

Captain James Cook, R.N.

Basil Greenhill

The following Address was given by the author during the Cook Commemoration Service, Westminster Abbey, London, February 11, 1979.

As you took your seats in the Abbey this afternoon you each found in your Order of Service a brief account of the life of Captain James Cook, Royal Navy, whose death, two hundred years ago next Wednesday, we are gathered to commemorate.

So I am not going to recapitulate the chronology of his remarkable life, which encompassed a progress from 18th century farm boy to Post-Captain in the Royal Navy, Fellowship of the Royal Society and international fame.

I am going instead to present two aspects of James Cook's career not covered in the account you have before you. These aspects are: first, the real nature of his achievement, and second, to use an old-fashioned phrase, what manner of man he was.

The achievement is the easier matter to deal with, but it requires some explanation of the contemporary background.

When James Cook set out on his first exploring voyage in 1768, a third of the earth's surface, the Pacific Ocean and that part of the Southern Ocean which lies beyond it, was virtually unknown. It was widely believed that the Southern Ocean contained a continent stretching far into the temperate zone of the Pacific, a possible second North America for European man to settle and to develop. The west coast of Australia had been sighted many times and a small fragment of New Zealand sighted once. Both might be parts of this hypothetical Southern continent. Almost nothing was known of the north west coast of North America and it was still believed that there might be a navigable passage through the continent between the Atlantic and the Pacific, the so-called North West Passage.

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But to explore the oceans to find the answers to those mysteries posed technological difficulties in the 18th century as great as those which were to be posed by the moon landings exactly two centuries later. The exploration of the Pacific required a ship to operate at extreme range from any dockyard or base, beyond any hope of rescue or support, for, once that ocean was entered, a ship's crew was more isolated than any astronaut on the moon today.

But the naval ships of the period were complex, fragile structures built of wood and rigged with natural fibres. They frequently needed major repairs. But as they were deep-hulled, with curved underwater bodies, they could not sit upright on the mud of a tidal river and so could not be laid aground for maintenance work in some creek on the other side of the earth. They had to be docked in sophisticated and properly equipped yards.

Moreover, because on a voyage of two or three years away from all contact with civilisation it was probable that up to three-quarters of the crew would die of dietary deficiency diseases, notably scurvy, from accidents and from illnesses which came from filth and overcrowding, the ships had to be grossly overmanned.

To operate effectively, even to survive, on such a voyage at extreme range, a ship's company had to be a close knit team. But the methods of management current among naval officers of the day did not make for this kind of organisation.

Once you were in the Pacific 200 years ago there was a yet greater obstacle to successful exploration. This was the problem of finding where you were in the ocean and expressing your position with precision, in scientific terms of latitude and longitude. Since the late 15th century the navigator had been able to find his latitude, his distance north or south of the equator, to within a few miles by astronomical observation. But a method of measuring a ship's longitude at sea, her east/west position on the globe, had been evolved only four years before Cook sailed on his first voyage. As this method demanded great observational skill and mathematical ability, very few navigators could use it. The method had been developed after almost a century of research at the Old Royal Observatory, now part of the National Maritime Museum.

James Cook was one of the few navigators in the world at that time who had mastered "lunar distances" as this complex method was called. He demonstrated its utility beyond all doubt on his first voyage. On his second and third voyages he proved the reliability, the even greater accuracy, and the relative simplicity, of the newly developed chronometer for determining longitude at sea.

This difficulty in determining position on the earth's surface had meant that all explorers before Cook were faced with a double problem. They did not know with any degree of accuracy where any previously reported land was, east and west, and they did not know where they were themselves. When they stumbled on new land they passed these problems on to the next generation.

So much for the background. Now what was the achievement?

It was James Cook's achievement that when, after three great voyages spread over ten years, he was killed in Hawaii, the true face of the Pacific was known in detail.

He had proved that there was no temperate southern continent, but an Antarctic vastness the nature of which he suspected. He had proved that there was no practical passage from the North Pacific to the North Atlantic. He had placed New Zealand accurately and charted its coasts. He determined the limits of Australia and first charted its east coast. He had seen hundreds of islands, points of land in the vastness, and plotted their positions accurately. Cook had overwhelmingly demonstrated that it was now possible to know, virtually all the time, where a ship was, in scientific terms of east and west as well as north or south, and that it was practical now to position new discoveries and old continents reliably, and to return to the discoveries with little difficulty.

