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Locations: Juan Fernández Islands



THE "BERGAMINI" AT SAN FERNÁNDEZ.

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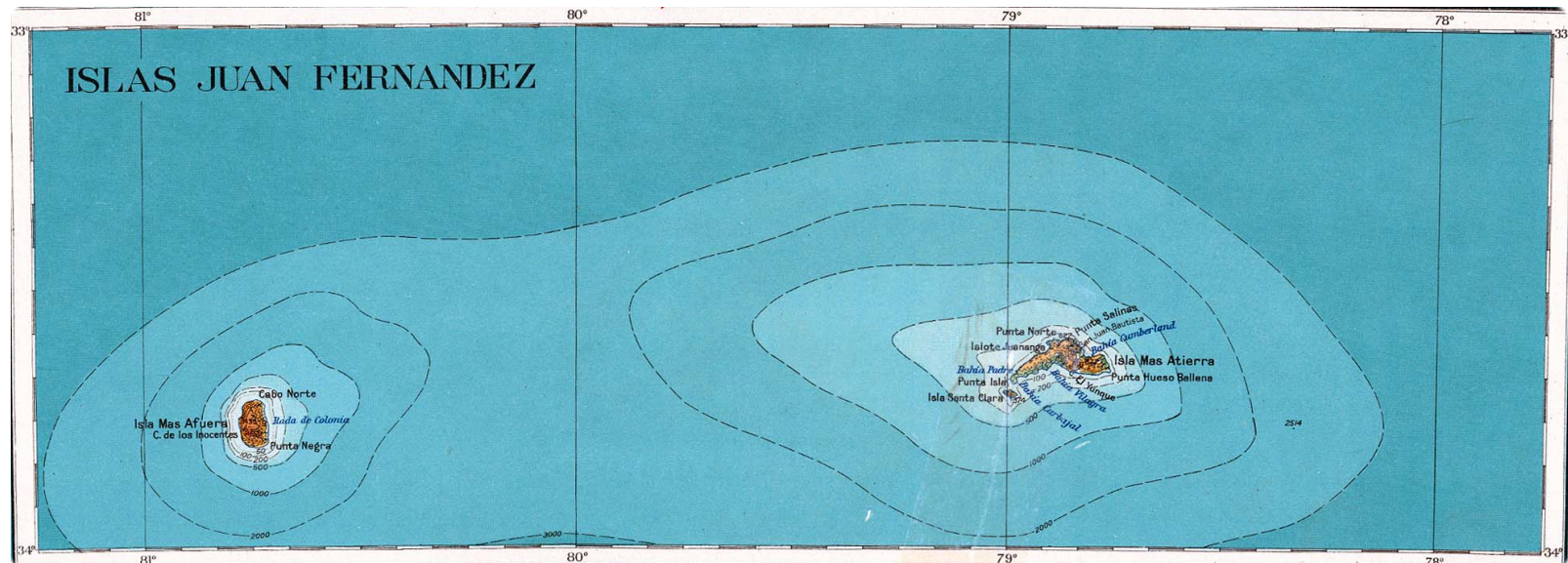
Cover: HMS Challenger at Juan Fernandez during the Challenger Expedition (1887; Frederick Whympers, From page 54 of the 1887 book **The Sea: its stirring story of adventure, peril & heroism.**, Volume 2; British Library; Public domain; [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Map of Juan Fernández Islands in the Pacific Ocean (1927, [American Geographical Society](#); Public domain; [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Plan de l'Isle de Juan Fernandez (from **Descripción bibliográfica: Voyage historique de l'Amerique Meridionale : fait par ordre du Roi d'Espagne / par Don Georges Juan ... , et par Don Antoine de Ulloa ... ; et qui contient une Histoire des Yncas du Perou et les Observations Astronomiques et Physiques, faites pour déterminer la figure et la Grandeur de la Terre. - tome second.** (1752; [Fondo Antiguo de la Biblioteca de la Universidad de Sevilla](#); [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic](#) licence; [Wikimedia Commons](#))

A view of the commandores tent at the Island of Juan Fernandes. (between 1740 and 1744; [Source](#); Public domain; [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Juan Fernández Islands



Spanish navigator Juan Fernández, who plied the route between Lima and Valparaíso, sailing south between Callao and Valparaíso along a track around seven hundred kilometres west of the South American coast, which avoided the Humboldt current ¹ discovered the previously unknown ² islands on the 40th parallel subsequently named after him. in 1574.

