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978-0-521-51379-1 - European Encounters with the Yamana People of Cape Horn, Before and After Darwin

Anne Chapman

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## EUROPEAN ENCOUNTERS WITH THE YAMANA PEOPLE OF CAPE HORN, BEFORE AND AFTER DARWIN

Cape Horn has been associated with its native inhabitants, the Yamana, as if the final furious expression of the continent were coupled with the most wretched people on earth. Even the great Darwin referred to them as “miserable degraded savages,” “the most abject and miserable creatures I anywhere behold.” This book is a documented (not fictional) narration of dramas played out from 1578 to 2000, in the Cape Horn area, by the Yamana, Charles Darwin, and Robert Fitz-Roy, among others. One objective of this work is to clarify why Darwin had such a negative impression of the “Fuegians,” as he called them, and how his writing on them relates to that of others. Another objective, the second, is to challenge the concept of ethno-history by incorporating an “ethnos” (the Yamana) into world history, by pointing out their role in the sequence of events of the last 400 years in the Cape Horn area and their contribution to our understanding of human society. The third objective is to treat the “events” that take place in Cape Horn – the discoveries and experiences of Francis Drake, James Cook, Herman Melville, Darwin, James Weddell, Charles Wilkes and James Ross – not only when they encountered the Yamana but how their discoveries and experiences affected the world at large.

The second chapter focuses on the whalers and sealers and the impact of their activity in the markets of the United States and Europe as well as on the Yamana. The last chapters concentrate mainly on the Anglican missionaries and the colonists – on the effects of their presence on the Yamana as a people. The epidemics that nearly extinguished them are another main theme. This book evokes the Europeans’ motives for going to Tierra del Fuego and the Yamana’s motives for staying there some 6,000 years, what the outsiders gained and what the Yamana lost. The narrations are based on geographical, historical and ethnographic sources and Anne Chapman’s work with the last few descendants of the Yamana. The body of this book has been written for the public at large, while the notes are for students and specialists; therefore it is a general work as well as a source reference and textbook.

Anne Chapman is a Franco-American ethnologist. She has done extensive fieldwork in Honduras with the Tolupan (Jicaque) since 1955 and the Lenca since 1965. In Tierra del Fuego (Argentina and Chile), she has worked, as of 1964, with the last members of the Selk’nam (Onas) people as well as with four descendants of the Yamana, from 1985 into the 1990s, who were knowledgeable about their tradition and spoke the ancient language.

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*I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THE JEMMY BUTTONS OF  
THE WORLD AND THEIR FRIENDS.*

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## Acknowledgements

It was, as I recall, in March 1991 in Buenos Aires that, quite suddenly, while going over Fitz-Roy's and Darwin's voyage, thinking about my four Yahgan friends and informants in Chile, it occurred to me to attempt to reconstruct the "story" of the Yahgans from their very first contacts with outsiders to the present. I was retired by then so I could not expect any institutional support. "Through the years," to quote some popular song, off and on, to the present, this text has been researched, written and rewritten, especially written during the '90s, when I was living part-time in Oakdale, Long Island. During those years my brother, Theodor Landon Chapman, encouraged me "to carry on," given his unbounded enthusiasm for Charles Darwin. He is the first person I wish to thank, in his memory. This was not an heroic enterprise, as he seemed to think, but it was time-consuming. While in Oakdale I took advantage of the Dowling College Library, whose librarians were always very helpful. About 1996, my friend of many years, Edith Courturier, suggested that I send the beginning chapters to the anthropologists Kristine Jones and James Saeger, which I did, and they both responded with helpful comments, as did June Nash, another anthropologist, whom I admired for her work in Bolivia and Mexico. Somewhat later I sent my first chapter on the missionaries to the Reverend Roy Mac Kaye Atwood, my late cousin, who was pleased to reply to me. Later, while still on Long Island, I was very encouraged by two brief letters from Stephen Jay Gould. In one he suggested that I read Keith Stewart Thompson on the *Beagle's* voyage.

