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INTRODUCTION:
CAPTAIN JAMES COOK: MAN, MYTH, AND REALITY*

by Michael Hoare

For perseverance, persistence, doggedness, determination and achievement, the eighteenth century possibly knew and honored no man as highly or as universally as the second son of a simple Scottish farm day laborer, James, and his Yorkshire wife, Grace. The man, their son, was James Cook, born on 27 October 1728 in a two-roomed thatched cottage in Marton Village, now in Middlesborough, County of Cleveland (formerly part of Yorkshire), England.

Over forty-five years later, on 30 January 1774, Cook stood on the quarterdeck of his sloop HMS *Resolution*--a soundly built former collier transformed for discovering--peering anxiously like all his men into the thick fog, surrounded by numerous icebergs, and finally confronted by impenetrable pack-ice in his questing to the southward in search of an elusive southern continent. They were in latitude 71°10' south (longitude 106°54' west), man's "farthest south" of the century, and their very attaining of it owed most to Cook's character: ". . . I whose ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has been before me, but as far as I think it possible for man to go." Balked by ice, they stretched back to the north. At the same moment, it is told, George Vancouver, a learning midshipman on this second round-the-world voyage of Cook, went out to the extremity of the bowsprit, waved his hat, and exclaimed, "*Ne Plus Ultra!*"

And Cook indeed strove to leave "nothing beyond" nor to quit any coast with anything unverified. He left nothing to chance and aimed

*This article was originally compiled as a postconference series of introductory comments and observations on the state of research on Cook's biography post-Beaglehole and particularly following the international symposium "Captain James Cook and His Times," held at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, in late April 1978. The author had been for four months visiting professor and Canadian Commonwealth Fellow in the Department of History in the semester prior to the conference. The author also gave the academic summary and opening paper at the conference, and his more thoroughly documented article on the state of Cook research after the Vancouver gathering is, published below.

for perfection in his two main fields of endeavor: geography and navigation. Between 1768 and 1779, Cook and his officers and scientists laid bare many hitherto unknown coasts and islands of the vast Pacific Ocean, sailing as far as 70° north and 71° south and along the coasts of Australia (New Holland) and New Zealand in the southwest and British Columbia, Alaska, and Kamchatka in the northeast. In between they discovered, re-examined, and accurately located major islands and archipelagos like New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and Aleutians, and the Friendly, Society, Hawaiian and Marquesas islands. These voyages, rich for the sciences of botany, zoology, astronomy, and oceanography, fascinating in their extent of anthropological discovery and the arts, artifacts, and ways of life of Pacific peoples, had an immense impact upon the future course of European art, drama, poetry, philosophy, and natural history. For the Pacific peoples touched by Cook's visits--Australian aborigines, New Zealand Maoris, Polynesians, Melanesians, Northwest Coast Indians, Aleuts, and others--the voyages foretold drastic and sometimes not-too-distant upheavals in their economies and ways of life.

Charles Darwin, who followed Cook to the Pacific seventy years later, reckoned that the Yorkshireman opened up another hemisphere. Another contemporary who sailed as an artist and scientist with Cook surmised that what the Captain "has added to the mass of our knowledge . . . will strike deep roots and long have the most decisive influence on the activities of men." And so it has proven, because the men who followed most immediately in Cook's wake were, in the main, those who had sailed with and were trained by him, mariners like William Bligh of the *Bounty*, George Vancouver of the new sloop *Discovery*, and the American-born Nathaniel Portlock and his associate in the early fur trade of the Northwest Coast, George Dixon. At a time when his monarch, George III, was losing the American colonies (soon to be the first United States) Captain Cook in the Pacific gained for Britain the raw material of a "second empire." That is why today the Union Jack flies still in the flags of British Columbia, Hawaii, Australia, and New Zealand.

It became an age of empire builders and heroes: of legendary figures such as Wolfe and Nelson who died like classical warriors of old and were enshrined in their national mythologies. Cook, slain by Hawaiians at Kealakekua Bay on 14 February 1779, became such a hero. But he was, too, something more. He was the poor man of humble origins and means who captivated the whole civilized world with his deeds.

