lovereading.co.uk

This Thing of Darkness

Harry Thompson

Published by Review

Extract is copyright of the Author

Copyright (c) 2005 Harry Thompson

The right of Harry Thompson to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2005
by Review

An imprint of Headline Book Publishing

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7553 0280 X (hardback)
0 7553 2714 4 (trade paperback)

Typeset in ***** by Palimpsest

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'
The Tempest,
Act V, Scene 1

This novel is closely based upon real events
that took place between 1828 and 1865.

Preface

Port Famine, Patagonia, 1 August 1828

An icy wind shouldered its way into the Straits of Magellan from the west, pummelling the cliff walls and scouring the rocks as it passed. Its thirteen-thousand-mile journey across open ocean completed, it sought out the ancient glaciers of its birth in anger. As a grimy late-morning light ahead signalled the dawning of the brief southern day, it funnelled at speed through the narrows at York Road, before sweeping left into the bay of Port Famine. Darting and jinking as it hunted for a target, it picked out the solitary figure of Captain Pringle Stokes where he knelt. It buffeted him and tore at his clothes. It tugged at his thinning forelock in mock deference. It cut through the sodden wool of his coat, turning his skin to gooseflesh and congealing the blood in his veins.

Stokes shivered. *I am so emaciated*, he thought bitterly, *I can feel my shoulder-blades almost touching each other*. He shifted his weight as another furious gust did its best to hurl him to the ground. His knees jostled together in the cold gravel. His ceremonial scabbard, the badge of his rank, scratched uselessly at the smooth stones. He plastered the damp strands of hair back into place – a tiny, futile act of vanity – but the wind merely caught them again and flung them aside dismissively. *This place*, he thought. *This place constitutes the sum total of my achievement. This place is all that I amount to. This place is all that I am.*

Further down the beach, Bennet and his ratings, all drenched from the waist down, were still struggling to pull the cutter ashore; ants, going about their irrelevant business in the service of an unheeding monarch half a world away. A curse on His Majesty, thought Stokes, and a curse on His Majesty's government, in whose service they found themselves marooned in this wretched place. As he inspected them, the bent, sullen figures seemed to be winning their little war. They were probably wondering where he'd gone. Curiosity, he had learned, is one of the few feelings that boredom cannot

kill. As soon as Bennet had the boat secured, they would follow him up the shingle. He did not have much time.

He had conceived his plan weeks ago, but today he would put it into practice. Why today? Nothing marked out this shoreline as different from any other. It was as wretched as the rest. Which was precisely why today was so apt. He had realised it, suddenly, when he had stepped out of the boat. *Today was the day.*

Stokes lifted his head heavenwards, as if seeking reassurance. As always, an obdurate black wall of rock met his gaze, shrouded in lifeless grey. Somewhere above him, hidden from view, was the snow-capped spur of Point St Ann, christened by one of his predecessors – Carteret, or Byron perhaps – in an attempt to imbue this place with spiritual familiarity, a sense of the proximity of God. Yet if ever God had abandoned a place, this was it. The ragged beech forest above the shoreline lay silent. There were no animals to start before a sudden footstep, no birds to soar and swoop, no insects even. Here was a scene of profound desolation. He and the men under his command were alone.

The only man with whom naval etiquette would allow him to converse, that damned fool Captain King, was a couple of miles away at least, another stupid speck in the wilderness. King had spent the winter beating up and down the east coast in the *Adventure*. At least the sun sometimes shone upon the east coast. This was truly a place where 'the soul of a man dies in him'. For if the sharp point of St Ann herself was unable to tear a hole in the suffocating blanket of cloud, then what chance did human beings have of living and breathing in such confines? A curse on King, and a curse on that fat buffoon Otway as well.

The time had come. His frail, icy fingers, lean from long months of low rations, reached down and grasped one of two pistols that hung from his belt. They were pre-loaded on board, of course, prior to any shore excursion, as per Admiralty orders. He couldn't even shit without following Admiralty orders. Would the lords care, he wondered, would they be secretly impressed by his gesture, or would they take offence? Or had he already been forgotten, he and his men, their futile labours destined to be mislaid for ever in the ledger of some consumptive little Admiralty clerk?

