

---

Paolo Galli

# IN THE BLUE

The Maldives in 18 Stories

**FrancoAngeli**





---

**Paolo Galli**

# **IN THE BLUE**

The Maldives in 18 Stories

**FrancoAngeli**

Isbn e-book: 9788835192152

All graphics are by Kevin Kuijper (courtesy).

Cover image by Andrea Frazzetta.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milano, Italy.

This work, and each part thereof, is protected by copyright law.  
Text and Data Mining (TDM), AI training and similar technologies rights are reserved.  
By downloading this work, the User accepts all the conditions of the license agreement  
for the work as stated and set out on the website  
*www.francoangeli.it*.

Active links and QR codes included in the book are provided by the author. The publisher assumes no responsibility for active links and QR codes that lead to websites not owned by FrancoAngeli.

The author declares that generative AI tools were used exclusively for linguistic revision and stylistic optimization. The author is solely responsible for review and scientific content of the book.

*To you, Valeria,  
a chapter for each of your years.  
Keep marveling, always*



# Index

Introduction	pag.	9
1. Cartographic Espionage	»	11
2. The Perfect Coin	»	20
3. The Island of Hope	»	25
4. The Maldivian Word That Conquered the World	»	33
5. Origin of the Maldivian Atolls	»	36
6. Wandering Islands	»	44
7. Not Only Marine Animals	»	50
8. Corals That Protect	»	57
9. Waiting for a Name	»	64
10. Ecological Equivalents	»	68
11. Coral Stones	»	78
12. Floating Gold	»	83
13. Ropes for Ships	»	87
14. Dominant Nation Brand	»	91
15. Bodu Mas	»	94
16. The Crown-of-Thorns Starfish	»	97
17. From Sand to Forest	»	100
18. In the Blue Painted Blue	»	103
Appendix: major historical events of the Maldives	»	105
Acknowledgements	»	106
References	»	108
Credits	»	114



# Introduction

“Paolo, I discovered what the Inuit do after hunting a polar bear”, Inge Rasmussen, my high school biology and natural sciences teacher told me one day during class. Rasmussen continued, explaining that once the bear is caught, the Inuit begin a special ritual: they place the head outside the igloo, facing the direction the bears come from, generally north, towards the frozen sea. This gesture might seem strange at first, she said, but it actually has a profound meaning. The Inuit believe that polar bears are not simply animals, but beings with a powerful spirit that continues to exist even after their death. By positioning the bear’s head in such a way, they want to show respect and reconciliation with the bear’s spirit. It’s a bit like saying: “We acknowledge your sacrifice and want you to return to your natural environment”. For the Inuit, hunting polar bears is not only a matter of life or death, but an act of deep reverence towards nature and a way to maintain balance between humans and the world around them. My teacher was of Danish origin, cultured and empathetic, capable of changing the lives of students who had the fortune of meeting her. I was lucky enough to be one of them. Why did she tell this to *me*? Because she understood my fascination with the world of the Inuit and with cold places in general. I used to imagine myself as an adult in some Nordic setting, gazing at the sea while sipping a cup of coffee. Fate however, had other plans, and seems to have wanted me to end up working in hot, extremely hot places, like the Maldives. My fascination with the Inuit began during a vacation in Copenhagen. It was winter, the weather frigid, and while walking on the pier, out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a small group of people staggering drunk. Back home, I shared the memory with my teacher, who told me that they were probably Inuit and that it was incorrect to call them “Es-

kimos”, a colonial term presumably derived from the word “ashkimew”, meaning “eaters of raw meat”. She explained that they often came to Copenhagen to get drunk. It was indeed a population devastated by Western civilization.