During one of my frequent visits to Buenos Aires, I consulted the archive of the Diocese of the Anglican Church, whose director and employees were extremely cooperative, enabling me to copy a great number of articles from the *South American Mission Magazine*, which is so essential for my subject. There, in Buenos Aires, I also consulted the library of the

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Museo Etnográfico, where I was always welcomed. Later, having completed a first draft, I attempted to convince a number of editors to publish the text, but it was invariably considered far too long, with too many notes and illustrations – that is, too costly for a best-seller. Meanwhile, while I was visiting my friend Edith Courturier again, in Washington, DC, she arranged an interview with Sandra Herbert, a Darwin scholar and professor of the history of science at the University of Maryland. She very willingly read several chapters, made very pertinent comments on them that applied to the entire text and encouraged me to persist. Through her I met Janet Browne, in London, whose first volume of her biography on Darwin I had received as a gift from Colin McEwan. She was also extremely helpful and suggested improvements, especially on the two chapters concerning Darwin. Later, again in London, I contacted Stephen Hugh-Jones, whom I had met years before. He was very encouraging and made many very helpful comments, then and also quite recently. Betty Meggers at the Smithsonian made several pertinent suggestions concerning my “style” of writing. George Stocking Jr., by mail from the University of Chicago, convinced me to write in the first person and made other pertinent comments. In Punta Arenas, Chile, Mateo Martinic as well as other members of the Instituto de la Patagonia and the University of Magallanes, especially Flavia Morello and Alfredo Prieto, have given me unfailing support for this and other projects concerning the “Fuegians.” I also wish to thank Gonzalo Sanchez, in Santiago, Chile, for his enthusiastic support of this work during these last years, as well as Jorge Mery García for sending me an article by the Chilean historian José Miguel Barros, in addition to many other articles and for contacts in Santiago. I am especially grateful to the late Eugenia Borgoño, Gabriela Christeller, Cecilia Hidalgo, Ana González Montes, Catalina Saugy and many others in Buenos Aires for their assistance and encouragement.

Adrian Matatia, librarian of the Musée de l’Homme, has been most helpful here in Paris, where I depended on the wealth of material for my subjects in this library as well as the photothèque which, years ago, gave me a nearly complete collection of the photographs of the Yamana taken in 1882 and 1883 by members of the Mission Scientifique au Cap Horn, which are among the best of this group. Now the president of the Musée de Quai Branly, Stéphane Martin, has graciously permitted me to use some of these photographs in Chapters 12 and 13. The facilities offered at the library of the Maison de Sciences de l’Homme in Paris were also essential for my work. I will always be grateful to the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique for allowing me to choose my topics of research

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I am above all grateful to Rosa Clemente, Cristina and Ursula Calderón, and Hermelinda Acuña, descendants of the Yahgans, for sharing their memories with me in Ukika, Navarino Island, Chile, during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. I cite them in the second and last chapters and hope, in the future, to publish more of their testimonies. I also wish to thank the Chilean Navy for the facilities they offered me to travel in little-known parts of the Cape Horn area and the Argentine Navy for my several trips to Staten Island, an uninhabited island of the southeastern tip of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina.

During these last few years, here in Paris, my good friend Viviana Manríquez has assisted me with her suggestions, her ability with the computer and her knowledge of the history and anthropology of her native Chile. Then in 2007, having reduced and re-formed my text to the utmost, she and her husband Hugo Moraga contacted their friend Frank Salomon, professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin. He very willingly read my chapters on the *Beagle* voyages and then most thoughtfully advised me to submit my revised text to Frank Smith, Executive Editor at Cambridge University Press in New York City. Thanks

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initially to Frank Smith and then especially to the two Cambridge readers and the Cambridge University Press Syndic, it was finally accepted. I also wish to thank Jeanie Lee at the Cambridge University Press office in New York for helping me secure permissions for the illustrations and Brigitte Coulton for being so patient while I made the final corrections to this long text. My rather special manner of writing involves a certain liberty with grammatical standards, for which I take entire responsibility. I was especially keen on publishing this text with Cambridge because it had been Darwin's university and became the depository of his archives and also because England is the homeland of most of the "outsiders" who encountered the Yamana through these last four centuries.

I owe a great deal to my friend Ixel Quesada who so carefully reviewed the entire text and made the final corrections the first week of December 2009.

Paris, December 2009

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## Glossary

**Alakaluf** (spelt in a variety of ways). Apparently the meaning of this term is unknown. It was first reported by Fitz-Roy. He undoubtedly heard it in 1829, during his first expedition, as the name of a small island or a group of islets called Alikhoolip, south of the large Londonderry Island and east of the twin Gilbert Islands (Chapter 3). However, though he became aware that the Alakaluf and the Yamana spoke different languages, he called both groups Fuegians, and the Yamana, also Tekeenica. The contemporary Alakaluf (see Kawésqar) do not recognise it as a term for their people. However, I use it because these people are known by this term in print.

