Introduction

This narration begins in 1578, with Francis Drake, and follows through, to the twentieth century, with other "outsiders" and with the native peoples, mainly the Yamana. I propose to travel with the reader, during these four centuries, through this desolate though often inspiring natural landscape: Tierra del Fuego, the islands south of the Magellan Strait to Cape Horn.[1]

Cape Horn has been associated with its native inhabitants, as if the final furious expression of the continent were coupled with the most wretched people on earth. Cape Horn, the southernmost part of the earth this side of Antarctica, is known principally for the tribulations of famous explorers and adventurous navigators. It has inspired and awed seamen for almost 400 years. Even in calm weather, a haunting silence shrouds the vast ocean beyond, disturbed only by the waves throbbing against the rocky coasts, where seals lounge and squalling petrels weave through the air. But now few animals remain there and fewer people. Now Horn Island is uninhabited except for men of the Chilean Navy and Coast Guard in the meteorological station. Despite the progress in navigation, "the Cape" still evokes the most dreaded seas on earth and from year to year draws tourists; but to the Yamana it was home.

The Yamana are among the most defiled people in the world. The early navigators either ignored them or treated them with disdain. Even the great Darwin referred to them as "stunted, miserable wretches," "miserable degraded savages," "the most abject and miserable creatures I anywhere behold" who "kill and devour their old women before they kill their dogs"; he added, "viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe that they are fellow-creature, and inhabitants of the same world." Although he also wrote of their progress under the aegis of the

FIGURE 1.1. Cape Horn, viewed from the East.

missionaries, again, in *The Descent of Man*, he referred to them as he had forty years before.

They are mentioned by historians and anthropologists, although sometimes they are simply ignored.[2] In note 3, I comment on the relevant publications on the Yamana, when possible, those that are available in English.[3]

I treat them as fellow human beings, on a par with the well-known personages who encountered them. Far from being wretched, the Yamana lacked nothing in human terms. They experienced more than their share of problems owing to the exigencies of an often hostile environment and the threat of starvation. But the obduracy of nature apparently inspired their love of country, a country they found infinitely exciting and of great beauty, as can be appreciated by some of the documents cited in this text and by comments of the few descendants I came to know.

The archaeological literature is full of adaptation hyperboles as if these people, hunters of marine mammals and gatherers of shellfish, were constantly struggling to survive.[4] Even though they lived closer to nature and in a more hazardous natural environment than many of us do today, their daily quest for food and shelter did not overwhelm them except during periods of unusually harsh weather. They were not constantly striving to adapt to their environment, even though the search for food was almost

constant. They were well acquainted with their territory and the seasons and knew where and when to find seals, shellfish, fish, certain birds and other food. Acutely aware of the danger of the sudden climatic changes they, as well as their neighbours the Alakaluf (Kaweskar), were accomplished navigators in their canoes of tree bark. The Yamana navigated the treacherous seas around Cape Horn and through the Strait of Le Maire; although moving from one campsite to another they travelled as close to the shores as possible. They were constantly alert to the subtle changes in their surroundings that might warn them of a coming storm, and they could see much farther into the horizon than the Europeans, as Darwin noted. Although they had good appetites, they often had other matters on their minds, such as when and where to hold their great ceremonies. However, canoe accidents were apparently quite frequent, and from time to time storms overwhelmed them and hunger struck. If a damaged canoe could not be repaired, a family might become isolated on a remote island and starve to death. When someone was assassinated, vengeance was taken on the real or assumed culprit. Unhappy marriages were not exceptional. These and other human frailties were part of their habitual routine. Nevertheless, they not only adapted and survived (for some 6,000 years), they often enjoyed life. They had a cheerful temperament until their lives were disrupted by outsiders.

Although the Yamana are among the best-documented native peoples in South America, they are not well known to the English reader because the main sources, those of the Anglican missionaries and the volumes on the Yamana by Father Martin Gusinde, are not widely read. The latter are not easily available in English. Therefore I allude to salient aspects of their culture. I also follow the lives of some twelve Yamana, all of whom died long before I first went to Tierra del Fuego in 1964. Thanks to the quality of the historical documents and to the years I spent concentrating on this text, their personalities have become so vivid that they have become my friends – some, my heroes.[5] I am sure that more information can be found concerning some of them, and hopefully documented biographies will be written about them. Even though the lives and achievements of the outsiders (European in the majority) are familiar to many readers, they here are treated in similar fashion. For instance, I follow the lives of Drake, Cook, Darwin, Fitz-Roy, Martial, Hyades and certain sealers after their visits to Tierra del Fuego, as well as the missionaries after their retirement.

