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978-1-108-06679-2 - At Home with the Patagonians: A Year's Wanderings Over
Untrodden Ground from the Straits of Magellan to the Rio Negro

George Chaworth Musters

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The first use of the word 'anthropology' in English was recorded in 1593, but its modern use to indicate the study and science of humanity became current in the late nineteenth century. At that time a separate discipline had begun to evolve from many component strands (including history, archaeology, linguistics, biology and anatomy), and the study of so-called 'primitive' peoples was given impetus not only by the reports of individual explorers but also by the need of colonial powers to define and classify the unfamiliar populations which they governed. From the ethnographic writings of early explorers to the 1898 Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits, often regarded as the first truly 'anthropological' field research, these books provide eye-witness information on often vanished peoples and ways of life, as well as evidence for the development of a new scientific discipline.

At Home with the Patagonians

Orphaned by the age of four, George Chaworth Musters (1841–79) joined the Royal Navy at thirteen, served with distinction during the Crimean War, and reached the rank of commander. Having been stationed on the coast of South America, during which time he read up on Darwin's voyage in the *Beagle*, he pursued in 1869 his aim of travelling through the south of the continent. In this 1871 publication, which earned him the nickname 'the king of Patagonia', Musters records the year he spent among native Patagonians, covering almost 1,400 miles. He gives a detailed account of their customs and daily life, particularly the manners, dress, hunting practices and methods of battle of the Tehuelche people. Featuring a number of vivid engravings, the book did much to reveal this land to Europeans. It remains an instructive text in the history of South American exploration and anthropology.

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THE PATAGONIANS

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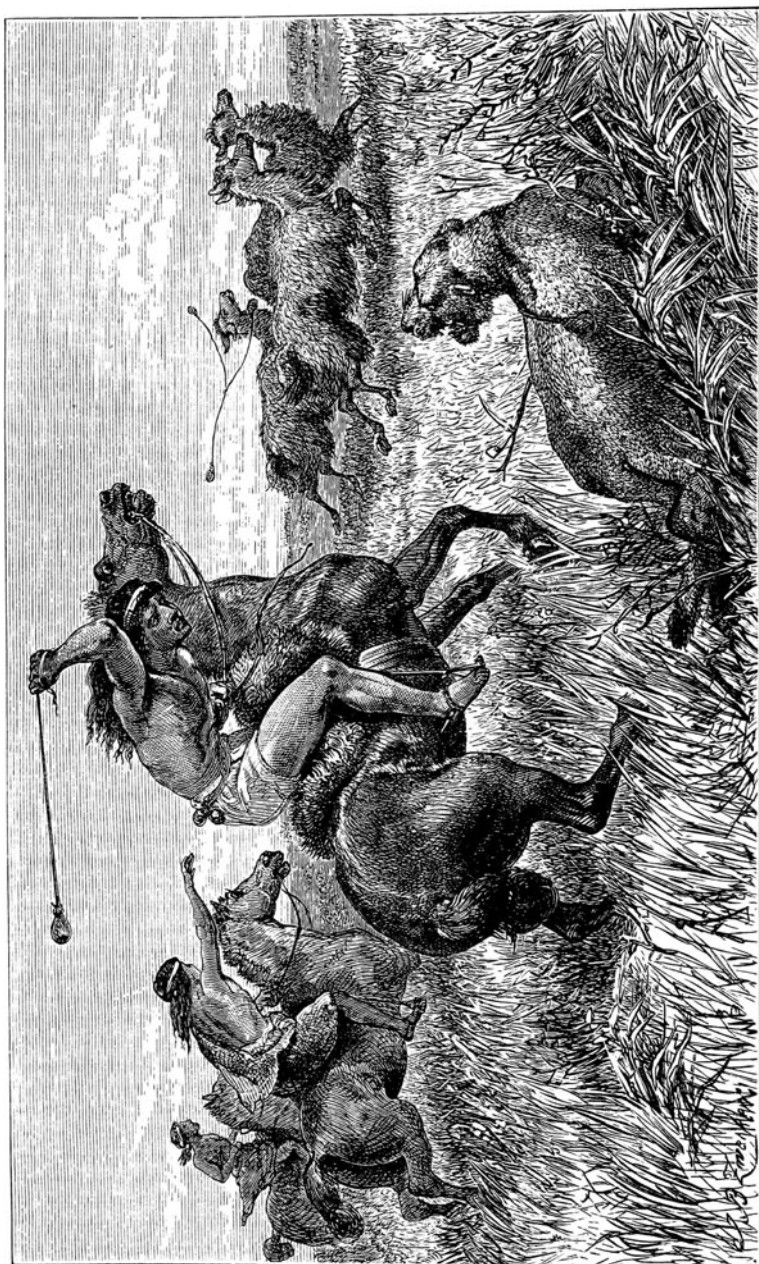
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AT HOME
WITH
THE PATAGONIANS