**Falkland Islands.** These islands are referred to in English and on many maps as “[The] Falkland Islands” simply because the British government has owned them since 1833. In Argentina they are known as Islas Malvinas. The former name dates from an expedition led by John Strong in 1690, who named the islands after his patron, Anthony Cary, the 5th Viscount Falkland. “Malvinas” is derived from the French name “Îles Malouines,” bestowed in 1764 by Louis Antoine de Bougainville, after the mariners and fishermen from the Breton port of Saint Malo. He became the island’s first known human settler, though not for long (see Chapter 2).

**Fuegian.** Used here as a generic term for the four ethnic groups of Tierra del Fuego (Yamana, Alakaluf, Selk’nam and Haush), even though the term is usually employed as a synonym for the “canoe people,” the Yamana and the Alakaluf.

**Haush** (spelt Haus, Aus). During the nineteenth century they were referred to as Eastern Onas. Maneken or Manekenku is apparently their genuine name but is rarely used. The Haush, like the Selk’nam, were a “foot people,” mainly guanaco hunters. In historical times, the Haush occupied the southeastern portion (the Mitre Peninsula) of Isla Grande, from San Pablo Cape, where they mixed with the Selk’nam, to Sloggett Bay, where some intermarried with the Yamana. Formerly, prior to the arrival of the Selk’nam, at least several thousand years ago, the Haush occupied most of the Isla Grande. Some time before the arrival of Europeans, they had been “confined” to the southeastern portion of the island by the more aggressive and combative Selk’nam. When first encountered by Europeans (the



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Nodal brothers from Spain) in 1619, they already were confined to the Mitre Peninsula. There they supplemented their diet of guanaco meat with the meat of seals (the sea lions and the fur seals), which were more abundant there than in the Selk'nam portion of the Isla Grande.

**Islas Malvinas.** See Falkland Islands, above.

**Kawésqar.** A term employed as their authentic name by the surviving Alakaluf living in Puerto Eden. It is also used as a generic term for all the Alakaluf by linguists and historians, such as the Chilean scholar Mateo Martinic. The Kawésqar or Alakaluf, the “canoe people,” neighbours of the Yamana, also lived along the Strait of Magellan east to about Elizabeth Island and up the Chilean archipelago to the Gulf of Peñas. To the south they inhabited the region between Brecknock Peninsula and Devil's Island, where, although they were the majority, they sometimes married the Yamana, at least in the nineteenth century.

**Native.** A term designating any and everyone identified with a distinctive culture, locality, particular nation or country. It seems neutral and is used freely.

**Ona.** Derived from a Yahgan word referring to the north. Thomas Bridges defines it in his *Yamana–English Dictionary* (second edition 1987, p. 10) as “*ona* (*on'isin* the mainland of Fireland) [that is, the Isla Grande]. The Foot Indians *on'a-shagan* (*onaiiusha*) [later known as Selk'nam]. The N. coast of Beagle Channel.” Here Bridges refers again to the Isla Grande, to its south coast, along Beagle Channel, which was Yamana territory. Thus there is a certain lack of clarity in his definition, as *on'a-shagan* appears as the term for both the Selk'nam and the Foot Indians and as a term for the south coast of Isla Grande. Recall that Bridges invariably used “Ona” as the name of the Selk'nam, which is a simplification of *on'a-shagan*. Gusinde (1982: vol. I: 240) pointed out that the Yamana called the Alakaluf *aóna yámana*, “people of the north.” So apparently the word *aona* (or *ona*) signifies “north” in the Yahgan language. It was frequently used by Jemmy Button and written as “Oens-men” (Chapter 5). However, it was not employed by the Selk'nam themselves. Lola Kiepja, the last Selk'nam shaman, whom I knew, thought Ona was an English word, because the few tourists who came to see her were mostly English-speaking and they invariably called her or questioned her using this term. It is currently used instead of Selk'nam, the authentic name, mainly because it is easy to spell and pronounce (see below).

**Pecheray** (or Pecherais). A term first used by Bougainville, the eighteenth-century explorer, for the Alakaluf along the Strait of Magellan. It is apparently an Alakaluf form of greeting, which has been translated differently by various authors. Captain Cook used the term, in 1769, to refer to the Haush in Good Success Bay. Also see Gusinde (1926) in the Bibliography.

**Selk'nam** (also known as Onas and Oens-men). The authentic name of the largest group of guanaco hunters. The etymology of Selk'nam was not known by the last members of this group. It does not appear to be derived from any other word, and its meaning has been lost over the eons. The Selk'nam, like the Haush, were “foot people.” They occupied most of the Isla Grande in historical times and probably long before. During the nineteenth century, they were neighbours of

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the Alakaluf along the shores of Useless Bay (across from Dawson Island) and of the Haush, as mentioned above. They mingled with the Yamana when they crossed the cordillera and descended along the north shore of Beagle Channel, as frequently mentioned in this text.