I started searching high and low for books on this topic, anything I could get my hands on. It was no easy task, but I had help from my wonderful teacher who joined me in seeking out more information on the fascinating Inuit. The internet was still more than a decade away, and the first computers were mostly good for playing games with primitive graphics, not yet containing a browser nor able to connect the world. But I would not be deterred. I discovered that some Inuit lived in Greenland, others in North America. At that time, my passion for the sea was already alive and well. Around the time I was 17, when deciding what to do with my life began to feel more urgent, I chose to study fish or, to be more precise, fish parasites. This not from a veterinary perspective, but an ecological one: what strategies they used to survive, how they fed, etc. I imagined a job that would satisfy my interests and be specific enough to give me my own niche, eliminating the tendency to compete with others (I didn’t know anything about ecological niches and intra and interspecific competition, yet). And so I did! My dream back then was to put to use everything I would learn during my university studies in Biological Sciences in a country with freezing seas, but all my efforts aimed in this direction turned out to be a total disaster. I found myself, by chance or luck, studying the Maldives, the polar opposite. And *this* is precisely what I would like to tell you about in the chapters to come.

# 1

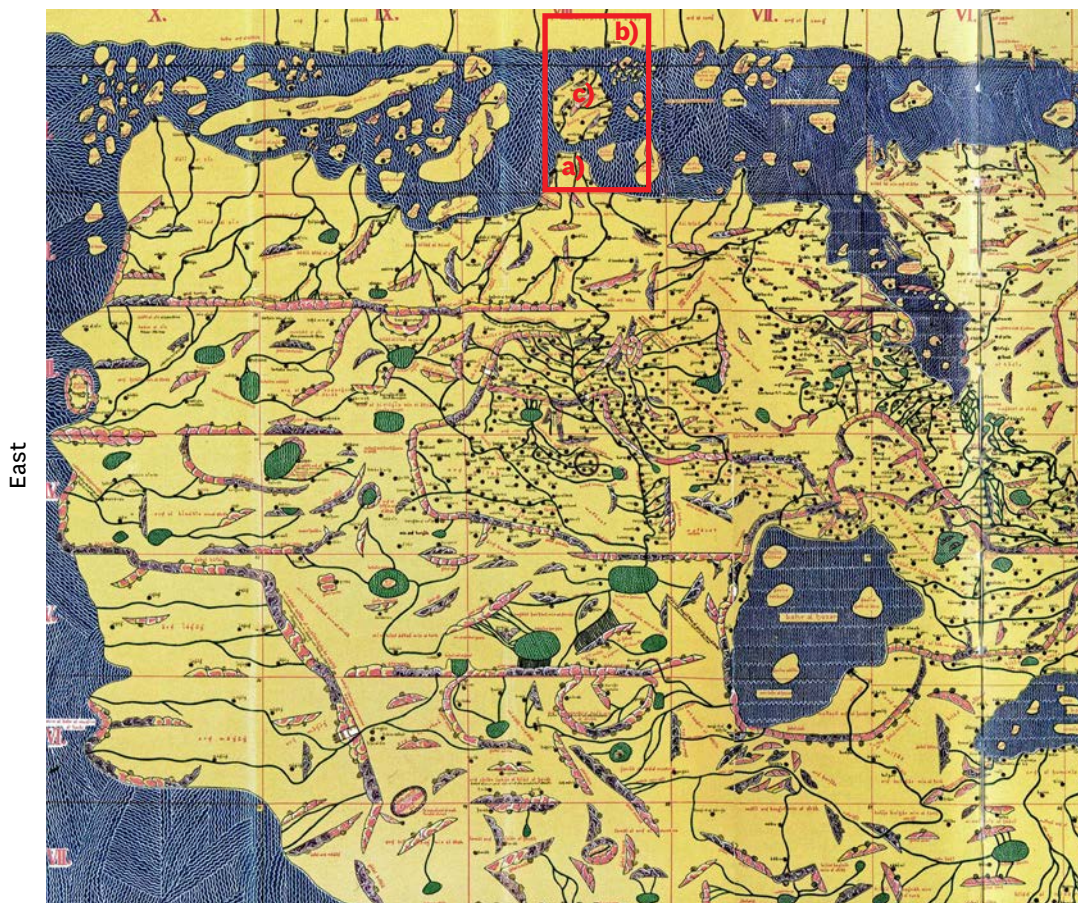
