of this area at the Charles Darwin Station.

One of the documents of Elizabeth's management that survived and that came into my hands is a reorganization plan for the building that today occupies the Library, Archive and Museum area. It should be remembered that this building was one of the first to be built at the Station, in 1960. When the institution was inaugurated in 1964, it was the director's house. Only at the end of the 1970s, with the construction of the current director's house, the space was assigned to the library and the natural history collections. What I mean by this is that the construction is historical, patrimonial if you will, and should not be altered, nor its structure changed. Elizabeth's plan, curiously, respected that historical integrity, reallocating the spaces inside...

...and adding a wooden terrace on the outside, facing the sea. Can you imagine it? Because I've been doing it since the day I took over the Station library. Finding, months after that moment, a project from one of my predecessors that included an almost verbatim description of my own vision was almost surreal.

That was the "E. Knight" that appeared on the two white chairs forgotten in a corner of the Museum. I assumed that during Elizabeth's organization of artifacts, collections, and spaces during her work on the islands, an inventory was made, and that during that inventory those chairs appeared and were labeled with her name. And that's it. End of the story.

It was my library partner, who has been in the position for more than a decade and personally knew all the characters who have walked the Station in that time, who got me out of my mistake. No, it was not the end of the story.

It turns out that those chairs originally belonged to Gabriel López, the director of the Station back in 2009-2010. He and his wife bought them to be able to sit in the garden of their house (the director's current house, located a few meters from La Ratonera beach) and enjoy the sun and the clouds, and the sea breeze, and the visit of the finches and the walk of the many sea iguanas that live around the place. When they moved out of the islands, they left the white plastic implements in the library...

...so that, when it expanded its structure with a terrace, the chairs could be used by visitors to read outdoors.

This is how I found out that the idea of expanding the library structure with a terrace (and adapting the interior) had not been Elizabeth Knight's, but it was an earlier project. Much earlier, actually, as some internal documents from the archive ended up telling me.

Whoever came up with the original idea, and whenever that project is going to materialize, we already have two deckchairs, white and made of plastic, waiting to receive those readers who want to sit down and leaf through a book with their faces to the sea, under the blue or gray Galapagos sky.

Two chairs that have been waiting patiently for a destiny that, perhaps, will never arrive.





#20

## **Her work, his fame**

One of the most interesting items held in the special collections of the CDF Library is a folder —looking luxurious enough to intimidate me, I must confess— containing a series of the famous "Gould prints". Specifically, a set of six pieces on Galapagos birds.

John Gould was a famous British ornithologist. Although he began his career as a botanist, he became an expert taxidermist, which led him to specialize in birds and end up as a curator and a taxonomist at the Zoological Society of London. This, in turn, allowed him to have privileged access to the materials that the naturalists of the time deposited in the institution. Among them, there were those who arrived in Britain in 1836 aboard the *H.M.S. Beagle* after his second circumnavigation voyage.

That means that Gould worked with a part of the specimens collected by the naturalist on board that ship, who was none other than Charles Darwin.

Here I will open a huge parenthesis to emphasize that Darwin was not always the controversial author or scientific innovator that he ended up becoming (at least in the eyes of those who respect his theory of evolution). When he embarked on the *Beagle* he was a young man fairly inexperienced in academic and scientific matters, had little previous field activity under his belt, and had never traveled by ship — which means that he had never left the his homeland. The British faced worlds totally new for him on the

other side of the planet, and had a job in which he did not have much practice (and in which he made mistakes...). To his credit, it can be said that he did it armed with an insatiable curiosity, a fine sense of observation, and a lot of patience. His aptitudes ended up compensating, in a way, for his shortcomings; the rest is history.