The pistol weighed heavy in his hand, and for the first time that day he felt nervous. For one tremulous instant he sought a friendly reflection in the gunmetal, but its dull gleam refused him even that consolation. Instead it offered only a reflection in time, of a sunlit September afternoon eight thousand miles ago, of himself in the doorway of Forsyth's gunshop at number eight Leicester Street. A day when the piece in his hand had shone handsomely, speaking to him of foreign travel, of exciting times ahead, before his life's path had narrowed and hemmed him in. The assistant had stepped out into the street to demonstrate the revolutionary copper-cap percussion system. Mock-aiming the weapon with (he had to admit) a dash

of theatricality, the smartly attired young captain had attracted admiring glances from passers-by, or at least he had imagined so. What price those attentions now? It was half as reliable again as a flintlock, the assistant had said. Well, he would be needing that reliability today.

With a deep intake of breath, Stokes rested the barrel carefully against his front teeth, and curled a tapering finger round the trigger. His lips, suddenly dry, closed painfully around the freezing metal. A warm gush of fear welled in his bowels. Another gust plucked mockingly at his hair, daring him to go ahead. He had to do it, really, if he was any sort of man. To pull back now would be the ultimate, the crowning failure. So do it then. *Do it now.* His hand shook. Three. Two. One. *Now.*

Whether it was a last-second change of mind that caused his hand to jerk sideways, or a surge of fear, Stokes never knew. At the exact moment that the powder flashed and the iron ball smashed upward through the roof of his mouth, his hand dragged the barrel round to one side.

And suddenly, the wind was stilled. The crash of water on stone ceased. The clouds receded, and all the brutal discord of the Patagonian winter was gone, replaced by the purest, blinding agony. And then a tiny thought within made itself known: that if he could go through pain of such dazzling clarity and be conscious of it, he must still be alive.

Part One

Chapter One

Rio De Janeiro, 13 November 1828

'It took Stokes twelve days to die.'

Captain King's voice carried the faintest hint of accusation. He sat forward, his eyes fixed upon the admiral.

'The powder explosion blew away half of his brain. Never have I seen a man suffer so much. Such great agonies . . . and yet he bore his fate with fortitude. He had' – King paused, remembering the pitiful, mutilated creature brought squealing and snuffling back to the *Beagle* – 'He had no eyes. He made little sense; he merely cried out. He became lucid again on the fifth and sixth days, even philosophical as regards his fate, in spite of the pain. Thereafter he lapsed into incoherence once more. He died on the morning of the twelfth.'

Admiral Otway exhaled at last. 'Poor Pringle,' he murmured to himself, and sat back heavily. The manner of Stokes's death disturbed him, rather than the fact of it.

Sensing an advantage, King persisted. 'It had become clear to me, from reports in the days preceding his death, that the balance of his mind had become disturbed. For instance, he stopped for four days to survey the gulf of Estevan, when the *Beagle*'s supplies were very nearly exhausted, a survey that I had most emphatically not commissioned.'

'The south has the strangest effect on a man,' offered Otway apologetically.

King held his ground. 'I do not honestly believe, sir, that any of us had ever previously experienced such conditions. The weather was atrocious. The crew were incessantly employed. At Cape Upright, for instance, the *Beagle* was under way all night for four nights. Most of the crew were sick with rheumatic complaints. Four men drowned. Three died of scurvy. Conditions were little better aboard the *Adventure*.'

The accusatory tone of his remarks, King knew, served no purpose other than to provoke Admiral Otway to mild discomfiture. It was mere sport on his part, his meagre reward for months of back-breaking toil. He had

no reason to fear Otway, no need to seek the admiral's influence: this was his last commission, indivisible, unalterable, fashioned in Whitehall. His future was already out of Otway's hands. Both men were aware, too, that King had given Stokes the tougher task, ordering him west into the teeth of the gales that howled up the Straits of Magellan. The sad fact was that Stokes had been a bad appointment, a mediocre captain crushed by the pressure of his responsibilities. Goading his superior now, King realised, helped only to ease his own frustrations.

The close tropical atmosphere bore down stickily on both men, as Otway pondered how to put into words what he was going to say next.

King monitored a bead of sweat as it made its way down the admiral's neck, then dissipated suddenly into the stiff, high-necked woollen collar of his frock-coat. The contrast between Otway's immaculate, starched uniform and his own, battered and salt-bleached, struck him briefly as absurd. Instinctively he raised his fingers to the thick, grey-streaked beard that had kept him warm in the south. He had not shaved now for over six months.

