

LETTER FROM TIERRA DEL FUEGO (1898)

At last we got into Magellan Straits, but, instead of being mountainous country as I expected, it was low country without a stick of timber, similar to the Canterbury Plains. The first bush we saw was at the town of Punta Arenas (in English, Sandy Point) We landed on a Sunday. People in South America work on Sunday just the same as any other day. I think I never beheld such a lot of villainous-looking people: all colors and all languages; plenty could talk English and the dirtiest town on this earth. Every place is a drinking shop, and a great many something more. I had a good look at the place, and said to myself, Now, old man, you have finished; you have got to the bottom, this must be hell. I stayed there ten days, but got so frightened I turned teetotaler and never moved out of the house at night. Somehow I met with a lot of kindness, and had some curious adventures, and at the end of ten days, just as I had decided to put my swag on my back and travel away into Patagonia,

I got a situation as major domo ['mayordomo', foreman or under-manager, Ed.] on a station (or farm, as they call them here) in Terra del Fuego, at the east entrance of the Straits. We went down in a small steamer. There were four of us in a cabin about 6x8 [6 feet wide by 8 feet long, Ed.]: two Spanish and a German who could speak a little English, and who was in charge of 12 navvies who were going down to strip a big wreck. We had a very pleasant run down the Straits, as the weather was beautiful, and at last reached the wreck, a great 6000 ton boat with her back broken ['Corocoro', 4,000 tons, Ed.], but there was already a posse on board in possession, and who talked English to our German commander of the navvies, and firmly declined to allow either him or his men on board. I at one time thought it would come to a fight, especially as there was plenty of whisky going, and I was rather wishing to see the row come off, as I was perfectly indifferent as to which side won, but after four hours of stormy debate our side had to draw off; landed one on Terra del ['Tierra del Fuego', Ed.]. By this time it was just dusk, and [the steamer] returned to P.A. [Punta Arenas, Ed.]

When I landed I was told I would find a settlement about three miles inland, which turned out to be right. The place belonged to a brother of my boss. I stayed there a day or two, and saw them mark 12,700 lambs, from 13,000 ewes. To all appearances it is beautiful low country; you could drive a buggy anywhere on it; it is looking its best just now. Here the

Indian question cropped up heavily. I had heard a lot of wild yarns while at P.A. Mr W. [Montague E. Wales, Ed.] was away, and I lived with the major domo, otherwise head shepherd or overseer, and cadet [management trainee, Ed.], Blair [William Blain, hereafter identified as 'Blain', Ed.] and Davis [not identified, Ed.]. Blain had come to the place when it was first taken up seven years ago. He just looked a canny old Scotch shepherd, which he actually is.

In talking to him in the evening I expressed surprise that such a fine country should have remained so long unoccupied. He said the country was quite unknown, because if a man attempted to leave the coast he was sure to be killed by the Indians [Selknam, Ed.]. He said "I can count 35 white men who have been killed in my time, and we have had to shoot the Indians." He said: "The first 4000 ewes we landed the Indians came one moonlight night (it appears they do all their depredations by moonlight three or four nights before or after the full) and took away the lot and when we overhauled them we had a big fight before they would give them up, but there were only 1600 that we could get back to the beach. Mr D. [W.?, Ed.] said to me "Blain, I won't have women and children killed." I told him the women (chenas) ['chinas', adult female Indians, Ed.] were the worst of the lot and now he knows better.

Mr Davis' yarn is that he has only been here three years and has been out in one Indian hunt and does not want to go again. The Indians had been playing up with the sheep and it was decided to see if they could not be made to go further back, or if possible, to capture as many as maybe and send them to the Catholic Mission Station [Salesian order, Ed.] at Dawson Island in the Straits [located south of Punta Arenas, Ed.]. For every Indian big or little you send to the station you have to pay 20s [twenty shillings = one pound sterling, Ed.], and they undertake to keep them on the island. It is worked as a station for sheep and cattle and a very extensive sawmill, altogether I think it must be a paying business. Our farmers growl terribly at having to pay the 20s beside the expense of catching and transport to Dawson Island.

