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TOM MICHELL

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The Penguin Lessons

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'His classic dry British wit provides the perfect counterbalance to the inherent sweetness of the penguin's remarkable devotion. Animal lovers and travel fans alike will find Michell's adventures bright and charming' *Shelf Awareness*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Michell was born and grew up on the rural downs of southern England, where he discovered his love of animals, birds and plants. After living in Argentina he returned home and settled in Cornwall, where he helps with the family business, tends a small plot of what he calls 'good Cornish soil' and sings with a local choir.

He is an amateur artist and in his spare time he draws and paints subjects from the wildlife around his home, specializing in birds of prey.

Tom is an enthusiastic proponent of understanding how humans can live in genuinely sustainable ways. He is married with four grown-up children and three grandchildren.

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TOM MICHELL

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whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Books, Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Michael Joseph 2015
Published in Penguin Books 2016
Reissued in this edition 2025
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This book is based upon the author's memories and recollection of events.
However the names and identifying characteristics of certain individuals have been changed
in order to protect their privacy, and dialogue, characters and incidents have been
reconstructed to the best of the author's recollection in order to convey his story.

Typeset in Dante MT Std 12.5/15.5 pt by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–98143–9

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Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper

For W, A, M and C

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Prologue

Had I been told as a child in the 1950s that my life would one day run parallel with that of a penguin – that for a time, at least, it would be him and me against the world – I would have taken it in my stride. After all, my mother had kept three alligators at the house in Esher until they grew too big and too dangerous for that genteel town, when keepers from Chessington Zoo had come and removed them. She hadn't intended to keep alligators at the house in Esher. She had lived in Singapore until the age of sixteen and, on leaving to return to England, she had been given three eggs as a memento by her best friend in a tender and tearful farewell. The eggs had hatched, naturally, in her cabin during the long voyage and so, naturally, she had to take them home with her. Years later, in wistful moments, she sometimes remarked that the imaginative present was perhaps the most effective keepsake she had ever been given.

I knew wild and domestic animals well. My rural upbringing ensured I had a realistic view of life. I knew the fate of foxes and farm stock. However, exotic animals I knew only from zoos and my imagination. I, like Walt Disney Productions later, was inspired by the genius of Rudyard Kipling. I could identify completely with *The Jungle Book* and *Kim*, and his description of schooldays that were identical to my own more than half a century later.

It's true. I was brought up with an Edwardian view of the world. My parents had been born in different parts of the Empire and I had grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins scattered around the globe: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Singapore, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Nyasaland (Malawi) and so on. To me, these places seemed almost familiar. Several times a year, letters – and, with rather less frequency, their authors – would arrive from those countries to fire my childish imagination with stories of 'Darkest Africa' and the like. But I wanted to explore somewhere different, uncharted territory, a real *Tierra Incognita*. South America was somewhere that nobody I knew appeared to have any experience of or connection with. So I had made up my mind while still at school that South America was where I would go when I grew up. At the age of twelve I bought a Spanish dictionary and secretly started learning Spanish phrases. When the opportunity arose, I'd be ready.

It was some ten years before that opportunity arrived, in the form of an advertisement in *The Times Educational Supplement*. 'Wanted,' it said, 'for HMC Boarding School in Argentina . . .' The position was so clearly suited to my purpose that within half an hour my application was in the postbox and ready to wing its way across the Atlantic, announcing that they need look no further. As far as I was concerned, I was on my way.

I researched the economic and political situation before leaving, of course. An uncle in the Foreign Office gave me the inside track on the fragility of the Perónist government in Argentina. There was likely to be another bloody coup by

the army at some stage, our intelligence suggested. Terrorism was rife; murder and kidnappings were everyday events. Only the army could restore any order, it was thought. My bank in London, meanwhile, furnished me with economic information on Argentina: out-and-out wholesale mayhem! In short, everybody said, in an avuncular sort of way, that going to Argentina was an absurd notion and, under such circumstances, quite out of the question. Nobody in their right mind would dream of going. This, of course, was exactly what I wanted to hear and all the encouragement I needed.

