Chapter 3
Making Friends in Chile

When the *Beagle* arrived in Valparaíso, it had been at sea for more than two years. Those years were fundamental to Darwin’s intellectual development, as he learned more about how to work and see, especially by following Fitz-Roy’s example of work ethic and self-discipline. Their shared literary and scientific interests provided them with ample conversation material: the men breakfasted together at 8:00 a.m. daily and had lunch after the noontime check of Fitz-Roy’s 20 chronometers. In between meals, Fitz-Roy ensured order on his ship and in his paperwork. Following the captain’s example, Darwin updated his personal, botanical, and zoological observations assiduously in his various journals, also noting down crucial details, as Fitz-Roy did. Working beside Fitz-Roy, Darwin learned to observe his surroundings carefully, and make notes in his field notebooks, writing a fuller account as quickly as possible. These notes were an essential tool of good scientific practice, providing validation of the findings or observations and ensuring details were recorded about material collected. During his five years on the *Beagle*, Darwin used 18 notebooks.¹

Darwin’s admiration for his mentor was amply reciprocated. In a letter to his sister, Frances Rice-Trevor, Fitz-Roy wrote: “Much interesting information has been acquired by my messmate—Charles Darwin—in his wandering on shore—He is a good pedestrian, as well as a good horseman;—He is a sensible, shrewd, and sterling good fellow.”² Darwin’s ease at making other friends on the ship also helped his work. The crew affectionately nicknamed Darwin “Philos,” short for “Ship’s Philosopher,” and also referred to him as a “stone pounder.”³

Due to Darwin’s friendship with Fitz-Roy and his popularity among the officers, he evolved from a “supernumerary” naturalist into the ship’s natural history leader, isolating the rightful expedition naturalist, Robert McCormick. McCormick was by all accounts a difficult
man. In private, Darwin dismissed him and his scientific skill, but due to their shared interests they worked together, for instance when the ship landed in the Cape Verde Islands. McCormick geologized enthusiastically; he, not unreasonably, expected the Beagle voyage to propel him into a career as a feted naturalist. The dual occupation of ship’s surgeon-naturalist dates back to the seventeenth century, but was formalized in Britain around the turn into the nineteenth century. Before signing on, McCormick had spent a year in Edinburgh studying natural history, and thereby following a well-established path. Appointed to the Beagle, McCormick was to make the official collection, to be donated to the government. Knowledge of countries beyond Europe, plus a collection to distribute to key figures, could help unknown aficionados join the community of British naturalists. It was for similar reasons that Claudio Gay ventured to Chile, seeking a stable place in the community of French naturalists.

Thus if anyone was to receive support on the Beagle, it should have been McCormick, who not only sought a collection to establish himself, but also had the responsibility to deliver a collection to the Crown. Yet it was a former student who dominated the public spaces of scientific exploration and private spaces of reflection on and off the ship. Darwin hung his nets over the ship’s side, hunched over a microscope in the poop cabin, talked natural history with Fitz-Roy, and shipped his collection home on Beagle-made crates at the Admiralty’s expense. When the Beagle landed on St. Paul’s Rocks, between Cape Verde and Brazil, Darwin scrambled over the rocks, whacking the unsuspecting gannets with his geological hammer, while McCormick was sent to fish for dinner. And Fitz-Roy played terrible favorite, because he preferred Darwin’s company. Angrily, McCormick left the Beagle in Rio in April 1832, citing “a false position on board a small and very uncomfortable vessel...every obstacle having been placed in the way of my getting on shore and making collections.” After McCormick’s abrupt departure, Darwin had some claim to becoming the voyage’s official naturalist; moreover, as a paying guest, his only responsibility was the work he created for himself.

While Fitz-Roy’s friendship with Darwin blossomed, the captain’s older friends felt slighted. In a letter from Montevideo, in large, unusually careless handwriting, Fitz-Roy asked his sister, Fanny, rhetorically,

> Who amongst all those who have time at their disposal and are not at most engrossing work from six in the morning till twelve at night? yes which of them has bestowed on me more than one letter during the last twelve-months—...I know it is my fault—but it is hard to do every thing—to work—to write—and to pay.”