

In Patagonia

B.Chatwin

February 1-3, 2020

In the late seventies I read in the New York Times Book Review a favorable review of a book by an unknown writer by name of Bruce Chatwin. I got intrigued, as I did not read much contemporary work at all, and bought it. I was favorably impressed and decided to 'follow' the author, a concept that at the time was not yet named. Of the book I remember little as became apparent as I read it anew. You remember little of a book yet it may have done its work and made some sort of indelible impression on you. What remained in my brain after all those years? A sense of Patagonia being at the end of the world, far away from everything that mattered, and mostly inhabited by bewildered Europeans who had settled there and never really feeling at home. There had been a colonization of North America would it not be the turn of South America next? It turned out not, the countries of the South were far more unstable than the civilization of the North, and attempts really came to nothing. Argentine was not the new frontier after all, as it had been billed to be.

Now reading it after having myself visited parts of the southern Patagonia I was in a better position to appreciate it, than forty odd years ago. And much made now more sense. The Strait of Magellan with its dolphins, the barren world of the Tierra del Fuego, the penguins, Punta Arenas itself the metropolis of the region. The herds of gaunaco, and maybe more than anything else the cave where the Mylodon skin was discovered, the ostensible quest of the author's journey. We went to that cave filled with tourists, when Chatwin sought it out, he seemed to have had it for himself. As late as the late seventies mass-tourism had not entirely conquered the globe, but a wanderer and nomad-to-be, such as the author, could still feel that he was something of an explorer.

So how do you write a successful travel story? It should be in the form of a log, but not too detailed and specific, that will be tedious and tire the reader. There should also be some word-painting. Description of nature and weather, but once again not too much of it, the reader is liable to skip most of it. Then there would be some action and even some adventure. A long trip may have some of it, but it will in general not be much, so you need to pad out a narrative which otherwise would be too short and anti-climactic. Now you do work not on the road but in your chair. You dig out old stories and embellish them a little before you present them to the jaded readers for their instruction and enjoyment. Here we have stories of Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid, along with other criminals. Criminals may not lead virtuous lives but at least their lives are not boring, at least not when edited and presented in a compressed form. In real life being on the run is a pain and a bit stressful. Being on the run you cannot really settle down and make plans we are being told by those who should know. Yet some criminals may really enjoy their lives, or at least find their chosen pursuit superior to what otherwise would be a tedious and boring existence. Then there are stories of people on the sea. This was always romantic, at least up to the age when containers were introduced. After that the romance was taken out of sea-faring, the old way of seeing the world and calling at ports for a few days were

no longer an option, and even earlier when the steamship replaced the sailing vessel, much of the necessary skill and experience of a seasoned captain became obsolete. Still the 70's belong to the modern age, yet at the time there were people alive born in the last decades of the 19th century and hence having memories of times which nowadays no one knows of first hand, and in particular having encountered people born in the early part of the 19th century, thus giving a connection to the distant times of romantic adventure. Now the seventies are almost half a century in the past, and already being part of history.

So what is dated? At the time of the visit Allende had recently been overthrown. For many people, especially the rich the author encounters, the disposal of the President was a blessing, not in disguise but in full view. The country was on the verge of being ruined, and all those unworldly Marxists, in fact no better than uneducated boors, trying to take over, with predictable catastrophic results. Such opinions and attitudes were common, also among the merely comfortably off of the middle class. To liberal Western eyes Allende may have been a romantic hero, to many people on the ground, he was simply a disaster.

During our visit forty odd years later there was much talk about the deliberate extermination of the Natives on the southern islands, of being hunted for bounty by hired hands. Of this there is no direct mention in the book although there are some hints of Indians being killed, but with no sense of indignation.

When I read the book back in my youth I was enchanted, much less so as a mature adult; maybe because the travel account was a new genre to me back then (and the reading of a contemporary book was a fresh experience). Since then I have read many and been somewhat jaded. And on the other hand what can I expect really, this is after all a visit to the end of the world, and such a place is inevitably imbued with sadness and a sense of superfluity.

February 6, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se