He called the islands Más Afuera, Más a Tierra, and Santa Clara. They may not have been the Spanish navigator's only discovery. ³

The volcanic islands are the peaks of a submarine ridge formed over a hotspot where the Nazca tectonic plate meets the South American continent at the Peru-Chile Trench.

Santa Clara (5.8 million years B.P.) is the oldest, followed by Robinson Crusoe (Más Afuera, 3.8 – 4.2 million years B.P., and Alexander Selkirk (Más a Tierra, between 1.0 and 2.4 million years old).

¹ The combination of the current and persistent southerly winds meant that the 2700-kilometre passage could take six to nine months. The new route reduced that to thirty days. (Roberto Ferrando, *The Search for Terra Australis*, p. 81; Carlos Martinez Shaw, *Terra Australis - The Spanish Quest*, p. 63; Miriam Estensen, **Discovery: The Quest for the Great South Land**, p. 94.

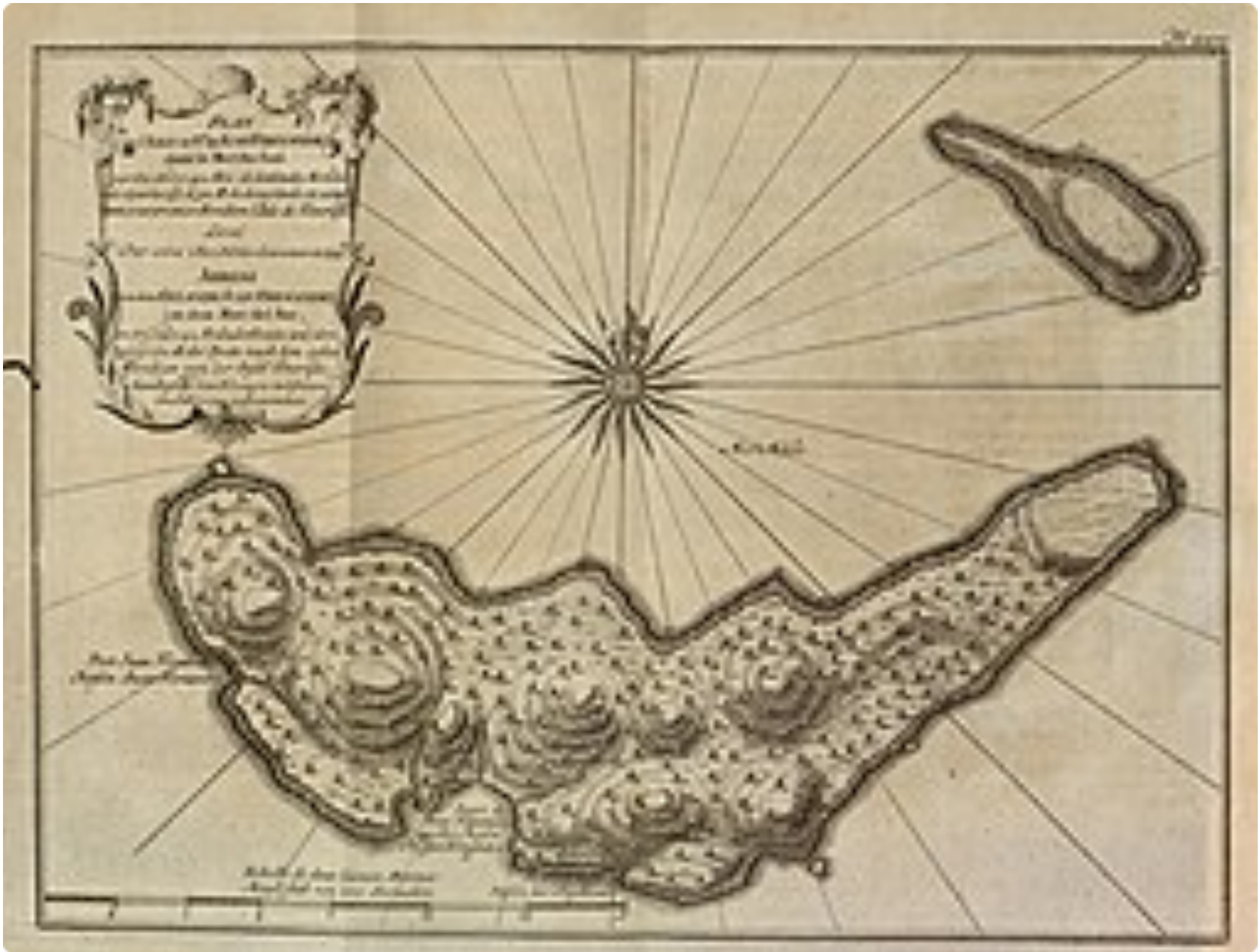
² Polynesian navigators are not known to have travelled east of Easter Island; indigenous South Americans are not known to have travelled very far from the continent's western coast.