I had another version of Davis' yarn afterwards but the facts were right enough. My boss and Mr W., a shareholder in this property, and working manager of a place called Spring Hill, and two Argentine professional Indian hunters were out for a fortnight and could get near nothing. On their return, when one day's stage from home they came on a mob of

Indians. Mr W. was away at the time, looking for water and my boss and Davis made a dash at them, the Argentines in attempting to get their rifles off the pack horse started him bucking and they were useless, the Indian men and a lot of the women crossed over a swamp, my boss attempted to follow, but his horse went nearly out of sight, so he crossed on foot and opened fire on the men. W. then turned up and formally accepted the surrender of 22 chenas and their babies which many of them were carrying, and desired Davis to hold them with his rifle until the Argentines came back with the pack horse. Davis said he just lit a cigarette and kept his eye on them, but Mr W. told me he never saw a man in such a "blue funk" [state of fear or panic, Ed.] in his life. He said there was no danger so long as he kept on horseback, and did not allow them to come too close. He could not stop himself, as he wanted to go and help with the men — Chunkies they call them. ['chunke', adult male Indian; presumably from 'chonkóiuuka', term formerly used to identify the northern Selknam group, Ed.] However, the Argentines turned up and helped Davis. I was at the place afterwards, and Mr W. was showing me where they camped. He said it came on an awful night, They lit a big fire with a lot of scrub they had made the prisoners collect, and camped them round it in two circles, and took it in turn to watch. It was his and Davis' watch, and it was sleeting and raining like anything, and they could hear the Chunkies calling to the prisoners, and the children that were still with the Chunkies crying at having to clear out in the cold and dark, and he went to the tent to get a nip [drink of strong liquor, Ed.] and was only absent a minute, when he returned 11 of the women had given Davis the slip. He called all hands, but never saw one of them again. However, they sent off those left to D. Island.

Davis said a rather amusing thing happened next morning. When they started to march the women were carrying their babies. There was only one old woman in the lot, and she had a most preposterously big baby under her cape. She could hardly stagger with it. W. told her to drop it, and at last made her do so, and found that instead of a baby it was a great boy of 12 years or so. She was afraid if the whites found it was a boy they would shoot him, and so had been carrying him under her cape and gammoning [pretending, Ed.] him to be a baby. Latterly they have been having a cheaper way of catching them. They have let contracts at £1 a head — the women alive. The man's bow and arrows are considered a sufficient proof that he is out of the way.

One man — a Mr S. H. [Sam Hyslop, notorious "Indian hunter", Ed.] — judging from the yarns that you hear, and coming from so many sources, some must be true, appears quite a genius at the business. I have not had the pleasure of meeting him yet. They tell me he has a pair of handsome manares ["maneas", Ed.], horse hobbles, that he made from the skin of a Chunkey that he killed. These kind of yarns fairly knocked me off my legs, I began to wonder, am I mad or dreaming; I do verily believe, though, it is true, it seemed to have been a bitter war on both sides.

The parson from Punta Arenas was here a night or two ago, and as we slept in the same bedroom, he also entertained me with a few Indian yarns, in fact, the Indian here takes the place of the New Zealand rabbit as far as conversation goes. Mr Williams [Rev. John Williams, Ed.] has been a missionary about Cape Horn [Anglican mission at Tekenika, Hoste Island, Ed.]. He said they were a different race there [Yamana / Yagan, Ed.], smaller, but equally treacherous. They were pretty quiet now, for the reason that they were nearly exterminated. He said there had no doubt been a lot of wrecks, in fact, you see the remains of a lot of them and the custom of the Indians was, when they got the chance, to murder all the crew by torture except one, who they stripped and painted, and allowed to escape to some passing vessel; the idea seems to have been as a warning to others not to land, and it seems to have been successful, for it has kept the country unknown. They tell me that not one quarter is known to the white man yet.

Excuse the mixed way I write. I can only get writing done after I knock off during the past three nights, and tomorrow is mail day, so I must bring it to an end, although I have given but few details, and have not exhausted the outline. I am supposed to be in charge of the wool-shed, but that includes mustering, filling the shed, storekeeping, and what little bookkeeping there is. Thank goodness, their ideas on that subject are of the most primitive. I would admire to see the Major-General and Short examining our books. You might tell S. to write, and a letter from any other decent man would be most acceptable, I have never heard a word since I left New Zealand.

Well I must hurry and finish that Indian yarn for I am sure it will interest you. I got here, and as my hut was not ready the boss, a man of about 30, very nice and pleasant, but knowing nothing on earth about station

work, invited me to stay at his house; he has just come from England with his bride, a young English lady. [Ruth Waldron, see Ernest Wales, Ed.] From what I can learn this place and a whole lot others in Patagonia and Terra del belong to a company of 15 people, English and more or less connected with one another; they are big properties; this place is over 500,000 acres, and it is by no means the largest. There is no freehold in Terra del, but they have a lot in Patagonia, and they have no trouble there with the Indians.