## Cartographic Espionage

Nowadays, we have maps for essentially every square inch of the planet, accessible through the most diverse means imaginable. To observe one of the 1,192 islands of the Maldives, you need not look any further than “Google Maps”, move the mouse to the area of interest, zoom in, change the display mode and, in a sort of cartographic espionage, scrutinize undisturbed each and every detail of the place. Obviously, it hasn’t always been this way. In the past, information was obtained through the work of cartographers, figures of great prestige who were considered both scientists *and* artists in the eras in which they lived. Their maps not only served practical purposes, such as navigation and exploration, but were also works representing the known and unknown world.

In classical antiquity, the Maldives were mentioned for the first time in the “Geography” of Claudius Ptolemy, a Greek-Egyptian geographer, mathematician, and astronomer who lived in the 2nd century AD. In his work, Ptolemy describes a group of islands in the Indian Ocean that are in all likelihood the Maldives, with a high degree of probability.

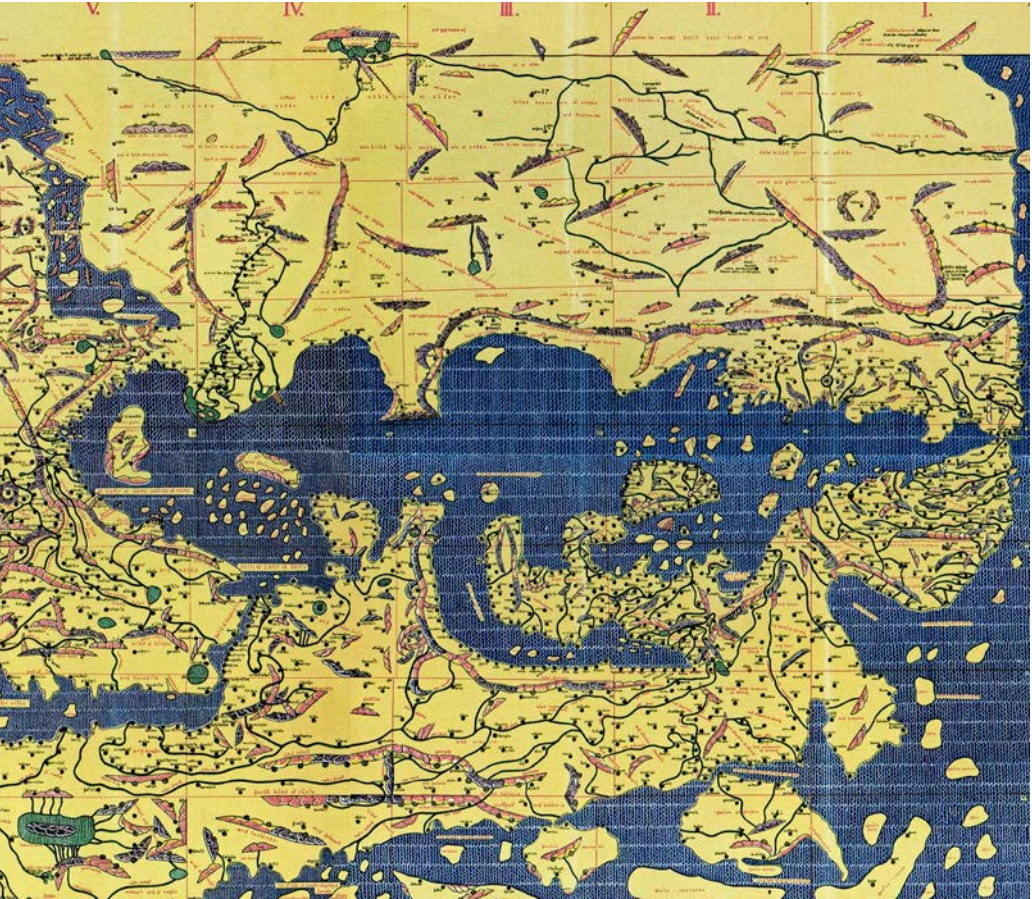
To have a cartographic representation of the Maldives, we had to wait for the Tabula Rogeriana of 1154 (**figure 1**), one of the most famous maps in the history of medieval cartography. It was created by the Arab geographer, cartographer, and traveler al-Idrisi on commission from Roger II of Sicily, the Norman king. The work is part of a larger geographical treatise, entitled *Kitab Rujjar* (“The Book of Roger”). The map, drawn based on the knowledge of the time, is the first which sees the Maldives represented. In order to find them on the map, one must not orient his gaze as one would do with modern maps. This is due to the fact that medieval Arab maps were drawn with north facing downwards. On the map, Europe is on the right with Italy above Germany, the Arabian Peninsula with the