I was offered the post of assistant master with residential responsibilities but the terms of my contract were not terribly promising. The college would pay for one return flight, conditional on my staying for a full academic year. My UK superannuation would be paid and I would be remunerated in local currency. What that would be worth in terms of buying power locally the headmaster couldn't say because of the prevailing economic shambles. However, I would be paid in accordance and commensurately with the other teaching staff. While I was resident in the college, food and lodging would be provided. That was it.

I made sure I had enough money in the bank to buy a return flight from Buenos Aires in the event of an emergency and my bank arranged with a branch of Banco de Londres y América del Sur in Buenos Aires that I could draw on funds in London should the need arise. But I didn't care about money. I was on my way, about to indulge that spirit of adventure I had felt as a boy; to embark on a quest to seek my destiny. That Fortune would assign me a penguin as a

friend and fellow traveller, who would one day provide a wealth of bedtime stories for generations then unborn, was a singular twist of fate that still lay far over the western horizon.

Juan Salvador was a penguin who charmed and delighted everyone who knew him in those dark and dangerous days – days that saw the collapse of the Perónist government in terrorist outrages and violent revolution as Argentina teetered on the verge of anarchy. It was a time when liberties, opportunities and attitudes were so completely different from those of today. However, a young traveller like me and the inimitable, indomitable penguin, Juan Salvador, could – it turned out – be the happiest of companions after I rescued him in dramatic circumstances from deadly seas off the coast of Uruguay.

1

I Pick Up a Penguin

In which one adventure ends and another begins

The seaside resort of Punta del Este can be found at that point on the coast of Uruguay where the great southerly sweep of South America's Atlantic seaboard meets the northern bank of the vast delta of the River Plate, or Río de la Plata. It lies some sixty miles to the east of the capital, Montevideo, and across the mighty river from Buenos Aires, the capital of the Republic of Argentina. In the 1960s and 1970s Punta del Este was, for the denizens of those two great metropolises, their Nice, Cannes or St Tropez; the place where the smart set went for summer holidays to escape the city heat, to stay and be seen in luxurious penthouses and apartment blocks facing the sea, and, for all I know, they do so still.

The key to one of those apartments had kindly been lent to me by the Bellamys, friends of mine who, because it was mid-winter, were not using the apartment themselves. I was in

Uruguay following an extraordinary stay in Paraguay and was making my way back to the Argentine via the gargantuan waterfalls at Iguazú, and then along the coast. After several weeks of exertions and excitements I was content to spend a few days relaxing in quiet, out-of-season Punta del Este.

I had returned to the apartment late in the afternoon on my last day in order to pack and organize my belongings ready for a very early departure the following morning. My booking for the hydrofoil across the River Plate was for twelve noon, which required that I catch the *colectivo*, the local bus, from Punta del Este to Montevideo at a quarter to six in the morning. *Colectivos* were enthusiastically decorated by their drivers with innumerable diverse adornments and good-luck charms, which were supposed to make up for the bald tyres, I think.

Having packed, cleaned and checked the apartment, I decided to take a final walk by the sea before going out for what would be my last supper at the resort.

The harbour at Punta del Este, on the western side of the point, was small, sufficient only for a few score fishing boats and pleasure craft, which on that day were rocking gently on their moorings, in harmony with the floating pontoons along which owners could walk to reach their dinghies. Although the harbour is well defended against the Atlantic Ocean to the east, there was little protection from the westerly breeze that was blowing that day.

The air was full of the cry of gulls, the slap of halyards and the smell of fish, and this little haven of security basked serenely in the bright winter sunlight. The vibrant colours of the gulls, boats and houses were shown to their best

advantage against the sapphire sea and azure sky. My attention, however, was drawn towards the countless thousands of fish in the cold, crystal-clear water. Swimming in unison, shoals of sprats raced around the harbour, attempting to evade their predators by zigzagging or by dividing and reuniting every few seconds. I was mesmerized by the scintillating waves of light that pulsed across the water like an aurora as the sun reflected off the iridescent bodies of the fish.