³ During one of his voyages, Fernandez "was caught in a storm that blew him off course in a westward direction, eventually reaching "a land of enormous extent inhabited by light-skinned people," From the latitude the navigator claimed to have reached, the land in question may well have been New Zealand, but the truth remains a mystery to this day." Roberto Ferrando, *The Search for Terra Australis*, p. 81; *A Memorial Addressed To His Catholic Majesty Philip The Third, King Of Spain, By Dr Juan Luis Arias, Respecting The Exploration, Colonization, And Conversion Of The Southern Land*. in R H Major, **Early Voyages to Terra Australis, now called Australia**, p. 209); Alexander Dalrymple, **An Historical Collection Of The Several Voyages And Discoveries In The South Pacific Ocean**, pp. 53-4.

The uninhabited islands were subsequently visited and used as a hideout for pirates, buccaneers and privateers.

Dutch' Nassau Fleet'⁴ commissioned by Prince Maurice and the States-General and commanded by Jacques l'Hermite, the first armed entry into the South Pacific around the Horn, rendezvoused at Juan Fernandez in April 1624 before making for Peru.

Another party, led by Bartholomew Sharp, with William Dampier, Basil Ringrose and Lionel Wafer aboard, retired to the islands after pillaging smaller ports and ships along the South American coast at the end of 1680.⁵



They anchored off Mas a Tierra on Christmas Day – "the beginning of the Island's career as a base for the rovers of the seas".⁶

Their stay was punctuated by quarrels over the leadership.

⁴ Eleven ships, five of 600 tons or more, carrying 1600 men and over 290 cannons. (O.H.K. Spate **The Pacific Since Magellan, Volume II: Monopolists and Freebooters**, p. 36.

⁵ Sharp's force was "... too weak to attack the main Spanish citadels. Glyndwr Williams, *Buccaneers, Castaways, and Satirists: The South Seas in the English Consciousness Before 1750*, p. 115.

⁶ O. H. K. Spate, **Monopolists and Freebooters**, p. 142.

Sharp was placed in irons and replaced as captain by John Watling.⁷

The ructions might have continued if a Spanish flotilla had not appeared on the horizon.

When it did, a hasty departure saw a Nicaraguan Miskito Indian named Will left behind.

He "survived quite nicely ... loiving from the milk and meat of feral goats, from fish, shellfish and various wild herbs, and no doubt from the absence of violent encounters with foreign criminals and Spaniards."⁸

When Dampier and Wafer were back on Mas a Tierra with Ambrose Cowley in 1684 they rescued him:

his story, recounted in the published journals of Cowley and Dampier, formed part of the material that Daniel Defoe could draw on for **Robinson Crusoe** and may have been the inspiration for Friday.⁹

Alexander Selkirk arrived at Mas A Tierra aboard the *Cinque Ports* in September 1704; he believed the vessel was unseaworthy, "declared he would leave the ship rather than sail in her," and remained there for more than four years.

