

REVIEW ESSAYS

Captain Cook Revisited

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J.C. Beaglehole (ed.). *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery*. 3 volumes in 4 books, plus portfolio. Reprint of Hakluyt Society publication. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. Vol. I: *The Voyage of the Endeavour, 1768-1771*; cclxxxiv + 696 pp., introduction, notes, appendices, 21 maps, 26 black-and-white illustrations; Vol. II: *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure, 1772-1775*; clxx + 1028 pp., introduction, notes, appendices, 20 maps, 62 black-and-white illustrations. Vol. III (in two parts): *The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery, 1776-1780*; Part 1: ccxxiv + 720 pp., introduction, notes, appendices, 16 maps, 65 black-and-white illustrations; Part 2: viii + 928 pp., notes, appendices, 2 maps, 11 black-and-white illustrations. Portfolio: *Charts and Views Drawn by Cook and his Officers*; viii + 68 pp., 68 charts and views. £695, US \$1200, cloth; ISBN 0-85115-744-0.

It has been nearly half a century since the first of the four-volume set of Captain Cook's journals appeared under the editorship of J.C. Beaglehole. Since this recent reissue has no additional editorial comments, given the time elapsed it is reasonable to ask how well the work holds up in light of modern scholarly criticism. It is a pleasure to report that from the perspective of the past decade and one-half of scholarship on Cook, Beaglehole's edition remains relevant. In the vast majority of cases he provides the base upon which others build.

As for the production of the journals themselves, two aspects need consideration. The first is the task of reproducing what Cook and his shipmates wrote over the course of three voyages, and the second is interpreting those writings. For comparison's sake, the other long-term modern editorial venture that comes to mind is that of Robert Latham and William Mathews, who spent virtually all of their working lives on publishing the nine volumes of the well-known seventeenth-century English diarist, Samuel Pepys. Despite the massive size of the Pepys undertaking, the Cook project was more daunting. Unlike the editorial work on Pepys, who left one acknowledged version of his diaries, just establishing a written text of the Cook journals for all three voyages was an impressive piece of detective work. To take only the records of the *Endeavour* voyage as an example, Beaglehole had to track the journal's authenticity through several generations of a family named Smith. It is highly unlikely that any current scholar will undertake the task again. Insofar as anything can be called definitive, Beaglehole's version of the journals fits the definition. Along these same lines, the research that went into every aspect of these voyages, whether it was discovering the background for the use of the marine chronometer or the customs of the Tahitian Arioi cult, far surpasses what most scholars are prepared to do to produce a publication.

If the current reprint has an editorial weakness, it has nothing to do with Beaglehole. Accompanying the four volumes of journals with their modern charts and maps is a separate portfolio of the charts and views drawn by Cook and his officers, edited by R.A. Skelton. Unfortunately, several items in this reprint are under-exposed and viewing them is difficult.

If Beaglehole's editorial work remains without equal, his interpretations are not as likely to remain unchallenged. For reasons a large number of readers of this review could undoubtedly mention, we live in a cynical age. Unlike Beaglehole, what current historian would leave the financial benefits Cook gained from his voyages virtually unexplored? When the journals first appeared, it was considered legitimate for academics to have heroes; Samuel Eliot Morison's Columbus was such a man. So was Beaglehole's Cook. The accomplishments of the three Pacific voyages are so impressive, and Cook's central role in their success so clear, that it was natural to emphasize the positive aspects and to spend less time on the negative ones. In the first voyage, the way in which Beaglehole deals with the grounding of *Endeavour* on the Great Barrier Reef shows the accentuation of the positive. While Cook spends over twenty printed pages relating it and its consequences in his journal, Beaglehole says virtually nothing about the incident in his introduction but rather concentrates on the mapping of Endeavour Straits separating Australia from New Guinea. Yet that work could take place only after Cook worked his ship free of the Great Barrier Reef and repaired it.

