Book Review: Elizabeth Hennessy, On the Backs of Tortoises: Darwin, the Galápagos, and the Fate of an Evolutionary Eden

22 January 2021
Bookshelf,Series

Lonesome George (Source: Arturo de Frias Marques, **CC BY-SA 3.0**, via Wikimedia Commons)

By **Rodrigo Salido Moulinié**

The reports said they wanted to kill the turtle. They surrounded the research station and refused to let supplies go through to the 33 people—and the colony of reptiles—inside the building. **[1]** Yet the fishermen went on strike and took the building not because they hated *that* turtle (they did not even intend to harm it), but because of what it meant: an allegory of the politics of conservationism, development, and the local making of science. Lonesome George, the oldest living tortoise at the time and symbolic target of the fishermen, stood for environmental conservationist policies that limited their commercial activities, ideas of restoration, science, and economic development, and serious attempts of making a laboratory out of the Galápagos—and the rise and fall of this symbol entails a history.

In *On the Backs of Tortoises*, environmental historian Elizabeth Hennessy makes sense of these stories by weighing the histories and evidence supporting them to show what was at stake. Her book traces the travels, disputes, and writings that made the Galápagos a contested space. Since the *Beagle* arrived on its shores in 1835 carrying a young observer by the name of Charles Darwin, an entanglement of myths, discourses, and practices changed the social and environmental worlds of the archipelago. Today, a white-bearded Darwin in the middle of an arch watches over native species. The secular godlike figure stands at the end of a street that bears his name. Yet, as Hennessy shows, Darwin came up with the ideas that made him famous years after he visited the islands,

and he was not the nature-lover conservationist some people have in mind. A young Darwin rode on the backs of tortoises and ate turtle soup just like everybody else at the time. He even drank from the water they store internally, like camels, just for the sake of knowing what it tasted like.

The myth of Darwin as a man of science and a wise traveler—the old one with the majestic beard—worked as an anchor for a diverse set of scientific and political endeavors during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Before and after the rise of the story of Darwin and his findings at these pristine islands, their location and environmental conditions drew a few people and brought changes with them: pirates, travelers, settlers, and military bases. The Darwin rupture lied in imagining the remainders of Eden, an old world that prompted visits in the form of curious travelers, collectors, scientific expeditions, and now tourists. Going to the Galápagos became, in a way, traveling to the past.

Entrance of the Charles Darwin Research Station, Galápagos, Ecuador (Source: David Adam Kess, **CC BY-SA 3.0**, Wikimedia Commons)·

Hennessy shows how the islands and the animals that inhabited it, such as Lonesome George, became icons of Eden, symbols of a world before human intervention and its eventual decline. As a laboratory to study the paths of evolution, the adaptive processes of vegetation, and the lives of nearly extinct giant tortoises, the Galápagos turned into a scientific space in need of aggressive protection. Even further, a wave of efforts to "restore" it as a *pre*historic site of wilderness, devoid of any traces of human existence, reveals the artifice of making a natural laboratory: a place as natural and human as anywhere else. Her historical analysis unpacks the politics—conflict, violence, diplomatic troubles, and internal displacement—underlying these processes. The idea of "restoring nature" implies an image of what nature is and how it looks (or looked) like, which species should live in a certain space and which ones should be displaced or killed, and how humans are supposed to look at nature and use it for development without changing it. But, as it usually happens, every attempt to stay the same produces unforeseen transformations. Using tortoises as an anchor, Hennessy's research merges apparently disconnected historiographies, from the histories of science and tourism to environmental and political histories of the Galápagos, to destabilize what preserving wilderness actually means. Conserving, protecting, and restoring are only other names for change. Nothing ever stays the same.

In 1835, the same year that the Galápagos saw Darwin arrive aboard the *Beagle*, Nathaniel Hawthorne penned “Wakefield,” a short story about a common, even boring man, who suddenly left his marriage and his family behind. He went away—yet “away” for him meant moving one block from his old house. He dedicated his time—twenty years—to look at his house in secret, to see how life went on without him. No one looks for Wakefield, not even his family, and yet he keeps looking through the window to feed his curiosity of a pristine world without him. But things changed: when he decided to come back, his family had built a life of their own. His initial presence set the course of their story and, at last, he met the impossibility of picking up where he left off. *On the Backs of Tortoises* evokes a similar curiosity: the need to look without being seen, the desire for being part of a story without altering its course—a peak into a world without us. Yet, like Wakefield, the Galápagos offer a similar lesson: there is no turning back.

Publishing details: Elizabeth Hennessy, *On the Backs of Tortoises: Darwin, the Galápagos, and the Fate of an Evolutionary Eden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

---

[1] Paul Brown, **“Scientists held hostage on Darwin’s Island,”** *the Guardian*, 28 February 2004; **“Galapagos tortoises held hostage,”** *BBC News*, 27 February 2004.