Certainly, in the future, more people the world over will admire the Yamana for their physical stamina and ingenuity in dealing with an often

unpredictable environment, their creative ceremonies, their talent for mimicry and ear for music, their caustic and often amusing oral literature, their geometrical, almost code-like paintings (on their faces and on slabs of wood), their dynamic society generated by a subtle combination of cooperation and competition, their amazingly rich language and their sociability. They usually welcomed the European navigators cheerfully even though the men did not always resist the temptation to "pocket" pieces of iron on the decks of the ships.

With respect to their simple technology, T. W. Deacon said very clearly: "Anthropologists in the early twentieth century quickly realised that the technological status of a society was no predictor of the complexity of its language or the symbolic richness of its traditions." Moreover a simple technology requires a complex knowledge of how to use it. Such knowledge was usually not transmitted in the publications concerning them.

In 2009, there is now only one person, Cristina Calderón, who speaks the Yamana language fluently. She appears in the final chapter, along with the other three women with whom I had the opportunity to work as an anthropologist from 1985 through part of the following decade.

This is not a historical novel; no part of this narration is fiction. I pay close attention to the sources. The events and personages are dramatic enough in themselves; nothing has been "fictionalised" in order to make them more appealing to the reader. Yet this approach had to be coherent. I could not simply choose the most dramatic episodes and proclaim that I was not "fictionalising." My insistence on providing a documented narration meant that certain episodes could not be eliminated simply because I feared that the reader might fall asleep, or skip pages. For instance, I follow the two *Beagle* expeditions in Tierra del Fuego (1827–30 and 1832–34) and describe all of its encounters with the Fuegians. No matter how uneventful they may appear, all are significant for one reason or another. Hopefully you will follow the unfolding of these histories. The text may be read without consulting the notes. Most simply identify the sources consulted; however, quite a few are rather long because they treat themes of interest for teachers, students and other scrupulous readers.

The main sources provide a great deal of detail on a variety of subjects. Were this wealth of data to be included, this book would comprise thousands of pages. Now I will appear to contradict myself, because I also insist that the details give the "living in" to the histories and the encounters. All depends on the objectives of the "work." I selected details from the sources concerning what appeared to me essential for an understanding of the theoretical questions Darwin first posed in terms of progress

made since the primitive "savages" to the "civilised" Europeans of his day, particularly concerning the Yamana (whom he called Fuegians). My selection was also made in an effort to elucidate or reveal the conflicts, ambitions, illusions and the achievements of the "actors," natives as well as outsiders and their roles on different levels of significance: personal, home-country and international. I follow the lives of completely distinct people – as, for example, those of Captain Cook and Jemmy Button's eldest daughter. Despite this diversity, the entire text, covering four centuries, is a single narrative because most of the events and the personages are directly or indirectly linked, forming a worldview of those 400 years which were so vital for Europe, for the Fuegians and for Chile and Argentina.

Although I focus on the Yamana, I also include the other "Fuegians," their neighbours, when they enter the narration for one reason or another: especially the Alakaluf (Kaweskar), the Selk'nam (Ona) and the Haush as well as the Tehuelches (also called Aónikenk); even though the latter were not "Fuegians" they were neighbours.

As mentioned above, I focus almost equally on the "insiders" and the "outsiders": the former, the Yamana, who appear in the sources and the few I knew, and their neighbours. The outsiders include explorers, scientists, missionaries, whalers, sealers, and finally Argentine and Chilean government employees, historians, journalists in addition to anthropologists and three famous visitors in the final chapter. My intention is to fill a void – to situate the Yamana and the other Fuegians in universal history as relevant actors during these past four centuries, to bring them into the fold of written history from that outer rim of human experiences, from that separate category of savages, primitives, marginal survivors or exotic curiosities. This book opens another door to the past by joining the experiences of the insiders and outsiders, of the Fuegians and Europeans in a single narrative.