**Tekeñica.** A term used in the nineteenth century, mainly by Fitz-Roy, to refer to the Yahgans living in the area of Hoste Island (see below). According to Lucas Bridges (1987: 36), this term was not employed by the Yahgans simply because it was not a word. It is derived from the expression *teke uneka*. Lucas Bridges explained that Fitz-Roy probably began using this term (during his first expedition) when he pointed to a bay (see below) and a Yahgan replied, *teke uneka*, which signifies “I don’t understand what you mean.” He thought the expression was the word Tekeñica and used it to refer to the Yahgans living in that area. So the bay that Fitz-Roy pointed to appears on the Chilean maps as Tekenika Bay, located on Hoste Island, between Pasteur and Hardy peninsulas, bordering the much larger Nassau Bay. I use the latter term, to not confuse the reader with the name of the bay and Fitz-Roy’s term.

**Yacana-kunny.** A term used by the Tehuelche for the Selk’nam, who were also called simply Yacana by Fitz-Roy.

**Yahgan and Yamana.** Terms used interchangeably in this book to refer to the same people. These “canoe people” inhabited the southern portion of Tierra del Fuego, both shores of Beagle Channel to Cape Horn, and to the west areas as far as the Brecknock Peninsula, where they mingled with the Alakaluf who were the main inhabitants there at least in the nineteenth century. The Yamana probably camped in Staten Island also (see, in the Bibliography, Chapman, A. (1983), available only in Spanish). Along the north shore of Beagle Channel, the eastern Yamana had frequent contact with the Selk’nam, at least during the nineteenth century. The Yamana were also neighbours of the Haush in the area of Sloggett Bay.

I use “Yamana” and “Yahgan” as synonyms because of a certain confusion concerning their definitions. The anthropologists, archaeologists, and other writers favour “Yamana,” as did Father Martin Gusinde, author of the main study of Fuegian cultures, even though he was aware that it signifies humanity at large. T. Bridges (1987: 265) defined the term *hanna-iamalim* as “used by the natives specifically of themselves [as] My countrymen, My country people.” I have never seen this term used in other publications nor heard it from the descendants. However, this is an expression, not a name. “Yahgan” seemed inappropriate to Bridges because it is a local name; nevertheless, he favoured it as a generic term and intended that it be used in the title of his dictionary because his informants were from that area or nearby. He (1987: 659) defined “Yaga” as “The name of the Murray Narrows, or rather the coasts on either side and the parts in the neighbourhood.” In Spanish it is spelt Yagán; in English, Yahgan.

Long after Bridges’ death but in agreement with his family, Gusinde, thanks to whom the dictionary was finally published, took the liberty of replacing the term “Yahgan” with “Yamana” in the title of Bridges’ dictionary. Natalie Goodall pointed out in her preface to the second edition that “His [Thomas Bridges’] descendants feel that although Yamana is the form at present most generally

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used for these people, the language represented in this dictionary should be called Yahgan.” In his dictionary, Bridges defined the word “Yamana” as follows: “By this term the Yahgan tribe distinguished themselves from all other natives who spoke a different language as well as from all foreign peoples; this term primarily means Humanity.” There is an obvious ambiguity in this definition. In SAMM (1880: 74) Bridges stated that a term for the Yamana or Yahgan people as a whole does not exist. Also the last speakers of the language, Cristina Calderón and her sister Ursula, explained to me that the term “Yamana” does not apply to them (as a people) because it signifies all humanity; the human being of any nationality, ethnicity or race. They also insisted that “Yamana” signifies the male gender. For these reasons the Calderón sisters are opposed to the use of “Yamana” to designate their people and prefer to be called Yahgan. The linguist Christos Clairis (1985: 18) noted a similar statement made by the late Clara Alvarez, who was also Yahgan.

The ambiguity of the word “yamana” (humanity/male gender) is apparent in other languages, such as the English “man,” the Spanish “*hombre*,” the French “*homme*” and the German “*Mann*.” This ambiguity is especially noted by feminists like myself, who refrain from using these words to apply to all of humanity. But in this text I try to accommodate the anthropologists as well as the descendants of this group and use both terms (“Yamana” and “Yahgan”) interchangeably, hoping not to offend anyone or confuse the reader.

**Yapoo.** A term derived from the Yahgan *aiapux*, or otter. It became a derogatory term employed by the Alakaluf, especially by York Minster, for the Yahgan-Yamana (Chapters 3 to 5).