Cook was imposing as a person. He stood out among Europeans and indigenous peoples as a leader. He was born to command and bore command well. He was thorough, meticulous, scrupulous, and honest, especially in all matters concerning the health of his seamen and in his relations with natives. He knew, in short, that he relied for success in discovery on both his hands and his hosts; therefore he treated both with a justice, tolerance, and humanity uncommon in his age. On his first two circumnavigations (1768-1771 and 1772-1775), noted one of his companions, "Cook punished rarely and reluctantly, never without valid reason and always with moderation." He was the acme of correctness and fairness when trading with islanders and, unlike many of his forerunners, approached them with few or no prejudices and pride in his technical and military superiority.

For years, however, it was claimed that Cook cured scurvy, the age-old dread of mariners. Certainly Cook's rigorous regime of hygiene, cleanliness, and searching for fresh salads and vegetables at landfalls spread not too far apart kept his crew healthy and the scurvy abated. But Cook in fact failed to lend his authority to the real and most efficacious means of arresting scurvy: fresh citrus fruits and juices. Thus the British Navy suffered on miserably from this disease for three or four decades more. It is a myth, too, that Cook himself spread the social diseases of syphilis and gonorrhoea: the guilt of contagion lay with the more amorous of his officers, civilians, and crew. Cook, indeed, strove almost frantically and obsessively at times--but, of course, vainly--to hinder and stop liaisons between his men and native women.

How did such a man rise from obscurity to fame? The answer must lie partly in his intense ambition and in his determination to master the sciences and knowledge necessary to his chosen profession of master mariner and discoverer: astronomy, advanced mathematics, the intricacies of seamanship and surveying, and the arts of command--victualing and planning ruthlessly ahead. Cook developed an uncanny nose and sixth sense for a new coast, a fresh danger, or an impending mishap. It was said of him that he could be asleep in his cot but on deck in a trice if the ship veered off course or her motion changed perceptibly. He had what one friend called a "sailor's eye," able to discern faults and problems in seamanship which even experienced sea officers could miss, such as the set of sails and lines. He was by instinct and training a seafarer, "the seamen's seaman," one of the greatest of all time in vessels rigged with sails.

Cook, after some elementary learning and a short interlude as grocer's and then haberdasher's boy, began at eighteen his vital seaman's

apprenticeship in the hard school of the East Coast and North Sea collier trade off England. Here they plied those difficult shoal waters between the home port Whitby and the metropolis London and often got as far as the European coast and the Baltic ports. Over eleven years Cook “learnt the ropes” and, particularly, about ships and their ways. So good did he become as a mate in the mercantile service that his employer offered him command of his own vessel, the *Freelove*. But in 1755, aged twenty-six, Cook threw up this honor, volunteered for the Royal Navy, and was entered as an able seaman in HMS *Eagle*, a sixty-gun ship of the line.

Cook now began his lifelong log-keeping, and within a month such were his superiors impressed and such, we now believe, was the patronage working for him quietly ashore that he was promoted master’s mate. The obscure country boy was on the road upward in a navy where humble men rarely rose high. Next came war, action and cruising against the French. After two years, examinations passed, Cook became master in the twenty-four-gun frigate *Solebay*. The master was any naval vessel’s professional navigator, the ship’s eyes and ears, the captain’s highly skilled manager of things nautical. Cook very soon left his frigate to be the master of *Pembroke*, a new sixty-four-gun ship of the line under Captain John Simcoe. Destiny now awaited Cook in Canada.

In eastern Canada, along the St. Lawrence, he learned the finer techniques of surveying by land and water. He was one of the Royal Navy masters who surveyed and buoyed the St. Lawrence channel below Quebec for the invasion fleet. Here he followed in the steps of a long French tradition of mastery of astronomical and nautical surveying at home and abroad. Quebec captured, Cook was appointed master in the seventy-gun *Northumberland* and entered on a life of routine surveys and chartmaking, honing and mastering his skills in this art. Briefly he surveyed in Newfoundland waters after the recapture of St. John’s in 1762. The thirty-four-year-old master now returned to England with numerous drafts of charts and observations, a man of “Genius and Capacity . . . well qualified,” thought his Captain Alexander, Lord Colville, “for the Work he has performed, and for greater Undertakings of the same kind.”

Surveying Newfoundland and the other newly acquired provinces became vital to British trade and dominance in eastern Canada. Between 1763 and 1767, Cook led the Newfoundland survey and for most of the time commanded his own schooner, the *Grenville*, but still as a master. His charts of the southern and western sides of the island were

the finest anywhere in the world. Few contemporaries now surpassed him: the world, literally, could be his on the strength of his Canadian work.