Next to the rusting, antiquated fuel pumps marked in gallons, and housed under a corrugated iron roof, a muscle-bound fisherwoman scooped her living from the harbour with a large green net, securely tied to a stout bamboo pole. She wore a leather apron, rubber boots and a satisfied expression although, I noted, she had bare hands. Her hair was covered with a brown scarf and her face was deeply lined and weathered. Beside her were three wooden casks, filled almost to the brim with sprats, which I presumed accounted for her satisfaction. Standing ankle-deep in flapping silver-banded fish, she dropped her net into the water and lifted a fresh catch almost every minute, to the dismay of the gulls who scolded her noisily. She gave a toothless grin as she shook each new haul into the barrels and picked out the few fish that hadn't fallen from the net, something I realized she couldn't have done wearing gloves. The little black-backed, swallow-tailed gulls, after hovering briefly about ten feet above the sea, dived down then bobbed up to the surface to sit on the water with sprats glistening like rubber mercury in their beaks. In another flash, the catch was swallowed.

There were a couple of penguins in the harbour, too, enjoying their share. It was captivating to watch them fly so

fast through the water in pursuit of the fish, far more skilfully even than the gulls in the air. Twisting and turning, they tore through the shoals with breathtaking speed and agility, snapping up sprats as the fish scattered before them. Against such a superlative adversary the sprats appeared to be almost defenceless, other perhaps than their seemingly limitless numbers. I was only surprised that there weren't more penguins there to feast on such rich and easy pickings.

I could gladly have watched them for much longer, but as the penguins swam out of view, I turned and walked round the promontory to the eastern side and so on to the next breakwater. Small, white-flecked waves were rolling in from the ocean and breaking on the beach. I had only been strolling along the seashore for ten, maybe fifteen, minutes on that beautiful afternoon, reflecting on all my new experiences, the wonderful and awe-inspiring things I had seen and done on holiday, when I caught sight of the first of them: black, unmoving shapes. Initially, I was aware of only a few but, as I walked on, they grew in number, until the whole beach appeared to be covered with black lumps in a black carpet. Hundreds of oil-drenched penguins lay dead in the sand, from the high-water mark to the sea and stretching far away along the shore to the north. Dead penguins, covered in thick, cloying, suffocating oil and tar. The sight was so dreadful, so sickening and depressing, that I could only wonder what future lay ahead for any 'civilization' that could tolerate, let alone perpetrate, such desecration. I understood then why there were so few penguins in the harbour catching sprats, despite the abundance of the fish. Evidently, only a lucky few had avoided the oil slick.

Consumed by dark thoughts, I continued my walk above the trail of devastation that covered much of the beach, trying to estimate the number of dead birds. Even if I had been able to calculate how many penguins were on the shore – in places heaped on top of each other – it was impossible to assess the number of bodies churning in the sea. Each wave that broke piled more birds on top of those already there, while further out every new breaker was sweeping another grim batch of black carcasses towards the shore.

The beach between the sea and the wall at the side of the road was narrow, possibly only thirty yards at its widest, but the pollution along the beach extended as far as I could see. Clearly, thousands of penguins had died in the most horrifying manner while they were making their way north along their ancestral migration routes just as their forebears had done for millions of years.

I still don't know why I continued to walk along the beach that day. Possibly I needed to understand just how appalling this event was – the extent of the damage. I hadn't heard any reports of an oil spill in this part of the world but in those days regulations regarding the conduct of oil tankers were less stringent and compliance minimal, so occurrences like this were not uncommon. After discharging cargo at their destinations, oil tankers would put to sea again and wash out their tanks while in transit to collect a new consignment.

It was events such as these that eventually provoked much-needed change. I had little doubt that what I was witnessing on this beach was the inevitable consequence of a hideous collision of cultures. When the instinctive, annual compulsion of seabirds to migrate met a vast, floating oil

slick dumped at sea through human thoughtlessness and greed, there was only one possible outcome: the utter and complete annihilation of those penguins. This would have been indescribably ghastly had it been the result of an accident. That it should be the result of deliberate actions taken in the full knowledge of the likely consequences defied any kind of rationalization or acceptance.

I had been walking briskly, unwilling to focus too closely on the details of the dead creatures, when, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a movement. Not from the churning spume of the surf, but from the stillness on the beach. I stopped and watched. I hadn't been mistaken. One valiant bird was alive; a single surviving soul struggling amid all that death. It was extraordinary! How could one solitary bird still be living when the oil and tar had so comprehensively overwhelmed the rest?

Although it was lying on its belly and covered in tar like the other birds, this penguin was moving its wings and holding its head up. It wasn't moving much, but its head and wings were giving little spasmodic jerks. The death throes of a defeated creature, I assumed.