Current-day perspectives show up in other ways when examining what happened in the aftermath of the grounding. While Cook supervised the repair of *Endeavour*, various members of the ship's company explored the surrounding countryside in northern Australia and encountered both human and animal life. Most notably, as Mark Ellis points out in his essay "Tails of Wonder," in Margarette Lincoln (ed.), *Science and Exploration in the Pacific: European Voyages to the Southern Oceans in the Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1998), they encountered "kangaroos." At least that is what the British thought the aboriginals in the area called the animals. Ellis points out that a word sounding like kangaroo may mean to the indigenous people in that part of Australia "I don't understand." What this article illustrates is that, with a couple of noteworthy exceptions, Beaglehole rarely focussed on the cultural clashes and misunderstandings that are very much the focus of current scholarship about Cook. In the same volume with Ellis, David Turnbull has an article entitled "Cook and Tupaia" which explores Cook's inability to comprehend how a Society Islander named Tupaia who accompanied him on *Endeavour* could possibly navigate a ship across the open ocean when he lacked a scientific frame of reference. Perhaps David MacKay summed it all up best in the essay "Exploring the Pacific, Exploring James Cook," in Alan Frost and Jane Samson (eds.), *Pacific Empires: Essays in Honour of Glyndwr Williams* (Melbourne, 1999). MacKay points out that from the Pacific Northwest to Australia, in virtually every location Cook touched and opened up to European contact, the indigenous people are still trying to cope with the often unpleasant consequences of his explorations. For them Cook is no hero.

If modern scholars have moved off in directions that Beaglehole did not, he also left gaps in his own research that are puzzling. The first involves people and the second, custom. While Beaglehole spends a good deal of time in his introductions and notes on the Tahitian chief who finally took the name of Pomare, he fails to note a personality change between his earlier and later careers. Whereas on Cook's second voyage Pomare wanted the ship's cannon fired, later observers such as Bliqh and Vancouver noted that firearms frightened

him, despite his desire to acquire them. Then there was Pomare's wife, Itia or Iddeah. While it is undoubtedly true that during Cook's visits to Tahiti other women played a more significant role than Iddeah, by the time William Bligh arrived on *Bounty* she had displaced all the others as an object of European attention. Her intelligence and, unlike her husband, skill with firearms dominated the visitors' evaluations. Although Beaglehole looked forward to the time when Pomare would control much of the Society Islands, he never discussed Iddeah and her role in her husband's success.

Likewise, although the *taio* custom receives passing mention, Beaglehole does not go into detail about it. A variety of sources do, including George Hamilton, a naval surgeon who left a memoir of the ill-fated 1790 voyage of *Pandora* to arrest *Bounty* mutineers (*A Voyage Round the World in His Majesty's Frigate Pandora* [reprint, Sydney, NSW, 1998]). In this work he indicated that when a Tahitian selected someone as a *taio*, the two individuals in essence swapped identities. That process gave the *taio* all rights and privileges within his adopted family held by that individual's namesake – as Hamilton reported, quite frankly and humorously, especially sexual ones. It is fair to say that Beaglehole's analysis of the relationship between British sailors and scientists and the Tahitians would have benefited from further research into the *taio* custom.

One of the topics toward which Beaglehole did turn his attention was disease. Here he demonstrated broad interest. He spent a good deal of time discussing what diseases the Europeans brought or did not bring to the Pacific, and the impact each had upon the crew, especially such vitamin deficiency conditions as scurvy. This interest is a reflection of Cook's own concerns. As his journals indicate, Cook very much wanted to mitigate the spread of European diseases, especially venereal ones, among the Pacific peoples, and he had equal, if not greater, concerns about keeping his own men healthy and functional. Building upon where Beaglehole left off, Francis Cuppage's book, *James Cook and the Conquest of Scurvy* (Westport, CT, 1994), works forward and backward in history from Cook's time to examine the treatment of scurvy on both land and sea. What Cuppage points out is that during these lengthy voyages of exploration, Cook simultaneously used a wide variety of experimental remedies, ranging from carrot marmalade to sauerkraut. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that Cook really could not afford the luxury of experimenting scientifically with each potential cure to see what worked, since if he guessed wrong he had sick crew on his hands. The use of this "broad-spectrum approach," along with frequent gathering of local fruits and vegetables, meant that although scurvy did periodically make an appearance, the individuals involved were "cured" in short order. Beaglehole's pride in Cook's scurvy-free crew is entirely justified.

Ironically enough, about a decade after Beaglehole died, James Watt wrote an essay for J. Watt, E.J. Freeman and W.F. Bynum (eds.), *Starving Sailors: The Influence of Nutrition upon Naval and Maritime History* (Greenwich, 1981), in which he made a rather convincing case that Cook himself had contracted a parasitic infection from eating raw fish on his second voyage. As a result, Watt contended that Cook's health and judgement were seriously impaired on his third and final voyage. He went on to argue that it is not beyond the realm of possibility that this disease was a contributing factor in the ill-considered series of judgements that led to Cook's murder by the Hawaiians on Valentine's Day of 1779.