South



North

**Figure 1** Tabula Rogeriana in which the Maldivian Archipelago is represented for the first time. In the red box are highlighted: a) India; b) Sri Lanka; c) Maldivian Archipelago. Medieval Arab maps were drawn with north facing downwards.



West

Red Sea on the right and the Arabian Gulf on the left. Sri Lanka is found above India, to the right of which, at the top, one observes a small group of islands, the Maldives. If you can't see them, I suggest you turn the book upside down so that the Maldives appear as a group of small islands below and to the left of present-day Sri Lanka. Al-Idrisi called these Maldivian islands "Dīwah al-Mahāldīb" or "Mahal Dibiyat", names likely derived from an Arabic transliteration of their local name or of a similar name used by Arab and Persian sailors and merchants active in the Indian Ocean at the time. The Maldives were anything but unknown territories in the past, but I will discuss this later. One of the hypotheses of the origin of the name *Maldives* is that it derives from "Mahal Dibiyat", transformed over the centuries until becoming "Maldives". From that point on, the Maldives have had a place of honor on all the maps that represented that part of the world. Among the most important is the map produced in the 18th century by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin (**figure 2**), official hydrographer of the King of France, Louis XV, known for his precise and detailed maps of the regions explored by the French. Bellin was the first to represent the Maldivian atolls and islands in detail, rather than as a simple line of points in the Indian Ocean, as had been the case until then. One of the reasons why the Maldives began over the years to be drawn in great detail was related to sailors' fear of crashing the wooden keel of their boats against one of the innumerable coral reefs spread throughout the Maldivian archipelago. Let's not forget that the Maldivian coral reefs are the seventh largest in the world by extension.

The problem presented by corals for navigation is very well told in Stefan Zweig's book *Magellan*, that describes how the explorer's dreams of glory were shattered against the coral reefs of the Philippines. Ferdinand Magellan was the first Westerner to reach the Pacific Ocean by sea. After the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus, other explorers decided to venture out on the same route. Magellan, however, was the only one to circumnavigate South America, cross the strait that bears his name, the Strait of Magellan, and continue up the western coasts of America until reaching the East Indies. Being able to reach the Indies by sea was the dream of all merchants, because this new route would have allowed, among other things, to bypass the territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire, which monopolized land trade by imposing high taxes. Through the sea, European nations could have direct access to precious goods, such as spices, silks, and other exotic products, without having to depend on intermediaries. We should keep in mind that sea voyages would have represented a safer alternative to

land routes, often exposed to brigands, local wars, and prohibitive climatic conditions.

During one of his journeys by land towards the Indies, Magellan captured or purchased a slave of Malay origin named Enrique (sometimes written Henrique or Enriquillo). Enrique was originally from the Malacca region, in present-day Malaysia, and he was the one who played a leading role in determining whether Magellan had actually reached the Indies by sea. A significant challenge Magellan had to face was that of being able to state with certainty that he had, in fact, reached his destination: once one arrived in an unknown territory, how could it be established with certainty that they were actually in the Indies? Columbus himself, for example, had made an error, mistaking America for a part of Indian territory. At once surprising, simple and ingenious, was the stratagem devised by Magellan. Every time he believed he had reached the East Indies, he asked the slave Enrique to get off the caravel and speak with the local population: if they understood each other, it meant that they had arrived; otherwise, Enrique was brought back on board and the expedition continued towards a new destination.