Otway closed the book on King's accusations with an expansive gesture, as if to sweep aside the accumulated disasters of the preceding six months. His action prompted King to refocus, to widen his angle of vision. Rio de Janeiro harbour spread itself gloriously behind the admiral, filling the stern-lights of the *Ganges*: white sails dotted everywhere like a field of cotton in the sun, cormorants skimming home sleek with their day's catch, the bright terracotta roofs of the new merchants' mansions climbing the steep hill-sides alongside their crumbling, mildewed predecessors. Otway had the air of a circus impresario, thought King, installed before this magnificent panorama in his shiny coat, looking for all the world as if he was about to produce a dove from a handkerchief. Abruptly, he realised that this was no idle simile. Otway was indeed on the verge of making a big announcement. The admiral's fingertips met.

'Clearly the *Beagle* requires a commander of considerable qualities. Someone whose powers of leadership are, er, commensurate with your own.'

Don't bother flattering me, thought King. *We both know I'm going back because I have to.*

'She needs someone who can inspire the men to hitherto unsurpassed levels of courage, fortitude and determination. Were the Service blessed with two Phillip Parker Kings' – Otway squeezed out as much counterfeit sincerity as he dared – 'I should have no dilemma. You have taken so much upon your shoulders, with so little support, that my gratitude to you knows no bounds'.

King realised, uncomfortably, where the conversation was headed and decided to interject, although he knew as he did so that it would be futile. 'Lieutenant Skyring has commanded the *Beagle* these last four months, sir. Considering the morale of the men and the state of the ship when Captain Stokes met his end, the transformation that Skyring has wrought is little

short of remarkable. I can think of no one better suited to this commission than Lieutenant Skyring.' *Who should have had the job in the first place*, he added to himself.

'Indeed, indeed.' Otway grimaced. 'I have no doubt that Skyring is an extremely capable officer, and I am delighted to hear that he has made such splendid headway. However, the candidate I have in mind is a man of considerable capabilities. He's my flag lieutenant here in the *Ganges*. Only twenty-three, but the most—'

'Twenty-three?' King blurted out. 'Forgive my interrupting, sir, but Lieutenant Skyring is one of my most experienced officers. He has knowledge of the area and the complete confidence of the men. I simply cannot recommend—'

A little wave of the hand from Otway silenced the captain. 'I have already made the appointment,' he stated flatly, picking up a handbell and ringing it to attract his steward's attention. The man entered. 'Would you kindly request Flag Lieutenant FitzRoy to present himself forthwith?'

The steward gave a slight nod and vanished.

'A ship's captain, at twenty-three?' queried King, in more measured tones than before. 'He must be a highly impressive young man.'

'I shall only make him commander, of course,' replied Otway. 'He shall be acting captain of the *Beagle*.'

'FitzRoy.' King let the name drip from his tongue. 'Commander FitzRoy would not, I wonder, be a relative of Admiral FitzRoy, or of the Duke of Grafton himself?'

Otway smiled, sensing that King was now in retreat. 'Let us simply confirm that Commander FitzRoy will have ample means to fit himself out. In answer to your question, Robert FitzRoy is in fact the son of General FitzRoy, the nephew of both Admiral FitzRoy and the Duke of Grafton, also of Castlereagh. He is a direct descendant of Charles the second. But much, much more importantly, he is also the most successful graduate ever to pass out from the Royal Naval College in Portsmouth. Not only did he complete a three-year course in eighteen months, and take the first medal, he subsequently passed his lieutenant's exam with full numbers. *Full numbers*. The first man in the history of the service to do so. And before you enquire about his practical experience, for I can see the question taking shape on your lips, he has been at sea for nine years, lately in the *Thetis*. Bingham had nothing but praise. His record is nothing short of exemplary. I commend him to you, Captain King.'

There was a sharp rap at the door. Even his timing is exemplary, thought King.

Otway bade the young man enter. A slender figure appeared in the doorway, moved silently across the threshold, and seemed to glide into place opposite the admiral, where he dispatched the appropriate courtesies speedily but respectfully. There was nothing foppish about his elegance; King could

detect physical resilience beneath his graceful manner, allied to a firmness of purpose. The young man's features were fine-boned, his nose was sharp and his ears were too large, but the overall effect was a handsome one. His countenance was open and friendly, his long-lashed eyes dark and expressive.