All this had been achieved with the minimum loss of human life, and without the death of a single man from scurvy, in conditions, of course, of extremes of heat and cold, of exposure, over-crowding, hardwork, lack of entertainment, monotony of diet and of continuous violent motion, quite inconceivable to us today. These were, as one of the seamen put it, "the longest and hardest voyages that was ever made".

They remain so.

And these voyages had been made in standard, rugged, shallow draught, merchant sailing ships, very probably selected by James Cook himself, for he started as a merchant seaman. These ships had shown themselves able to be operated without any kind of sophisticated outside support, literally for years on end. The world was not slow to read the lesson. If these ships could sail for so long and penetrate the Antarctic and the Arctic, any well equipped and competently manned merchant vessel could go to the temperature parts of the Pacific, or anywhere else in the world and collect or deliver her cargo and return safely. Before very long this was just what was happening and, with the concurrent industrial revolution, the patterns of the trade routes of the modern world began to appear.

Now what manner of man was he who achieved all this?

He was above all the first and the greatest professional scientific explorer of the oceans and, as has been said so often, a supreme example of the right man in the right place at the right time. As his great biographer, Professor John Beaglehole, wrote, "His competence changed the face of the world".

Although his writings, and the drawings and paintings of the artists on the expeditions, gave the western world its first view of the Pacific and had great repercussions on contemporary thought, in all the tens of thousands of words he wrote in his journals, James Cook revealed very little of himself directly. But from the brief accounts of his contemporaries, from official records, from the nature in detail of what he achieved, and from reading between the lines, and we can find out a fair amount by reading between the lines, with the aid of his biographers some impressions can be formed.

From complex causes, perhaps connected with his own origins, he had attitudes to life and work which were new to the sea service at the time and which went a long way to make his achievement possible. He believed in the value of what he did, and it was quite a new thing to believe in the value of

of scientific exploration of this kind, as opposed to other, immediately more spectacular and financially rewarding, forms of service. He believed his work should be done to the utmost of his enormous capacity. He cared about the welfare of his people, as he called his crews, not only as units on whose efficiency the success of the whole enterprise rested, but as fellow human beings, and these were not common attitudes at this time.

He was an almost incredibly thorough worker; he not only discovered, he surveyed meticulously, he observed and recorded, and he foresaw something of the impact of western civilisation on the peoples he encountered and, as an humanitarian, he was concerned as to what was going to happen to them.

He was not an innovator of scientific theory. To quote John Beaglehole again, "the genius of the matter of fact was the genius of the practical application of science". He was so often the first man to do things and by doing them superbly he pushed forward man's knowledge, not only of the world but of the universe.

He reveals almost nothing to us, two centuries later, of his religious beliefs. But if the service of God involves the disinterested development of unique talents to their utmost limits there can rarely have been a more faithful servant.

Only once or twice in his own writings does he really show himself in simple, human terms and it is worth quoting a passage, written at one of the turning points of the voyages, for what it tells of his observations, his style and his approach to life:

A little after 4 AM we perceived the Clouds to the South near the horizon to be of an unusual Snow white brightness which denounced our approach to field ice, soon after, it was seen from the Mast-head and at 8 o'Clock we were close to the edge of it which extended East and West in a straight line far beyond our sight; as appear'd by the brightness of the horizon;

In this field we counted Ninety Seven Ice Hills or Mountains, many of them vastly large . . . I will not say it was impossible anywhere to get in among this Ice, but I will assert that the mere attempting of it would be a very dangerous enterprise and what I believe no man in my situation would have thought of. *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, was not sorry at meeting with this interruption, as it in some measure relieved us from the dangers and hardships, Inseparable with the Navigation of the Southern Polar regions.* Since therefore we could not proceed one Inch farther South, no other reason need be assigned for our Tacking and stretching back to the North, being at that time in the Latitude of 71 degrees 10 minutes South, Longitude 106 degrees 54 minutes West.

Now, no other ship, even today, has ever been so far south in this part of the Antarctic.

No other explorer in history has ever achieved so much or explored so much of the earth's surface or had such profound and lasting effects on subsequent developments.

There are many memorials to James Cook, here in London, at Whitby, in Australia, in New Zealand, in Canada, in the United States in Alaska—statues, plaques and museum galleries and, of course, a whole library of books.

But there is one memorial we all see, almost every day, in one form or another, somewhere or other.

It is the map of the world which he completed.