

Historian re-constructs Charles Darwin's Beagle library online

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For close to 180 years, Charles Darwin's library aboard the ship HMS Beagle during his landmark expedition around the world in the 1830s remained lost. The library was dispersed at the end of the voyage. Today, the library has been electronically re-constructed in its entirety and made freely available online as part of the Darwin Online website by historian of science Dr John van Wyhe, a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore.

The voyage of the Beagle between 1831 and 1836 was one of the most important scientific expeditions in history. On board was the young Charles Darwin, whose explorations and investigations would later lead to his groundbreaking work in evolutionary biology and change science and the world forever. The Beagle may not have had the internet, but she had a stunning, and what was then state-of-the-art, library. It was housed in the same cabin where Darwin worked and slept for five years. It played a major part in Darwin's research on board the ship, serving as reference and inspiration for the voracious reader and inquisitive naturalist.

The reconstructed Beagle library online consists of 404 volumes amounting to over 195,000 pages containing more than 5,000 illustrations. Much of the Beagle library was devoted to books on travel and voyages, and natural history, but it also included books on geology, history, literature as well as atlases and nautical maps. At least a third of the reconstructed library is in foreign languages such as French, Spanish, German, Latin and Greek.

Dr van Wyhe said, "The Beagle library reveals the sources and inspirations that Darwin read day after day as he swung in his hammock during long sea crossings, or as he worked on his specimens at the chart table or under the microscope. For a long time this was lost to us, but this reconstructed library provides us an unprecedented insight into the journey that changed science and our understanding of the world."

Deciphering and reconstructing the lost library

Reconstructing the Beagle library was no easy task. There was originally a catalogue aboard the ship but this is also lost. The Beagle's captain FitzRoy estimated the library was about 400 volumes. Earlier efforts had identified 132 works that were likely to have been part of the Beagle Library.

Identifying the contents of the Beagle's library required some historical sleuthing, piecing together disparate clues and information from Darwin's notes, annotations in his surviving books and the writings of other members of the crew. Some of the references in Darwin's notes are very brief and obscure, adding to the challenges.

Dr John van Wyhe edited the Beagle field notebooks – a series of small notebooks that Darwin used on his shore excursions during the Beagle voyage. Here he found more clues to what Darwin read during the voyage. Work started in 2012, and the Beagle library has now been reconstructed online after two years of meticulous work.

To reconstruct the library, Dr van Wyhe and his assistant Dr Kees Rookmaaker sourced scans of the books online and then had them specially transcribed to make them searchable on the Darwin Online website. As far as possible, the team strived to use the same editions that Darwin had, or when that was not attainable, the closest editions available. The reconstructed library also includes works that have been

digitised for the first time, such as the plates for Alexander von Humboldt's Personal Narrative of Travels, which is currently available nowhere else online in colour. Now, for the first time, it is possible for anyone to browse or search through Darwin's Beagle library in an instant.

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Dr John van Wyhe, the well-known historian of science, is the founder and Director of Darwin Online and has published nine books and many articles on Darwin, Wallace and the history of science. He lectures and broadcasts around the world. Darwin Online is the world's largest and mostly widely consulted publication on Darwin. Dr van Wyhe currently holds a joint appointment at NUS as Senior Lecturer at the Department of Biological Sciences and the Department of History.

More information: The Beagle library can now be viewed at: [darwin-online.org.uk/BeagleLib ... ary Introduction.htm](http://darwin-online.org.uk/BeagleLib...ary_Introduction.htm)

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