His stay provided further inspiration for Daniel Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe**.¹⁰

Dampier was back with Woodes Rogers in February 1709 to rescue "the most celebrated of all castaways"¹¹

⁷ Watling died in an assault on the port of Arica on 30 January 1681. Sharp returned to the leadership during a fractious stay at 'Drake's Island' (the Isla de Plata), but the disagreements split the expedition. Forty-four dissidents, including Dampier and Wafer, separated from the rest of the party and returned to the Caribbean overland via the Isthmus of Panama. Sharp's party remained in the South Pacific for another six months, taking the El Santo Rosario with a cargo of what may have been silver ingots, which the buccaneers mistook. The group split after they made their way around the Horn back to the Caribbean. Sharp returned to London, where Spanish demands saw him arrested and tried for piracy. He received a full pardon from Charles II after he presented the authorities with a book of Spanish maps taken from the *Rosario*.

⁸ Kris E. Lane, **Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas 1500 – 1750**, p. 144. Will is widely credited as the model for **Robinson Crusoe's** Man Friday.; "This Indian... has not gone unnoticed by those in search of Defoe's sources and, more to the point, was not missed by Selkirk's discoverer, Woodes Rogers, who remarked in his account of Selkirk in **A Cruising Voyage** that 'Dampier talks of a Moskito Indian... who... liv'd here three years alone, and shifted much in the same manner as Mr Selkirk did'." (Neil Rennie, *Far-fetched facts: the literature of travel and the idea of the south seas*,

⁹ Glyndwr Williams, *Buccaneers, Castaways, and Satirists: The South Seas in the English Consciousness Before 1750*, p. 116; Will had seen them coming and prepared a dinner of goats. (O.H.K. Spate, **Monopolists and Freebooters**, p. 146.)

¹⁰ James William Kelly, *Alexander Selkirk (1676-1721)*; According to Dampier, he was the "best man" on the [Cinque Ports]: "On that recommendation, Rogers appointed Selkirk as mate aboard one of the expedition's two vessels; *Buccaneers, Castaways, and Satirists: The South Seas in the English Consciousness Before 1750*, p. 120; "Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, though set in the Caribbean, owed much to the story related by Woodes Rogers of the marooning of Alexander Selkirk on Juan Fernandez. (p. 52.

¹¹ Glyndwr Williams, *Buccaneers, Castaways, and Satirists: The South Seas in the English Consciousness Before 1750*, p. 120); "Selkirk's story was revealed to the world in Rogers's **Cruising Voyage**, and his adventures formed the basis of Daniel Defoe's romantic Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719." (Gail Saunders, *Woodes Rogers (c. 1679-1732)*).

From Juan Fernandez, Rogers and company moved on to the waters off Chile and Peru and captured several prizes.

Other visitors included George Shelvocke on the last of the series of privateering and buccaneering sorties.

Shelvocke and John Clipperton set out to emulate Woodes Rogers' exploits, but when one of the ships was wrecked on Juan Fernandez.

Shelvocke's enforced stay gave him a chance to investigate the island.

"The soil was fruitful, the water good, and the air Wholesome. So healthy was the island that during the months the crew spent there, there was not an hour's sickness among them."

From being "very corpulent and crippled with gout," Shelvocke "became one of the strongest and most active men on the island."

He concludes with comments in line with contemporary fashion: "In short, everything one sees or hears in this place is perfectly romantic. The very structure of the island, in all its parts, has a certain savage, irregular beauty." ¹²

Jacob Roggeveen spent three weeks refreshing at Más (24 February to 17 March 1722) on the expedition that named Easter Island and went on to chart the location of islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago, the Society Islands, and Samoa. ¹³

Commodore George Anson's ill-fated venture into the South Pacific regrouped and recuperated on Más a Tierra after their dreadful passage around Cape Horn.