A YEAR'S WANDERINGS OVER UNTRODDEN GROUND

FROM THE STRAITS OF MAGELLAN

TO THE RIO NEGRO

By GEORGE CHAWORTH MUSTERS

RETIRED COMMANDER R.N.

WITH MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET
1871

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TO MY FRIEND

F. W. E G E R T O N,

ROYAL NAVY,

THIS NARRATIVE IS DEDICATED.

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P R E F A C E.



IN SUBMITTING the following pages to the public, I am conscious that some readers who desire exact and scientific descriptions of the geography and geology of Patagonia will be disappointed; but it must be urged as an apology that instruments could not be carried nor safely used under the circumstances. The course travelled was as carefully laid down, by the help of a compass, as was possible; and the map of the country is so far accurate, and, if incomplete, at least is not imaginative. To others who may perhaps eagerly expect tales of stirring adventure and hair-breadth escapes, such as are usually recounted as the every-day occurrences of uncivilised life, I can only express the hope that this faithful record of life with the Indians all the year round, if not very sensational, will serve at least to make them really at home with the Tehuelches. It is a pleasanter task to record my thanks to those by whose assistance the results of my journey have been utilised; foremost of whom is the venerable ex-President of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir RODERICK MURCHISON, whose kindly reception and introduction of the returned traveller to the Society are gratefully acknowledged. My obligations are scarcely less to

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CLEMENTS MARKHAM, C.B., whose unrivalled knowledge of the early history as well as the geography of South America has been freely placed at my disposal; and to Dr. HOOKER, Director of the Royal Gardens, Kew, for his courteous assistance in identifying some of the plants observed: while to Mr. RUDLER, of the Museum of Mines, I am indebted for a careful classification of the various specimens of rocks and minerals collected in the country. Lastly, the reader will share in my gratitude to Mr. ZWECKER, whose able pencil has created, out of rough outlines sketched in a pocket-book, the vivid and faithful illustrations which bring before his eyes the scenery and incidents of life in Patagonia.

G. C. M.

September 1, 1871.

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INTRODUCTION.



THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY years ago the great navigator Magellan anchored in a port on the eastern coast of an unknown shore, part of the seaboard of the vast continent of South America, to which he gave the name of St. Julian. Starting from this point, the pilot Serrano explored the coast to the southward, and discovered a river, which he named Santa Cruz. His ship was wrecked near the mouth, and left her timbers on the rocks, the first of the long list of vessels lost on that ironbound coast which, from the mouth of the Rio Negro to the Straits, offers but one or two safe harbours, while submerged reefs, fierce gales, strong tides, currents, and overfalls combine to render it nearly the most perilous known to navigators.