And so it was. In April 1768 Cook, the master, became Mr. Cook, lieutenant, commanding HMS *Endeavour* commissioned to convey persons to the southward for discovery and to observe the transit of Venus at the newly discovered island of Tahiti. But his was no great ship of the line, not even a regular navy vessel. *Endeavour* was a "cat-built" vessel, or simply a "cat," a ship of "narrow stem, projecting quarters," and "a deep waist, and having no ornamental figure on the prow," a vessel built usually "remarkably strong." She had, too, a shallow draught and was, in short, of exactly the same type as an east-coast collier. Cook was at home. *Endeavour* was a workhorse, a vessel chosen for strength and capacity. In her between 1768 and 1771 Cook charted the difficult New Zealand waters and the east coast of Australia--almost losing his "cat" on the Great Barrier Reef in June 1770. He also found and surveyed the Society Islands, sailed through Torres Strait, and advanced man's ability to find longitude accurately by lunar observations and to survive on long voyages.

A second world voyage, this time planned more exclusively by Captain Cook himself, was inevitable and it took place between 1772 and 1775 in the sloops *Resolution* and *Adventure*. Cook this time chose his own ships; but with all the Navy's vessels available he still opted for colliers, for their capacity, strength, and shallow draught. The two vessels chosen, both built in Cook's apprenticeship port of Whitby, were the *Marquis of Granby* (462 tons with a beam of thirty-five feet and lowerdeck of 111 feet) and the *Marquis of Rockingham* (340 tons and corresponding measurements of ninety-seven and twenty-eight feet). The first became *Resolution* (almost 100 tons larger than *Endeavour*) and the second *Adventure*, commanded by Captain Tobias Furneaux. *Adventure* proved a less satisfactory ship with a less venturesome commander and, during the voyage, lost Cook off New Zealand and sailed home one year ahead of him bearing the islander Omai.

Cook's own second voyage was his most epic and in discovery his most innovative. He mastered mechanical chronometry; defined the bulk of southern Polynesia and recognized eastern Melanesia; added tropical, subtropical, and Antarctic islands to the map and closely circumnavigated ice-bound Antarctica, coming to within respectable distance of solid land. This voyage was also the most highly scientific.

Something, however, remained, not in the South Pacific but in the North: the age-old problem of a northern passage around Canada. On

his third and fatal voyage Cook set out to resolve this problem and the vexed geography of western Canada, Alaska, and the Bering Strait. On the way he discovered the Hawaiian group. For the second time Cook sailed in *Resolution*, although she now leaked more noticeably, but took a new consort, *Discovery*, the smallest of Cook's ships and another sound collier with all the desired known qualities.

As in the south so in the north was Cook thwarted by impassable ice. But he gave us the published outline and coast of Alaska and the possibility that became British Columbia. Here there was no detailed chart making, only reconnaissance: the objective was Alaska and the Bering Strait, not Vancouver Island, Nootka, or anywhere else in modern British Columbia.

Storm and necessity brought Cook to the province. He needed shelter, refreshment and repairs. He missed in the night the Strait of Juan de Fuca, found an indentation he called Hope Bay on Vancouver Island--which he thought part of the main--but was attracted into Nootka Sound and there found his anchorage, not an ideal one, at Ship Cove (now Resolution Cove) on the seaward end of Bligh Island. Here they were trading with and having concourse with the Indians in all manner of useful and disastrous ways from the end of March until near the end of April 1778. The timber saved Cook's vessel, the *Resolution*, but the wild weather prolonged his stay. After Nootka, Cook was mostly out of sight of land, sailing past the northern part of Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands and so on to Alaskan waters.

Cook's exploration of the Northwest Coast challenged the Spanish and the Russians; it brought, too, British and American ships and entrepreneurs in quest of furs.

But, stricken on the second voyage with a vitamin B deficiency and intestinal infection, Cook, like many of his men and officers, was a sick, sometimes sullen and less iron man on the third voyage. He raged, he swore, he lost control more and more. His underlings took more liberties with people and property. Cook, in worse health than he would admit--perhaps he had the first symptoms of tuberculosis--withdrew more and more and became uncharacteristically wanton and took risks.

For these and other reasons more complex he died in Hawaii. Europe and England made a myth and martyr of him. But he was, in truth, an uncommon man risen with competence and help from a humble origin.

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