After being here a day or two the boss asked me to go with him to a hut some 10 miles back where a mob of Indians were who had given up their bows and arrows, and agreed to give up all their evil ways, such as stealing sheep and beef, on condition that they were supplied with as much beef as they could eat. So two white men (Campominsters, they call them) [hereafter 'campañistas', horsemen responsible for working the 'camp' (open country), Ed.] were left at their hut to kill beef and see that the Indians did not shake [presumably, steal, Ed.] the sheep; but the yarn came in that they were still shaking the sheep, and what was worse they were strongly suspected to be in communication with another tribe from the forest: so the question arose would it not be wise to capture the lot and send them to Dawson Island, so out we went and here were those blessed Indians.

I had seen a lot of tame and half tame ones about the station, but here was the real unadulterated article, big strapping fellows, the boss told me that when he first went to handcuff them they could not get the handcuffs on, and they had to get them specially made for size. A lot of the men were standing about the hut, and just in front of me with his back to the wall was what looked to be a lad of about 18, I was cutting up a smoke [preparing leaf tobacco, as for a pipe, Ed.] at the time and I ran my knife on the wall at the top of his head and measured it, he stood 5ft 10in [1.78m, Ed.]. And his legs and wrists were twice the size of mine, they were very much like our Maoris [native people of New Zealand, Ed.] in color and appearance. One man who I particularly noticed looked just the typical Tauhu [Maori male?, Ed.], high nose and straight thick lips, the ladies of the party appeared after a time, they were not nearly so good-looking, they laughed at and evidently chaffed [teased about, Ed.] my white beard, they were all painted with red bars across the face, all the males have the hair singed close to the skin on the head excepting a fringe right round the head and as it hangs down over the face it gives

them a very fierce expression. The only article of dress that they wear and it is hardly up to our ideas of decency, is a short cloth of guanaco skin, but the cold morn seems to trouble them.

The report of the two *campañistas* was unfavorable, so it was decided that the lot was to be captured and sent to Spring Hill until an opportunity occurred to send them to Dawson Island, A few days afterwards we camped out about two miles from the Indians and we heard that four professional hunters, our boss's brother and a neighbor, a Mr A. H. [not identified, Ed.], with the assistance of some opposition Indians had managed to get the handcuffs on them. It took three hours, and we marched the lot, 45, to this place and next day to Spring Hill where they now are watched by armed men during the day and leg ironed at night until they can be shipped away.

I think I never saw a more curious sight than I did a couple of days afterwards when our boss and I met this Mr A. H. returning from this foray. He was mounted on a rather fiery looking white horse who was half hidden by all the paraphernalia that those people consider necessary to put on a horse, and behind his saddle, seated on a sheep skin was a little Indian girl about 12 or 14 years of age, one of the captured party, she was quite naked except a piece of cloth round her shoulders and looked very frightened, and no wonder as it was the first time she had ever been on a horse and she had come 35 miles that afternoon. Mr A H. said he had washed her and dipped her in Little's Dip [disinfectant liquid used to treat 'scab', a contagious condition in sheep, caused by skin mites, Ed.], the dipping is necessary, and was taking her to his wife to train into a servant.

He also informed us that one of the Indian spies had brought in word that about 100 of the Buckarow ['Boquerón', hills inland from modern Porvenir, Ed.] Indians were on our back country and doubtless intend to make a raid on our sheep and he thought it would be a splendid chance to get hold of them and send them with the others to Dawson Island, although what people wanted to pay 20s for sending them to Dawson Island for he failed to understand when cartridges are so cheap.

Next day Mr W. arrived with the four *campañistas* that had assisted to capture the last lot of Indians. The Indians had marked some of these and from what I could learn the Indians had not escaped scot free, they all say

that a pair of handcuffs in the hands of a fellow like McB [not identified, Ed.]. make a most effective weapon at close quarters. The boss said he did not like to leave the women in the house alone while the Indians were about and asked me if I would like to go with the expedition as they were kind of weak handed, having to leave men to watch the captives at Spring Hill. The Indians on Tierra del Fuego appear to be divided into three distinct classes. The Carive ['Canoe', Ed.] Indians a poor miserable lot, but very cruel, who inhabit the southeast coast and neighboring islands. The Foot Indians, a fine warlike race, living on the pampas on the northeast coast, where they have any quantity of food, you may say for the picking up, and the Monte or Forest Indians reported to be beggars to fight, little or nothing is known of them as few of the people who have any communication with them get a chance to return.