Magellan remained at Port St. Julian and Santa Cruz from April till October of 1520, when he sailed southward, and discovered the Straits which bear his name. Two months after his arrival at Port St. Julian a man of gigantic stature appeared on the beach, 'larger and taller than the stoutest man of Castile.' Eighteen natives afterwards arrived, dressed in cloaks of skins and shoes of guanaco hide, which made huge footmarks, whence they were called Patagonés, or 'large feet,' by the Spaniards; and thus originated in a nickname the name of the country, Patagonia. These men used bows and arrows, and had with them four young guanacoës, with which they decoyed the wild ones within shot. Two young men were treacherously

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seized and carried off, howling and calling on their god Setebos. The natives naturally resented this return for their ready friendliness, and, attacking a party sent after them, killed one Spaniard with their arrows. Enough, however, was seen of them to furnish Pigafetta with some details. 'Their tents were light movable frames, covered with skins; their faces were painted; they were very swift of foot, had tools of sharp-edged flints, and ate their meat nearly raw.'

That the first knowledge of Patagonia was diffused in England by Pigafetta's narrative is suggested by Caliban's lines in the 'Tempest': 'he could command my dam's god Setebos;' but it was not till 1578 that the newly-discovered country was visited by Englishmen.

Sir Francis Drake in that year anchored in Seal Bay—probably a little to the south of Port Desire—and saw several Indians. His chaplain narrates their method of stalking the ostriches: 'They have a plume of ostrich feathers on a long staff, large enough to hide a man behind, and with this they stalk the ostriches.' He further says: 'They would have none of our company until such time as they were warranted by their God "Settaboth."' They never cut their hair, which they make a store-house for all the things they carry about—a quiver for arrows, a sheath for knives, a case for toothpicks, a box for fire sticks, and what not; they are fond of dancing with rattles round their waists; they have clean, comely, and strong bodies, are swift of foot, very active, a goodly and lively people. Magellan was not altogether wrong in naming them giants, yet they are not taller than some Englishmen.' Drake next visited Port St. Julian; and, curiously enough, as Magellan had in this place put to death two and marooned a third of his captains who mutinied, so this harbour was the scene of the execution of Mr. Doughty, who chose rather to be beheaded than to be put on shore. The ensuing year Sarmiento was despatched from Callao to examine the Straits in search of the daring Englishman.

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SARMIENTO'S COLONY.

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He saw natives who chased their game on horseback, and brought it down with bolas. But fifty years had elapsed since horses had been imported by the Spaniards of the Rio de la Plata, and already the Indians in the far south had become horsemen, and would seem to have exchanged their bows and arrows for the bolas.

In 1581 Sarmiento was sent from Spain with 2,500 men in twenty-three ships, to found new colonies in the Straits, and established a settlement, leaving 400 men and thirty women, furnished with eight months' provisions. On his way home his ship was captured by the English, and the unhappy colonists were altogether forgotten and neglected by their Government.

Five years after, Thomas Cavendish anchored in a bay to the south of St. Julian, called by him Port Desire, which perpetuates the name of his little craft of 120 tons. Here the natives attacked his men with bows and arrows. Visiting the Straits, he arrived at the settlement, and found only twelve men and three women surviving, the rest having perished of slow starvation and disease; and the name of the place, Port Famine, conferred by him, still recalls the miserable fate of these ill-fated colonists.

On his next voyage, in 1591, Cavendish died; but John Davis twice visited Port Desire, and explored the river for twenty miles. During his stay some 1,000 natives visited the strangers, and Knyvet describes them as being fifteen or sixteen span high.

Passing over the visits of Van Noort and Schouten, in the reign of Charles the Second Sir John Narborough took possession of the country near Port Desire in the name of the King. But few natives were seen, and the mate, Mr. Wood, boastingly declared that he himself was taller than any of them.

In the eighteenth century Byron and Wallis successively visited the shores of Patagonia, and made friends with the

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natives, whose height was found to be from 5 feet 10 inches to 6 feet, while some were nearly 7 feet high.

In 1774 the Jesuit Father Falkner published his work on Patagonia, containing all the information procured by himself and the other Jesuit missionaries who had attempted to obtain a footing on the western and northern boundaries. His account of the Tehuelches, or Tsoneca Indians, was evidently derived from personal communication with them, although his knowledge of the topography of their country seems to have been procured from the reports of others. By this work, which produced a great sensation, the jealous fears of the Spanish Government were aroused, and they hastened to despatch an expedition to form settlements on the coast of Patagonia.