Of all the historical controversies that have surrounded Captain Cook in recent years, the one about his death has been among the most prominent. Two figures dominate this discussion: Marshall Sahlins, whose book of essays, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985).

acted as the stimulus for Gananath Obeyesekere's book, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (Princeton, 1992). Their debate hinges on the question of how the Hawaiians viewed Cook. Was he some form of divinity associated with the god Lono, or was he a warrior chief of a distant tribe? What is seldom mentioned in this discussion is that Beaglehole gave a rather thorough evaluation of this question in the introduction to the final volume of the journals. But he laid out a case for both sides and did not take a stand. In the current discussion, the disputants definitely take a position. Sahlins puts forth the case that the Hawaiians had reason to see Cook as a person filled with divinity. Obeyesekere argues the contrary – that the Hawaiians were rational human beings who knew the difference between men and gods. Especially after Marshall Sahlins published a rebuttal with extensive presentation of Hawaiian material in *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago, 1995), the argument appears to tilt very much in his favour. Yet, as is true of so many historical debates, declaring a victor is always dangerous. In the introduction to Alex Calder, Jonathan Lamb and Bridgett Orr (eds.), *Voyages and Beaches: Pacific Encounters 1769 to 1840*, the editors note that the information on which Sahlins based his case is derived from British sailors, who may or may not have understood what they saw and heard in Hawaii, and from Hawaiians whose views were recorded after the Christian missionaries arrived. It is rather like the situation faced by those who want to reconstruct pre-conquest Aztec history from post-conquest information. Perhaps the heart of the problem is best summed up by Greg Denning in *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge, 1992), where he observes that "myth and common sense answer different questions."

The mention of Bligh leads to another significant aspect of Cook history. So many of the people with whom he was associated on his voyages are individuals who have attracted considerable historical attention in their own right. The most obvious are William Bligh, Sir Joseph Banks and George Vancouver, but this review essay on Cook is not the place to examine thoroughly the current state of scholarship on them. What does serve this review is to look at some of the "lesser" figures connected with Cook's voyages whose lives and works are now the subject of study. They include Daniel Solander. Edward Duyker has written a thorough biography (*Nature's Argonaut: Daniel Solander 1733-1782* [Carlton South, VIC, 1998]) of this Swedish naturalist who was one of the non-naval people accompanying Sir Joseph Banks on the first voyage. Also worth mentioning is Alan Frost's reprint of a work by James Mario Matra, an American-born visionary and troublemaker who also went on the first voyage, subsequently became a British diplomat and made proposals for settling Australia (Alan Frost [ed.], *The Precarious Life of James Mario Matra* [Carlton South, VIC, 1995]). Yet the two men who have recently attracted the most attention are the German born father-and-son team who went on the second voyage, Johann Reinhold and George Forster.

Beaglehole goes into considerable detail in the introduction to the journal for the voyage of Resolution and *Adventure* about the publications dispute between Johann Reinhold Forster on the one side and various individuals representing Cook's interests on the other. This is not some disagreement about the presentation of obscure scientific theories. Books about exploration in the eighteenth century were generally quite profitable. Upon their return to England, the Admiralty collected logs and journals of all participants on the voyages of exploration specifically to prevent poaching on the publication preserve of the expedition

officially-sanctioned version by Cook appeared. Unfortunately for the nearly bankrupt Germans, their version did not sell nearly as well as they had hoped, and ultimately they fled England to escape their creditors.

The University of Hawaii Press has published both of the Forster works: *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World* (Honolulu, 1996), edited by Nicholas Thomas, Harriet Guest and Michael Dettelbach, and *A Voyage Round the World* (Honolulu, 1999), edited by Nicholas Thomas and Oliver Berghof. The first has separate introductory essays covering topics that range from problems with production of the original work to the elder Forster's views on women. While it is generally agreed by the editors that both Forsters played a part in each book, the father is given the predominant part in *Observations* and the son in *Voyage*. While Nicholas Thomas feels that criticisms of Johann Reinhold's difficult personality have been exaggerated, he nonetheless tells a tale of successive patrons abandoning the man after disagreements. Other than commentary about his subservience to his father, George rarely gets the same negative treatment.