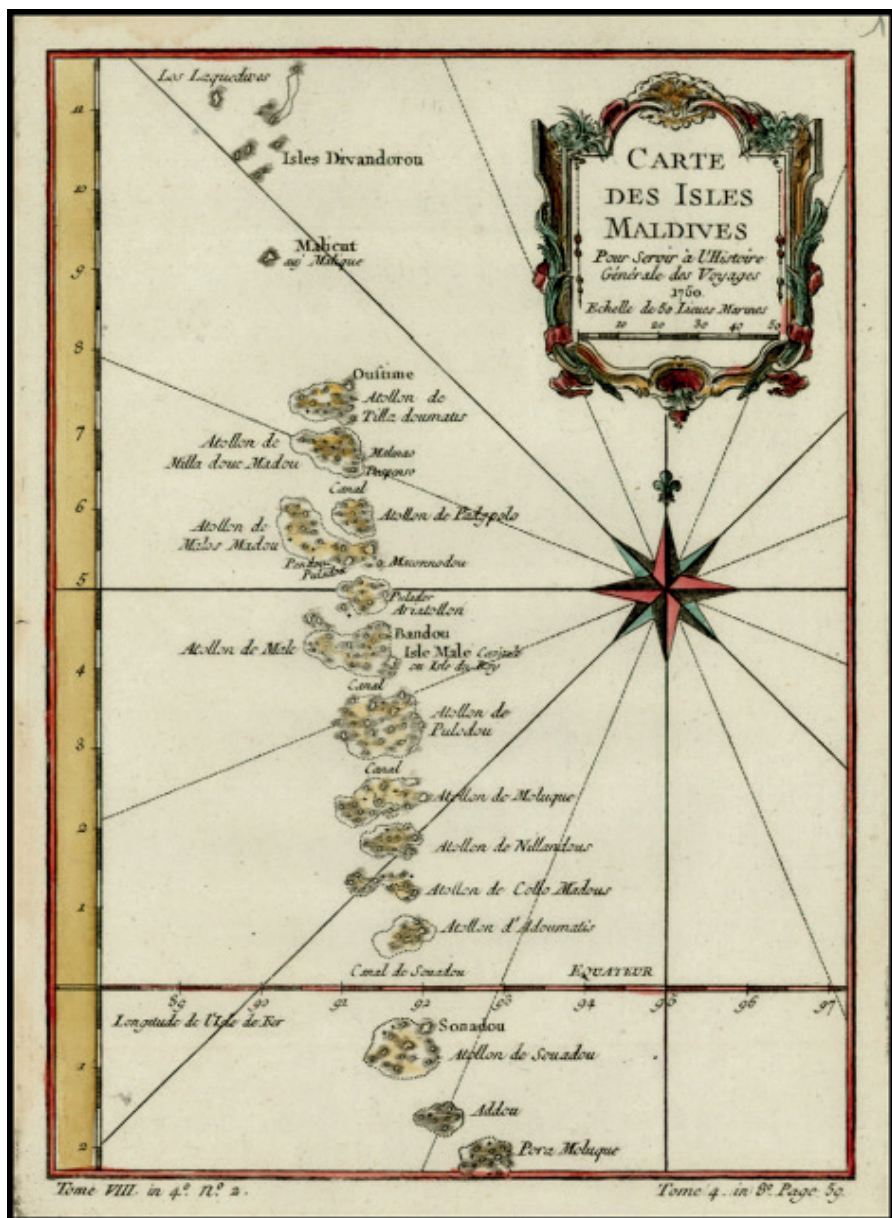
One day, Enrique was asked to go ashore and talk to the local population. To his great joy, he was able to understand their language: they had finally succeeded in circumnavigating the globe! They had arrived in the Philippines. Magellan knew that he had suddenly become one of the richest men in the world: on his return home, he would receive huge sums of money both from the Pope, with whom he had signed an agreement, and from the King of Spain. But let's return to his downfall: the coral reefs. One day, while resting and waiting to set sail again, he heard about a rebel tribe led by a certain Lapu-Lapu. In order to assert his supremacy, or perhaps bored while waiting to return, he decided, together with a group of his men, to teach this rebel tribe a lesson. He and his men, clad in their shining armor, boarded the boats to reach the rebel infested island, but when they arrived near the shore, they realized they could not continue due to the presence of coral reefs that impeded the movement of their boats. They therefore decided to disembark and cover the last few dozen meters in water up to their waists. Fatigued and slowed down by their metal armor, they became easy prey for the arrows launched copiously by the natives, who were angered by their presence. A few corals, interposed between Magellan and a group of rebels, were enough to interrupt the ambitions of glory tasted shortly before by a man who had dared and achieved what no one had ever done before: circumnavigate the planet and reach the East Indies by sea. Ah, if only