Of the brothers Viedma, who were sent in command, Francisco founded Carmen at the mouth of the Rio Negro, and Antonio, after first fixing on Port Desire, determined finally on Port St. Julian as the site of another colony. He thence undertook the first exploration of the interior in search of timber for building, in the course of which he reached the great lake at the foot of the Cordillera, from which flowed the Rio Santa Cruz. Both on the coast and in the interior he received much friendly aid from the Indians, of whom he formed a most favourable opinion.

Under his brother's auspices the Rio Negro was ascended as far as the mountains by Villarino, to whose expedition reference will be made in the proper place.

No further knowledge was gained of the interior of Patagonia until the survey of the Beagle, so ably performed and so admirably described by Fitzroy and Darwin; during which the ascent of the Santa Cruz river for 200 miles enabled the latter to observe the remarkable formations which he has so aptly described in his work on the Geology of South America.

This brief but perhaps tedious account has been given to show that although the coasts of Patagonia had been ex-

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INTERIOR OF PATAGONIA UNKNOWN.

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plored and surveyed, yet the interior of the country, though pierced by the expeditions of Viedma and Fitzroy, remained up to a late date still almost unknown. Its inhabitants, the Tehuelches, had been often communicated with, their stature noted, and their friendly disposition commended; but their real manners of life as they wandered through the country, and their relations with, or difference from, the Araucanian and Pampa Indians, had remained almost as much a mystery as they were in the last century.

During the last thirty years the Governments of Chili and of Buenos Ayres have shown themselves inclined to claim the possession of the coast, the former trying to advance from the Straits, and the latter from Patagones; and the natives have acknowledged the influence of either Government as they happened to be in the northern or southern parts respectively. Our missionaries also have not left the Patagonians without some efforts to instruct and evangelise them; and although these efforts have been necessarily limited to the coast, yet the fruits of Mr. Schmid's sojourn with the Tehuelches remain both in their friendly feelings and in the lasting record of the vocabulary of the Tsoneca language published by him. And the intercourse of these Indians with Argentines and Chilians, and more especially with English officers, sealers, and missionaries successively, all of whom have testified favourably to their character, has tended to make them more open to access, and to give them a knowledge of foreigners; so that in this respect I can feel that to all those who have been mentioned as having thus preceded me, this brief record is due from a traveller who has experienced the friendly feelings of the natives towards strangers, and especially Englishmen.

While engaged in preparing the ensuing pages for the press, I have had an opportunity of perusing the work of M. Guinnard, first published in French, and recently given to the English public in a spirited translation, entitled

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Untrodden Ground from the Straits of Magellan to the Rio Negro

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Frontmatter

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'Three Years' Slavery among the Patagonians.' The name necessarily attracted me, but to my great surprise careful perusal led to the distinct conviction that the author's personal experiences were altogether confined to the Pampas Indians north of the Rio Negro. From his own statements and omissions it is quite evident that he was not carried by any of his successive masters across this river, which he clearly and accurately defines to be (p. 40) the northern boundary of Patagonia. The name of Patagonians is, therefore, a complete misnomer; and the curious account (pp. 72-3) of the 'Tchéouelches,' or Foot Nomads, clothed in seal skins and accustomed to live on fish, and literally destitute of horses, is applicable to no tribe whatever east of the Cordillera, the Fuegians being the only race presenting any of the characteristic habits attributed to this so-called Patagonian tribe.

I hope I may not be supposed to be desirous of impeaching the accuracy of M. Guinnard's account of the hardships endured in his captivity, or of the customs of the Indians into whose hands he fell, much of which I can corroborate; but it is to be regretted that he was induced, probably by others, to describe under the name of Patagonians, the Pampas Indians, who, by country, race, language, and character, are marked as being altogether distinct from the Tehuelches of Patagonia.