What comes through quite clearly in the essays about the Forsters, and from their own writings, is that they absorbed the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and pushed it to what was then considered radical extremes. If there ever were two people who believed in John Locke's concept that all human beings are born with the so-called *tabula rosa*, the blank tablet of the mind, this set of father and son were them. Nicholas Thomas' essay on comparative ethnology in their work and Harriet Guest's on Johann Reinhold's views on women demonstrate that the Forsters applied Locke's ideas to all the various cultures they found in the Pacific. These European observers believed that under the right set of cultural circumstances all people, regardless of race or gender, were "perfectible." While clearly the Forsters' view of what constituted perfection was based in their own culture, they had read enough Rousseau not to claim that the state of affairs in Europe was anything even near perfection. Like so many visitors to Tahiti, they believed that before its contact with the outside world it was most likely very near earthly perfection. According to Harriet Guest's reading of *Observations*, the elder Forster believed that Tahitian women played a major role in "perfecting" or "civilizing" the men, in large measure because the women did not limit their activities to the private sphere of home and children. Most likely even in a period when her influence had declined, it was the mistitled "queen" of Tahiti, who the Europeans called Oberea, that Johann Reinhold had in mind, along with Pomare's two sisters. Given such views, it should come as no surprise to discover that in the wake of the French Revolution, George Forster was one of the most ardent advocates of its equalizing principles.

What the Forsters wanted to do with words was to give Europeans a picture of the life led by the people who participated in the cultures of the Pacific. In the days before photography, there was only one way to represent visually what Cook and his company saw on their voyages – through drawings and paintings. While many officers in the British navy, as well as their land-bound gentlemanly counterparts, including Banks, had at least some training in sketching, artistic talent was not evenly distributed throughout their ranks. Being well aware of that situation, the people planning Cook's voyages saw to it that individuals with professional artistic skills went on each of the three voyages. On the first voyage of *Endeavour*, Sydney Parkinson played a major role. D.C. Carr produced a volume of his work called *Sydney Parkinson: Artist of Cook's Endeavour Voyage* (Canberra, 1983). In the introduction Carr explained the problems with which Parkinson was faced. The key one was

change, either of position of the subject or from living to dead. It was no easy job to convince humans from another culture to hold still long enough to sketch them. The first views of kangaroos were certainly fleeting, as were those of free-swimming fish. With respect to the animals, their answer was to kill them and then sketch or paint the remains. Especially in the case of fish, this procedure led to other problems because the dead ones change colour. Even with plants, keeping them alive, or at least life-like, is not always possible. Nonetheless, among the colour pictures Carr reproduces, it is the plants that carry away the honours as realistic visual representations.

On the final voyage of *Resolution* and *Discovery* John Webber fulfilled Parkinson's role. Eleanor Nordyke, in collaboration with James Mattison, has reproduced the engravings of his work under the title *Pacific Images: Views from Captain Cook's Third Voyage* (Honolulu, 1999). While the book is useful and engaging, it does not have the emotional impact on viewers of Parkinson's works.

When it comes to reproducing and analyzing the art work for all of Cook's voyages, and, indeed, the art work of Europeans in their early years in the Pacific, Bernard Smith's name goes to the head of the list. Beaglehole used some of his early articles when preparing the introductions to the Cook journals. Since that time, in co-editorship with Rüdiger Joppien, he has produced a multi-volume work entitled *The Art of Captain Cook's Voyages* (4 vols., New Haven, 1985-1988). What is equally important, Smith has turned out works of interpretation of the art produced by the people who went with Cook. Two works are particularly noteworthy: *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New Haven, 1985) and *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (New Haven, 1992). What catches Smith's attention is that the images of the indigenous people in particular often do not look life-like to the modern eye. This situation has little to do with the talent of the various artists who travelled with Cook. Since these individuals worked in the age of the mature Joshua Reynolds rather than the mature J.M.W. Turner, it is safe to say that they wanted to reproduce life-like, if somewhat idealized, images of what they saw. What Smith points out is that these people did not travel to the Pacific with Locke's *tabula rosa*. Far from it: they went with prior training on the "proper" European way to sketch and paint, with European literary foundations to their philosophy of art, and with experience as working artists painting European subjects. What faced them on the voyages of exploration were sights almost totally beyond their realm of experience. These artists were not cameras, and their work reflects their very human efforts to incorporate the unfamiliar into their artistic vocabulary.

Perhaps that is the best way to characterize not only Cook but also Beaglehole. They tried to open up a world that their audience most likely had never seen, and certainly twentieth-century writers, even those who have seen the places where the adventures took place, were happy to follow the same path. Whether it was in botany, zoology, medicine, navigation, ethnography, art or biography, Cook and Beaglehole laid the foundations that made these undertakings possible. Even from the perspective of our very different age, they did so very well indeed.