Immanuel Wallerstein advocated such an approach from a slightly different angle when he stated: "Instead of drawing a line between the modern and the premodern, the civilized and the barbaric, the advanced and the backward . . . historical social scientists have to . . . subject all zones, all groups, all strata to the same kind of critical analysis."[6]

The landscape in which they travelled – in canoes, sailing ships, whaleboats and steamships – is evoked almost constantly. The localities where the Yamana camped, the explorers anchored their ships and the missionaries settled are pictured in some detail. The difficulties the climate created for the Europeans and for the Yamana are also empathised. I

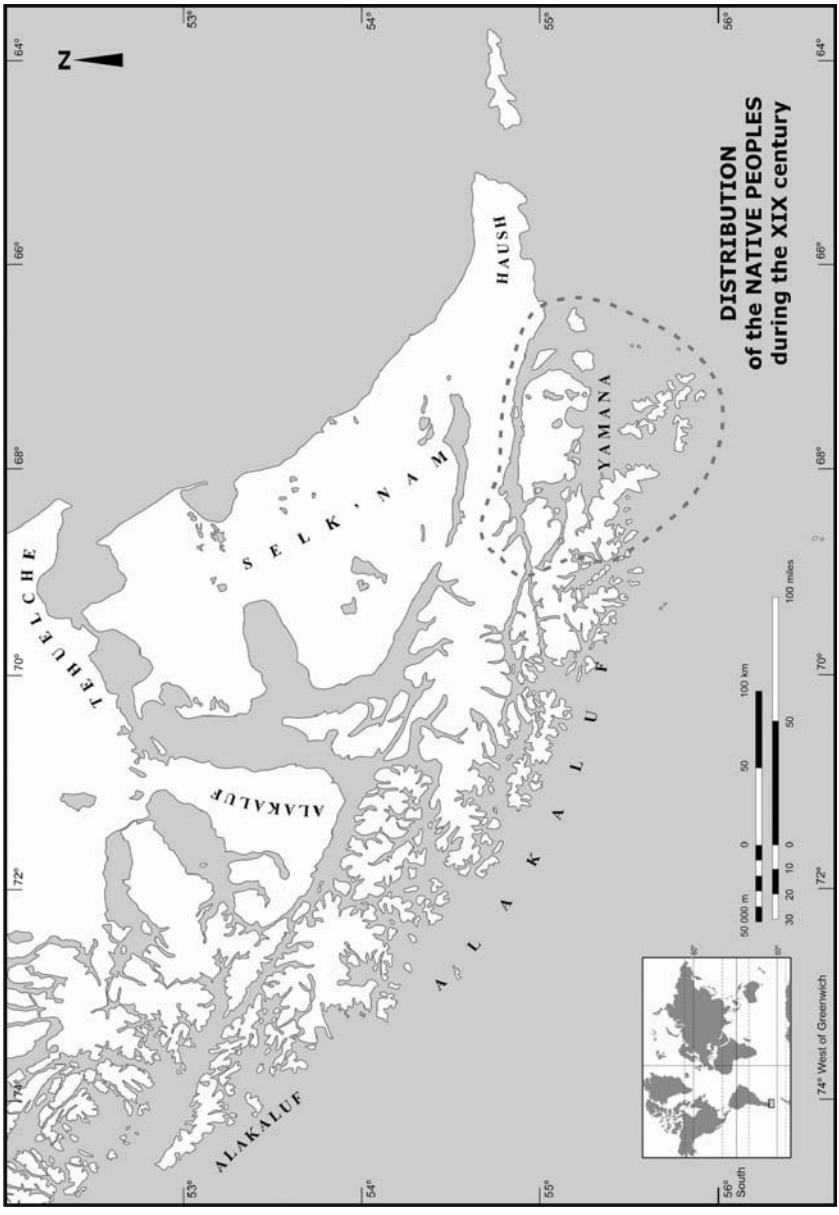

FIGURE 1.2. Distribution of the native peoples during the nineteenth century.