Magellan had had a map showing the coral reefs, perhaps he would not have died in such a trivial way.

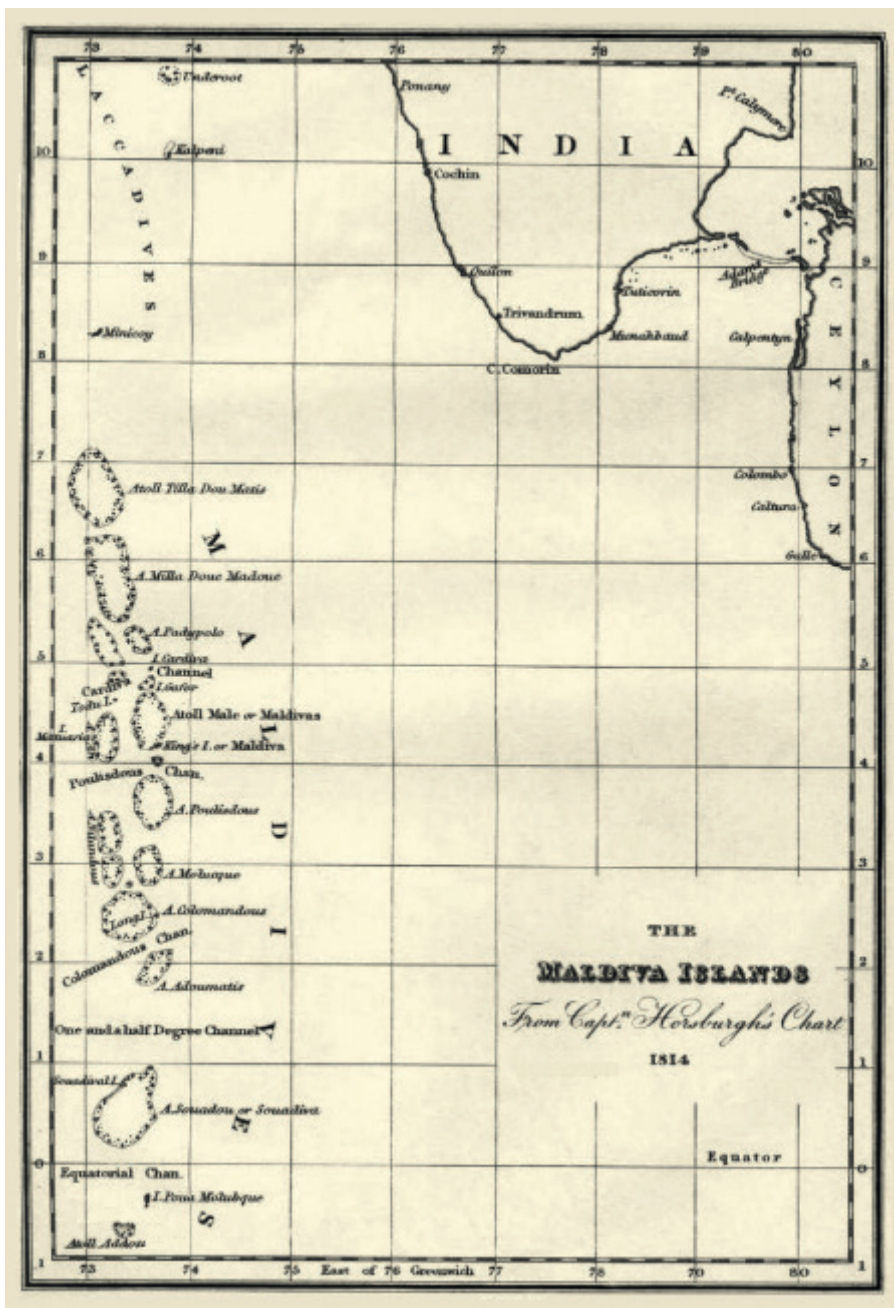
Returning to our maps, among the greatest cartographers who described the Maldivian archipelago in great detail, complete with the presence of reefs, were James Horsburgh (**figure 3**), a Scottish cartographer for the British East India Company, and Robert Moresby, an officer in the British Navy.