While his voyage was an "act of war, with far-reaching military and political objectives" in the long run, it proved to be "the last flare of the old privateering tradition". ¹⁴

Anson had left England in September 1740 on a mission to plunder Spanish settlements on the Pacific coast, attack Panama if a complementary expedition established a foothold on the other side of the isthmus and capture the annual Manila galleon.

Along the way, he was supposed to incite rebellions and insurrections against the Spanish imperial authorities and, hopefully, promote British commercial interests in new markets.

However, when he reached Juan Fernández, most of those objectives were out of the question.

¹² George Shelvocke, **A Voyage Round the World by Way of the Great South Sea** ..., pp. 246, 257.

¹³ O.H.K. Spate, **Monopolists and Freebooters**, pp. 222-7; When Roggeveen reached Batavia in October, he was arrested for violating the V.O.C.'s monopoly and his ships were confiscated. A lengthy lawsuit in the Netherlands saw the V.O.C. forced to compensate him for his losses and pay his crew. ([Wikipedia](#))

¹⁴ O.H.K. Spate, **Monopolists and Freebooters**, p. 253.)

While he still had his flagship, he had lost his other two major fighting ships. The transport carrying the artillery and other supplies he would need to attack any fortified strongpoint was missing and later found to have been wrecked on the Chilean coast.

Those losses paled beside the toll scurvy had taken on those who remained. Around a thousand men sailed from England.

When the remnants of the expedition reached Juan Fernández, they were down to three hundred and thirty-five – less than the flagship's usual complement – spread across four ships.

Still, it could have been worse.

The Spanish authorities knew Anson was coming and, more or less, where he was bound.

They had despatched a flotilla to intercept Anson in the South Atlantic, but the appalling conditions both squadrons encountered forced the Spanish vessels back to Rio de Janeiro.

A four-ship squadron left Callao to intercept the intruders if they made their way around the Horn.

Three of the four patrolled off the Chilean coast, while the fourth patrolled the waters around Juan Fernández.

Since the Englishmen failed to arrive by the end of April, her commander decided they weren't coming. ¹⁵



From Anson's point of view, that was just as well.

When Anson's *Centurion* anchored off Más a Tierra, Anson had thirty men fit enough to work the sixty-gun vessel. ¹⁶

After three months of undisturbed rest and recovery, Anson's much-reduced force moved to Valparaíso and points north on 19 September 1741.

¹⁵ Due to the difficulty of establishing longitude to any degree of accuracy. "Anson: sailed directly north for Juan Fernandez as marked on his charts but reached its given latitude without seeing land. He was then unsure whether to turn east or west. First, he ran westward until (unknown to him) his ships lay within a few hours' sail of the island; then he turned east and ran all the way back to the coast of Chile. Finally, he turned and ran westward again." (Simon Berthon and Andrew Robinson, **The Shape of the World**, p. 117.

¹⁶ That was not the last stroke of extraordinary luck on Anson's voyage. See the more detailed **Biographical Sketch** for the almost unbelievable story.

Four ships had become three; the supply ship *Anna* had been broken up at Juan Fernández.

By the time they completed another scurvy-ridden passage across the Pacific, only the *Centurion* remained.

In the meantime, a series of hit-and-run raids along the Pacific coast of South America resembled an old-style privateering or buccaneering venture, "although Anson made a more effective disposition of his force than had the old raiders." ¹⁷

Anson went on to capture an inbound Manila galleon and returned home via the Cape of Good Hope.

Meanwhile, his successes prompted the Spanish authorities to look more closely at the security of their Pacific possessions.

A report prepared by two young naval officers ¹⁸ diverted from their role accompanying the [French Geodesic Mission to the Equator](#) left the authorities in no doubt: almost everywhere was vulnerable; only Valdivia was reasonably safe.

The duo's report stressed the island's strategic importance and recommended fortification. An earthquake in Lima in 1846 ruled out immediate action.

However, after Anson's account of his voyage ¹⁹ appeared in 1746, the islands were occupied and fortified in 1750.