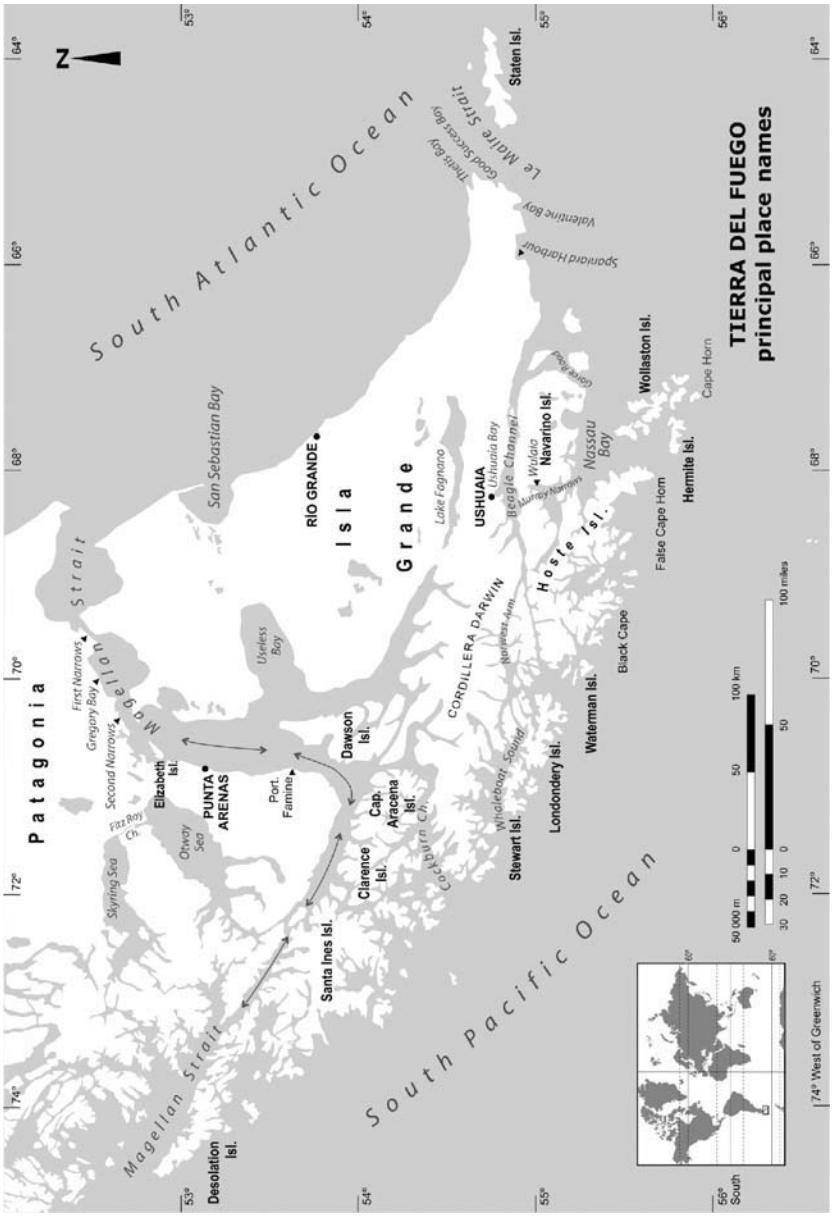

FIGURE 1.3. Principal place names of Tierra del Fuego.

hope to convey vivid impressions of this fascinating area, of how it was dealt with by people of such different backgrounds and objectives for being there.

This book combines archaeological, historical, geographical, natural, cultural and biographical data from published sources with original information I obtained through the years from the few descendants of the Yamana (four women). It also alludes to my experience of living and travelling in the area. As the narration unfolds, my comments should be evident to the reader. Each of us has only one life, but we can experience the lives of others, without stretching our imagination, through our knowledge and sensitivity.

The Fuegians' basic economy of hunting, gathering and fishing, for short H/G/F, lasted at least for ninety percent of our existence as *Homo sapiens sapiens*, that is, nearly 90,000 years of our 100,000 or more years' existence as a species. Why did these Palaeolithic societies continue for so long? Why did they last as a universal phenomenon until about 13,000 years ago (10,000 or 11,000 BC), when agricultural–sedentary villages, the so-called Neolithic epoch, emerged? They lasted so long perhaps because, with the different emphases on H/G/F, these people had the know-how to live in a great variety of places (coast and inland, deserts and forests, etc.), and their economy and society were flexible enough to adjust to the formidable changes in climate that occurred during these many thousands of years. These societies were more or less egalitarian (more for the men and less for the women) and their populations were small. They were not subjected to the overwhelming stresses of hierarchy that eventually shortened "the lives" of many of the great civilisations that followed. However the former were not simple band societies as some anthropologists contended. I would guess that some were like the Fuegians among whom certain individuals had a great deal of prestige, notably the shamans, although few economic privileges. Also the great variety of such societies included those who engaged in armed combat among their "own people." For instance the Selk'nam fought among themselves often to extend (or defend) their hunting grounds and to kidnap women. The latter were always scarce because of polygamy. They attacked their neighbours (the Haush) many centuries before contact with Europeans, mainly for territory and probably also for women. Incursions of the Selk'nam against the Yamana, in the nineteenth century were often for pillage (also for goods left by the Europeans), at least until the final attack in 1859 (Chapter 9). The H/G/F way of living was usually ecologically adjusted. It did not destroy the fauna or the forests and