I said I was quite willing to go, but that hitherto I had very little practice in killing Indians, nevertheless I was willing to see how it was done, so we started. Mr W. the four *campañistas* and myself, these five were all well-trained warriors. We had a pack horse with us carrying a few things. The first night we camped at the edge of the Indian country on a river called the Rio del Loska ['Río Oscar', Ed.] just about sundown. Mr W., myself, and one of the *campañistas* went on to a neighbouring hill to see if we could see any sign of a smoke, as the Indians generally do their cooking just before dusk. The country was clear and open, low hills, with a kind of small bush that grows two or even three feet high in some of the gullies — very similar country to that about Waihopai. [valley in Marlborough Region, South Island of New Zealand, Ed.] W. was looking away with his glasses without any result when he casually remarked "Now look here W., there is to be no slaughtering tomorrow, remember. By _____ he said, if any Chena or Chunkie slings arrows at me I am going to sling bullets back." There was no reply from W., but on my way back to camp he said to me: "That fellow is a blood thirsty beast."

I forgot to tell you that all these fellows are armed with a Winchester magazine rifle, a revolver, and a thundering long knife, as well as a lasso. I had a rifle only. They wanted me to have a revolver, but I said it was not necessary, as I could kill as many Indians as I required with the rifle. I was beginning to fancy that I was in a business that I hardly understood, so I said to W.: "What is the programme supposing we find these people." He replied: "They must be made to surrender — that is, throw down their bows and pull off their fighting caps (we had a supply of handcuffs with

us.") "Well, suppose they won't throw their bows down." "Then you must fire, and fire quick, if you don't want an arrow through your ribs in cold blood. They would hit you any time at 100 yards, but firing discomposes them, especially when they see one or two of their males drop, and if there is not a swamp handy for them to retreat to they will probably give in if we can get all round them, the horse you are riding has three arrow heads in him; has he I said, and I thought to myself he will have no more if I can possibly help it.

Well, we saddled up that night at 12.30, and got to where the Indians ought to be before the day broke, they must have seen us and cleared ahead of us; we saw a fresh camp and a fresh Guanaco trap, but no Indians. In the afternoon we saw a fire on a hill away ahead of us; we made for it; when we got there we saw a line of fires 10 miles ahead, and as it was then 4 p.m. we had to give them best; I can't say I was sorry, for I hardly saw what business it was of mine to shoot these people, but its a wonderful world this after all, as I just thought to myself when W. was instructing me circumstances alter cases, here is a man who I have only seen twice gravely telling me the best way to kill another man, with whom I have no quarrel and whom I have not yet even seen.

I think a lot of this country, but at present it is not a nice place to live in, and unless I can see something very much better than I do I shall not stay long. If you can find time to write address c/o ['care of', Ed.] British Consul, Punta Arenas, Magellan Straits, S.A. [South America, Ed.]. I will enclose you a letter I got from B., my cabin mate, a few days ago. It will interest you. I take this to post at the house in an hour's time; it is two miles from here. I am invited to dinner on Sundays. My boss' wife is a young English lady, [Ruth Wales née Waldron, Ed.] and she is very nice; but you cannot help seeing that she is terrified out of her life; no neighbors, not a soul to speak to save the servants — they keep two. It must be simply awful for her. She said to me a day or two ago that she really must have a little rifle practice. I believe she would about as soon touch a rattlesnake as a rifle.

There are any numbers of Guanacos on this place, lots of wild dogs, plenty of foxes — a very fine animal — and millions of karooras ['coruros', *Ctenomys magellanicus*, burrowing rodent, Ed.] — a little animal, grass feeding, between a rabbit and rat in size. They have the whole country honey-combed worse than any rabbit-warren you ever saw, but they say

as the country is stocked they disappear. I should have been very frightened of them, but they say there is no cause to be so. That is about all the animal life. But I never saw such a place for birds, and so tame. I have seen three kinds of geese; white swans with a black head; any quantity of duck, snipe, partridges; and a curious thing to find in a cold climate like this — flamingoes. It is the best place for shooting I ever saw. Tell G.C. about it. I don't doubt but what he would like this Indian hunting business.

I am quite sure you are full up of me and the Indians, but just think how many times you victimised people with those wretched rabbits, and be considerate. Remember me very kindly to all the good people, and I shall be very happy to get a letter from some of them. One gets a craving for news. As for my non friends, they may go hang [(slang) the writer doesn't care what they think, Ed.]. You will, I know, be pleased to hear that I have quite recovered my health, and am stronger and better than I was twenty years ago. With very kind regards to yourself and all old friends.—

Yours sincerely,
G. H. C.