Spanish Viceroy [Manuel de Amat y Junyent](#) strengthened the Spanish position on the island in the 1760s and organised Spanish expeditions to Tahiti and Easter Island. However, those developments remained shrouded in secrecy.

In 1756 Charles de Brosses recommended a French colony on Juan Fernández.

Eleven years later, Philip Carteret arrived off Mas a Tierra in H.M.S. *Swallow* on 9 May, looking to rest and recuperate as others had before him.

I was greatly surprized to see a considerable number of men about the beach, with a house and four pieces of cannon near the water-side, and a fort about three hundred yards farther from the sea, just upon the rising of the hill, with Spanish colours flying on the top of it. This fort, which is faced: with stone, has eighteen or twenty embrasures, and within it a long house, which I supposed to be barracks for the garrison: five and twenty or thirty houses of different kinds are scattered round it, and we saw much cattle feeding on the brow of the hills, which seemed to be cultivated,

¹⁷ O.H.K. Spate, **Monopolists and Freebooters**, p. 261)

¹⁸ [Jorge Juan y Santacilia](#) and [Antonio de Ulloa](#) visited Juan Fernández as part of their investigation in 1743.

¹⁹ Officially written by the *Centurion*'s chaplain, Robert Walter, but there is no doubt Anson was involved in the writing.

as many spots were divided by enclosures from each other; we saw also two large boats lying on the beach. ²⁰

So Carteret moved on.

He had slightly better luck at Más Afuera, where he watered with great difficulty in atrocious weather conditions before departing on 25 May

Dampier and Shelvocke had previously noted the presence of seals at Mas A Tierra. Carteret found them

so numerous that I verily think if many thousands of them were killed in a night, they would not be missed in the morning: we were obliged to kill great numbers of them, as, when we walked the shore, they were continually running against us, making at the same time a most horrible noise. These animals yield excellent train oil, and their hearts and plucks are very good eating, being in taste something like those of a hog, and their skins are covered with the finest fur I ever saw of the kind. ²¹

Revived Spanish interest in the South Pacific saw Alessandro Malaspina provide the first accurate fixing of the islands' position in 1790.

Sealers began investigating the islands before the British settled New South Wales. ²²

A rush began soon after Botany Bay established itself as a revictualling point for those who preferred not to work around the Horn.

By 1798, seven sealing ships were operating around Mas Afuera, and the quest for seal skins took others far and wide.

Nantucket-born captain Mayhew Folger was looking for seals when he managed to find something that had eluded the British authorities for twenty years.

Folger's rediscovery of Carteret's Pitcairn Island on 6 February 1808 established the whereabouts of the Bounty mutineers. ²³

Despite the Spanish authorities' attempts to dislodge them in 1801 and 1804-5 and the lack of a safe all-weather anchorage, hundreds of American sealers reduced an estimated half a million seals on Mas Afuera to a mere handful.

²⁰ John Hawkesworth, **An account of the voyages undertaken ... in the Southern Hemisphere**, Vol. I, p. 541.

²¹ John Hawkesworth, **An account of the voyages undertaken ... in the Southern Hemisphere**, Vol. I pp. 555-6.

²² The New York-based Eliza took 38,000 seal skins at Mas Afuera in 1782. O.H.K. Spate, **Paradise Lost and Found**, p. 285.

²³ By that time, only one of the mutineers remained alive. **Wikipedia**; see the **Pitcairn Island Encyclopedia** for an account of the encounter. Folger left Pitcairn with the *Bounty*'s compass and chronometer (K2). The Spanish governor confiscated both when Folger reached Juan Fernández.

By 1815 there were a few ruined huts on the island and no seals. In the interim, a seven-year period saw three million seal skins from Mas Afuera land in Canton.²⁴

Frequent visits from British and American whaling vessels followed Joshua Coffin's 1795 visit in the London.

The islands became a place of harsh political exile as revolutionaries battled royalists across Spanish America after the end of the Peninsula War at home.

²⁴ "more ... than from all other rookeries combined" O.H.K. Spate, **Paradise Lost and Found**, p. 285-6.)

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