plants, so it enabled people to remain settled in circumscribed areas for thousands of years, as did the Yamana and their neighbours. If these Fuegian cultures can be treated as prototypes of H/G/F communities (though by no means exclusively) it is because, as far as is known, they never had had contact with full or even part-time agriculturists (such as the Mapuches of central Chile). The Yamana and other Fuegians had always been H/G/F, though of course they had modified their infra and super structures at different times through the ages. Not only because ecological conditions changed but also because of the varying intensity and quality of their relations within their cultural sphere and beyond it, with their neighbours. At different times, certain subgroups (such as lineages or clans) became unusually powerful, having great extensions of territory, at the cost of those that were less well organised. This happened among the Selk'nam shortly before contact, with Lola Kiepja's maternal grandfather whose lineage was the largest in the area, extending as it did from Lake Fagnano to the Atlantic coast. The mythology also varied, not only from one generation to another, but also simultaneously (at the same time) as for instance when a myth was "used," interpreted, to enhance the prestige of a narrator (the relater of the myth), his lineage or clan. The Fuegian and probably the "Palaeolithic societies" as well, were dynamic despite their adherence to H/G /F economic patterns and lack of writing.

The further we go back in time through many millennia, we become aware of the quintessence of our human heritage in Africa, with the first *Homo sapiens*. When we began walking upright, our front legs and feet became arms and hands, giving more work to the brain and less to the muscles, until, perhaps some 100,000 years ago, we became, for better or for worse, twice "*Sapiens*," leaving our cousins, the *Homo sapiens neanderthalense*, to their fate. However, we were not destined, programmed or designed to become *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Natural selection (or "descent with modification," as Darwin sometimes calls his theory) is not predetermined. We have not been "selected" by Nature (or "anyone" else) to rule the biosphere. Nature has no axe to grind, no favourites. Near the end of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin wrote, "natural selection works solely by and for the good of each individual, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection." It "works" in different ways in terms of the individuals of a specific species. Darwin closes his treatise with these memorable lines: "There is grandeur in this view of life, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved."

The highly esteemed late biologist Ernst Mayr developed Darwin's statement concerning our species in this lucid passage:

> When speech developed between 300,000 and 200,000 years ago in small groups of hunter–gatherers owing to a selective premium on improved communication, the situation was favourable for a further increase in brain size. However, around 100,000 years ago this increase came to a halt and from then to the present, the human brain growth has stayed the same size and [of] equal capacity.

So apparently our "mental endowment" has not progressed since some 100,000 years ago. Mayr seemed rather disappointed when he added:

> One would have expected continued brain growth in the 100,000 years preceding the development of agriculture, which occurred around 10,000 years ago. A Great Leap forward in culture, as Diamond calls it, seems to come about very rapidly during this period, yet it was not correlated with an equivalent jump in brain size or changes in other physical characteristics. Just why this should be so has been speculated about, but no convincing answer has been found.[7]

So according to Mayr there is no biological reason for the "invention" of agriculture and sedentary life, nor for the "civilisations" that followed. We have the same brain capacity as our Palaeolithic hunting–gathering *Homo sapiens sapiens*, neither more nor less. Darwin also realised that the hunting–gathering Yamana he met in Tierra del Fuego had the same mental capacity as the British.[8] Also, in his conclusions of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, he noted that:

> all the chief expressions exhibited by man are the same throughout the world. This fact is interesting, as it affords a new argument in favour of the several races being descended from a single parent-stock, which must have been almost completely human in structure, *and to a large extent in mind*, before the period at which the races diverged from each other.[9]

Lévi-Strauss adhered to the same thesis. "I see no reason why mankind should have waited until recent times to produce minds of the caliber of a Plato or an Einstein. Already over two or three hundred thousand years ago, there were probably men of similar capacity." And he added: "the human brain is the same everywhere . . . not the input and output."[10]

Although the Yamana's "inputs and outputs" are vastly different from those of Wall Street brokers and our famous scientists, the Yamana may have discussed and argued about their different interpretations of their oral tradition something like Wall Street brokers agree and disagree on the reasons for the rise and fall of the stock market or scientists their hypotheses. Writing and mathematics have not made the scientists more intelligent than the "scholars" of oral traditions, but it has enabled the