I watched for a short time. Could I walk on and abandon it to the poisonous oil and the exhausting, suffocating tar that would slowly extinguish its life? I decided that I could not; I had to end its suffering as quickly as possible. So I headed towards it, clearing space under each footstep with as much decency and respect for the dead birds as was possible.

I had no clear plan of how I was going to administer the *coup de grâce*. In fact, I had no plan at all. But as that solitary

penguin, indistinguishable from the thousands of other tar-dripping penguins in all but one respect – this one was alive – struggled to its feet to face yet another adversary, all thoughts of such violence vanished from my mind. Flapping sticky wings at me and with a darting raptor beak, it stood its ground ready to fight for its life once more. It was almost knee high!

I checked my advance and looked again at this penguin's companions. Was I wrong? Were they alive after all? Perhaps just resting, recovering? I turned a few bodies over with my toe. No spark of life appeared in any bird apart from this one, nothing to distinguish one dead penguin from the next. Their plumage and throats were choked up with tar, hideously deformed tongues were protruding from their beaks and their eyes were completely covered with the corrosive filth. The stink of bitumen alone would have overcome the birds and I wouldn't have been walking along the beach myself had not the wind been blowing from the west, carrying the stench out to sea.

Amid all this obscenity there was just this single penguin with an open, red-tongued beak and clear eyes, jet black and sparking with anger. I suddenly felt a surge of hope kindling for this exception. Could it survive if cleaned? I had to give it a chance, surely? But how would I approach this filthy and aggressive bird? We stood there, eyeing each other suspiciously, evaluating our respective opponents.

Quickly, I scanned the accumulated rubbish along the beach: bits of wood, plastic bottles, crumbling polystyrene, disintegrating fishing net, all the familiar things found along the high-water mark on almost every beach tainted by our

advanced society. I also had a bag containing an apple in my pocket. As I moved away, the penguin settled back down on its tummy and shook its bottom as though getting comfortable again. Hurriedly, I gathered some of the flotsam and jetsam that I thought might be of assistance. Now, gladiator-like, I approached my quarry which, sensing the renewed threat, immediately reared up to its full height. Swirling a piece of fishing net, I distracted the penguin and, with the swiftness and bravery of Achilles, dropped the net over its head and pushed it over with a stick. I pinned it down and, with my hand inside the bag (it was no time to be eating apples), grabbed its feet.

I lifted the furious creature, twisting and turning in its efforts to escape, clear of the beach and away from my body and discovered for the first time how heavy penguins could be.

And so back to the Bellamys' apartment with a flapping ten-pound bird. If my arm were to tire and that vicious beak come within striking distance, it would skewer my leg and smear me with tar. I was apprehensive about hurting it or scaring it to death and I was trying to ensure it didn't suffer at my hands, but I was also concerned about my own well-being during the return journey of a mile or more.

My mind teemed with half-formed plans as I made the return journey. What was I going to say to anyone who challenged me? Was I allowed to pick up tar-soaked penguins in

Uruguay? Most countries in South America at that time were police states and I wouldn't have been surprised had there been some absurd law forbidding such a rescue.

At least I should be able to clean the penguin, I decided, as I jogged unevenly back along the beach road. I remembered we had used butter to remove tar from beach towels when we were children, and I knew I had some butter in the fridge in the flat, as well as olive oil, margarine and detergent.

Carrying the bird at arm's length was exhausting work and I had to change hands frequently. I was holding it by its feet but, fearful of causing any further injury to the frantic creature, I kept a finger between its legs in order to gauge the strength of my grip. I was under no illusion; this was not comfortable for the bird. However, we eventually reached our destination without major mishap to either of us. Despite its best endeavours, the penguin had failed to wound me – and I hadn't been tempted to finish it off en route.

My next problem was how to slip by the fearsome concierge, who occupied an office under the stairs. Throughout my stay she had come rushing out, like a savage guard dog, to scrutinize every visitor as they came and went, as though we weren't to be trusted. It was abundantly clear why the building management had engaged the services of this particular individual to ensure that visitors behaved respectably during their stay, so naturally suited was she to the task. But by some curious twist of fate, on the one occasion she might have had real cause for concern, she wasn't there. The coast was clear.