'Do you know Captain Phillip Parker King?' Otway asked the new arrival.

'I have not had the pleasure of Captain's King acquaintance, sir,' replied FitzRoy, meeting King's gaze squarely with what seemed to be a genuine smile of admiration, 'but few in the service could fail to be aware of his extraordinary achievements in mapping the western and northern coasts of Australia. Achievements for which' – he addressed King directly – 'I believe you have recently been awarded a fellowship of the Royal Society, sir. I am most honoured to make your acquaintance.' FitzRoy gave a little bow, and King knew instinctively that the tribute had been sincere.

'I have been discussing with Captain King your promotion to commander of the *Beagle*,' boomed Otway, no longer able to conceal the showman's grin plastered across his features, 'and I am pleased to make you his second-in-command.'

'You have obliged me very much by your kindness, sir,' replied FitzRoy, with a knowing nod to King. He's a bright boy, thought King. He's assessed the situation perfectly. Still, that's no reason to give him an easy ride.

'Admiral Otway informs me that you were a college volunteer. Sadly, the benefits of such a formal education were denied to me as a young man. So what precisely do they teach you in the classroom at Portsmouth?'

'A great many subjects, sir. The full list is an extensive one—'

King cut him off. 'I am eager to add to the stock of my own learning. Pray enlighten me.'

FitzRoy took a deep breath. 'I recollect, sir, that we studied fortifications, the doctrine of projectiles and its application to gunnery, hydrostatics, naval history and nautical discoveries—'

King raised a hand. 'Naval history,' he said. 'I'm interested in naval history. Tell me what you know of the history of your new command.'

'The previous *Beagle* was an eighteen-gun carrier,' began FitzRoy, cautiously, 'which won battle honours at San Sebastian and the Basque roads. Her replacement is a ten-gun brig, Cherokee class, two hundred and thirty-five tons burthen, three-masted. So she's strictly speaking a barque, but commonly known as a coffin brig.'

'Indeed she is,' cut in King warmly. 'And tell me, Commander, why the ten-gun brig is known throughout the service as a coffin brig.' All three knew the answer, that more ten-gun brigs were lost every year than any other class of ship, just as they knew that King was looking for more than that. This was a technical test.

'The ten-gun brig, sir, is a deep-waisted vessel – dangerously so, if I might venture to say so. The top of the rail, I apprehend, is just six feet

out of the water, less when fully loaded. Without a forecastle to turn away a large bow wave, she's liable to ship water . . . large amounts of water, sir, which are then unable to escape on account of the high bulwarks. So she's prone to wallow, or turn broadside on to the weather. In which circumstances a second wave, shipped before the first has had time to clear, might well finish her off.'

'Absolutely, Commander,' agreed King with grim satisfaction. 'It's like trying to sail a spoon. So tell me, Commander FitzRoy, how you would modify the *Beagle* to address such limitations?'

'I'd build a poop cabin and a forecastle, sir, to deflect the heaviest seas.'

'An excellent answer, Commander. Indeed, the work has already been carried out by your predecessor. Captain Stokes added a poop deck and a forecastle deck level with the rail. Altogether I'd say he added a good sixty inches to the height of the ship. Then again, Commander, in the Southern Ocean it's not uncommon to encounter sixty-foot waves, whereupon the poop and the forecastle make damn-all difference.'

'Indeed sir.'

'Put bluntly, Commander, the greatest achievement of the late lamented Captain Stokes may well have been that the *Beagle* returned safely to Rio minus only one officer.'

'Yes sir.'

'Do you feel you are up to the task of leading a crew of exhausted, half-starved and demoralised men through such conditions?'

'I am determined, sir, that the men under my command will receive my full attention as regards to their physical and mental welfare,' said FitzRoy, calmly.

'The *Beagle* was also your predecessor's first command. The pressures of that command thrust Captain Stokes into such a profound despondency that he shot himself.'

'So I heard, sir. An awful incident.'

'And you are sure you will remain immune to such pressures?'

FitzRoy hesitated, and for the first time, King detected a note of uncertainty in his confident manner. To his irritation, Admiral Otway chose that moment to blunder to the young man's rescue.