The point is that, on his return to Britain, Darwin handed over the biological collections assembled along his journey to a group of expert taxonomists, including John Gould. The latter was naturally in charge of studying the birds, and was the first to realize that the Galapagoan finches he received may not be different varieties, but different species. The same thing happened with the islands' mockingbirds. Unfortunately, it was impossible to corroborate that hypothesis in the first place because Darwin had not correctly labeled many of the samples collected in Galapagos. Finally, after getting additional information from other members of the *Beagle* crew, Gould's comment became one of the many triggers for the theory of evolution. The one that, some time later, would make the scientific (and religious) meetings of half the world burn with scandal and anger.

The results of all those zoological identifications were put together in a 19-volume series titled (unimaginatively, if you ask me) *The Zoology of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle*. The work was edited and coordinated by Darwin himself, but it was written and illustrated by those responsible for the taxonomic work. It was divided into several parts, according to its theme, and, depending on the printer, it was bound and sold in 3 or 5 volumes. It had large-format pages, printed on excellent quality paper and accompanied by hand-colored lithographs.

*[Currently, complete and undamaged collections of The Zoology... are hunted down by the world's leading auction houses. The starting price can be as high as \$20,000. Fortunately, there are many libraries that have copies for consultation by researchers and authorized users. And perfectly digitized copies already exist, accessible to the rest of us, common mortals].*

The third part of the work was devoted to birds. It was published between 1838 and 1941, as its parts came out, and was produced by Gould.

Probably one of the most valuable aspects of *The Zoology...* are the illustrations. The lithographs. Lithography is a printing process that, at the time, represented a huge advance. Until its popularization, people worked, in general, with engravings. The effort involved in preparing one of those images was huge, and was usually left to a specialized operator, and not the illustrator himself. Lithography allowed the draftsman to trace his work himself, first on a stone plate (hence the name of the technique) and later on a metallic one. This plate was treated with certain chemicals that left the parts covered by pencil in relief, and allowed the drawing to be printed massively. Coloring was a separate issue: although sometime between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ways of painting illustrations with lithographic plates were devised, at first it had to be done by hand.

Now I want you to think about a print run of 500 books. Imagine having to paint all the illustrations (let's say about 50) by hand. One by one. All the same.

This infernally arduous work makes the original lithographs highly appreciated... and easily identifiable: the coloring is irregular, the paper has particular markings that can be seen with a magnifying glass (and even with the naked eye), and they generally bear a serial number and the author's signature on the back, given its uniqueness.

*[Those from The Zoology... didn't have them, probably because they were part of a book].*

The illustrations for virtually all of Gould's work, including those of the *Beagle's* birds (and, within them, those of the Galapagos species), were produced by his wife, Elizabeth Coxen.

Coxen was an outstanding artist, whose name, perpetuating an unfortunately widespread problem, did not always appear in mentions of authorship of her work. According to some texts of the time, the woman seems to have always been in the shadow of a husband who took great advantage of her. In fact, we continue to refer to the engravings as "Gould's" — which combines a certain unawareness of Elizabeth's existence with the general habit of dropping the maiden name in the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

As much as the discourse of the invisibility of women in science (and in everything else) has been repeated, I firmly believe that it is worth continuing to write about it. And recovering, when possible, necessary and pertinent, the voices of all those who remained under the mantle (or the surname) of another person.

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Returning to our series of "Gould prints" (or, better, "Coxen's"), they turn out to be plates torn from some most unfortunate third part of *The Zoology...* which, in being so cruelly deprived of its images, lost all its market price — and a significant part of its historical and academic importance.

Contrary to what one might think, the sheets thus obtained do not have a great value. As I said, they are neither numbered nor signed, and having been produced so quickly and massively, they lack many of the imperfections and details that would make them unique and therefore valuable.

And the fact that they've been ripped out of a book doesn't help much. On the contrary...

For us, however, they have a symbolic value. And an anecdotal one, if you will. For our portfolio of prints was donated to the CDF in 2009 by the Charles Darwin Trust, and was hand-delivered by none other than the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, who visited the Charles Darwin Research Station in March of that year.

Charles, Prince of Wales. The current British king. And Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. The current queen-consort.



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