Just as Magellan's fate was decided by corals, the same happened to James Horsburgh, whose decision to produce detailed maps of the Indian Ocean came about after a shipwreck caused by corals. Horsburgh's maps became the reference work for navigation in the Indian Ocean in the first half of the 19th century, at least until the maps of Robert Moresby (**figure 4**) appeared. Moresby used James Horsburgh's work as a guide for his own studies, so much so that, as a sign of gratitude, he named a small atoll near South Maalhosmadulu Atoll, *Horsburgh Atoll*. Moresby's maps, produced between 1834 and 1836, were so accurate in representing atolls and islands that they were used for many years thereafter. Among the information reported were, for example, details of islands with "good water", which could be used by sailors to replenish their supplies, or which channels were best for entering the capital of Malé. Again, in honor of Moresby's work, the channel between North Maalhosmadulu Atoll and Fesdhuthere Atoll was named *Moresby Channel*.

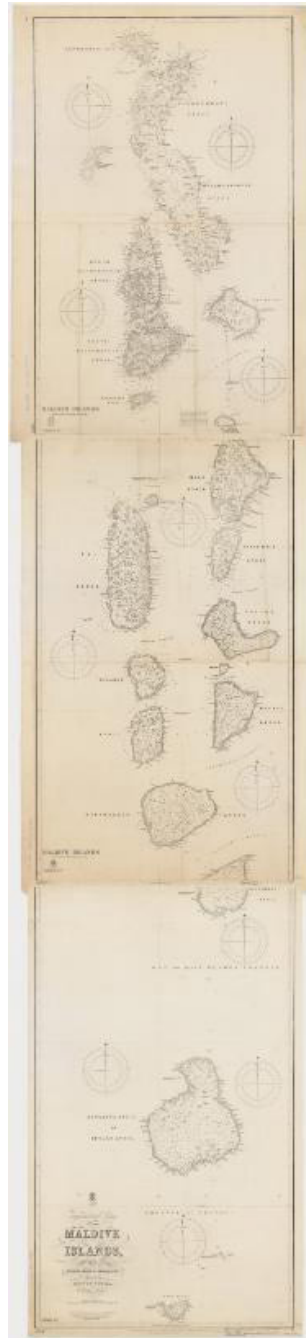
Among the famous names who used Moresby's maps was none other than Charles Darwin. In one of his books, published in 1842 and entitled "The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs", Darwin refers to Moresby's observations.



**Figure 2** Map of the Maldives by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin, 1750.



**Figure 3** Map of the Maldives by James Horsburgh, 1814.



**Figure 4** Map of the Maldives by Robert Moresby, 1835.