'The south is a place "where the soul of a man dies in him". That was the last entry in Stokes's log. He was quoting Alexander Pope, I think – eh, FitzRoy?'

'Indeed sir.'

'But then poor Stokes was a melancholy sort. Not like yourself. Hardly suited for such a lonely post. I blame myself,' he added, in a manner that implied he did no such thing.

'The men are convinced that Captain Stokes's ghost still haunts the ship,' King informed FitzRoy. 'You have an interesting task on your hands, Commander.'

'I'm beginning to see that, sir.'

'A familiar face or two wouldn't go amiss,' offered Otway, 'if you have any requests.'

'I'd like to take Midshipman Sulivan from the *Thetis*, sir, if that's possible. We were together in the *Glendower* as well. He's a capital fellow, and has the best eyesight of any seaman I've ever known.'

'I see no reason why not – provided Bingham has no objections.'

'You'll need a new master as well,' put in King.

'May I take Murray, sir? He's a fine navigator, and ready for his chance.'

'Of course, of course,' replied Otway generously. 'You may take Mr Murray with you. Murray and Sulivan it is.' The admiral produced a sealed package from his desk drawer. 'I have your orders here. You are to complete the survey of the South American coast from Cape St Antonio around to Chiloé in the west, as directed by Captain King. You are to take particular note of all safe harbours, and all suitable refuelling and watering places. You are to observe weather patterns, tides and currents, the nature of the country inland and the people therein, remembering at all times that you are the official representative of His Majesty's government. You and your officers are to avail yourselves of every opportunity of collecting and preserving specimens of natural history, such as may be new, rare or interesting.' Otway slid the package across the table. 'You can read the details at your leisure, Commander, but I would draw your attention to one significant instruction: the naming of topographical features. Grateful as I am to find myself honoured in perpetuity by the title "Port Otway", there has been a tendency of late to ascribe names of a more frivolous nature. I'm thinking in particular of "Soapsuds Cove", where you presumably did your washing. And "Curious Peak". What the devil was curious about it?'

'I have no idea,' replied King drily. 'You'd have to ask Stokes.'

'Admiralty orders are quite specific on this point. The maps you are updating were compiled by Byron, Wallis and Carteret back in the 1760s, since when it has been something of an embarrassment that English charts contain such trivial identifications as "Point Shut-up". The site of some unseemly squabble, no doubt. Try to confine yourself to practical descriptions, or if you must commemorate someone, I would recommend members of the government or the Royal Family. Of course you can commemorate yourselves, but I would suggest a limit for ship's officers of one or two place names each. Understood?'

FitzRoy nodded.

Otway's brisk tone softened. 'The *Beagle* is on her way up from Monte Video. When she arrives, she will be hove down and repaired. Before then I would pay her a visit. Unannounced. That is to say, I think you should make your presence felt.' He grinned conspiratorially, and gestured to indicate that the interview was over.

Formalities completed, FitzRoy and King took their leave of the admiral's

cabin, stooping with the instinct of years to avoid cracking their heads as they crossed the threshold. Outside, King paused at the top of the companionway. 'So tell me, Mr FitzRoy. Of all the captains under whom you have served, whom did you admire the most?'

'Sir John Phillimore, sir,' replied FitzRoy without hesitation. The ensuing pause made it clear that King meant him to go on.

'We were escorting Lord Ponsonby to Rio as ambassador, sir. One of the younger midshipmen suffered a terrible injury to his arm, and was in danger of losing it. Sir John gave the Ponsonbys' cabin to the boy, and himself slept in a cot outside the cabin door, giving instructions that he should be wakened immediately if anything were to befall the lad. We were all much impressed. It was Sir John who reduced the men's daily rum ration from half a pint to a quarter. Which, I must confess, improved the efficiency of the ship considerably.'

King raised both eyebrows. 'Good luck with the rum ration.'

FitzRoy smiled back, and King could not help but like his new second-in-command.

'Skyring's disappointment will be bitter, I confess. But he is not the sort of pay this off on you. He is a generous type. I will give him our supply schooner, the *Adelaide*, which should help soften the blow.'

'I hope so sir.'

'One more thing, Mr FitzRoy. That quotation in Stokes's log – "the soul of a man dies in him". Who really wrote it?'

'Thomson, sir. It's from *The Seasons*.'

'You'll go far, Mr FitzRoy. I think you'll go very far indeed.'