

James Cook in Historical Perspective

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It is part of the Australian character today that we are drawn to exploring the world, to adventure overseas, to see new lands, new customs, new people. Australians make some three million journeys overseas each year. Our peripatetic tendencies may well be traced back to our abiding admiration for Captain Cook and childhood memories of the story of his great adventures¹ that are part of our national treasure. Some contemporary views of this great navigator have sought to reduce the historical significance of Cook's achievements, but those achievements are factual, historically verifiable and irreducible. Captain Cook remains a true hero and his courage, perseverance and adherence to duty continue to inspire Australians who read his Journals.

Present-day Portuguese historians credit Mondoca (1522) and Sequeira (1525) as the first Europeans to discover Australia. Seventeenth century European explorers, Torres, Jansz, Hartog, Cartensz, Tasman, Dampier and Vlamingh, sighted Australia and charted parts of the coast line. Accounts of shipwrecks, of forced "landings" on Australian soil included castaways Pelsaert, Brooke and the Vergulde Draeck survivors. Yet, Cook achieved more than these, for his meticulous cartography separated definitively the island continent of Australia from New Zealand, New Guinea and the mythical Great South Land.

Some historians such as Geoffrey Irwin believe that the first European landing on Australian soil is insignificant considering that Greater Australia, the Pleistocene continent of Australia and New Guinea, was colonised 40,000 years before.² Other historians such as Paul Carter dismiss Cook's hero status as "colonizers' history", claiming that this kind of history is "associated with imperialism—for who are more liable to charges of unlawful usurpation and constitutional illegitimacy than the founders of colonies?"³ He ameliorates this harsh criticism, however, by acknowledging that Cook's accurate journals and precision maps "embodied an attitude essential to the colonization of Australia", a foundation model for later Australian explorers.⁴

Perhaps Cook's popular accreditation for the discovery of Australia is best understood in that sense of discovery, the moment of illumination, when a nebulous image comes into perfect focus. The Ancient Greeks' theory of a southern land, *Terra Australis*, appeared on Mercator's 1569 map as *Continens australis*, a land mass many times the real size of Australia. Other maps of the time showed New Guinea and New

¹ My first memories of Captain Cook are from two old children's histories that belonged to my father: "The Australia Book" by Eve Pownall, illustrated by Margaret Senior published by John Sands and "A Voyage to The South Seas" Pictorial Social Studies circa 1950s.

² Irwin, Geoffrey: *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific*, 1992, Cambridge University

³ Carter, Paul: *The Road to Botany Bay*, 1987, Faber and Faber Ltd pp.xvi-xx

⁴ *ibid* p.33

Zealand co-joined with Australia.⁵ Captain Cook “discovered” the true shape of the island continent by circumnavigating the islands of New Zealand, charting the east coast of Australia and verifying Torres Strait. By mapping these missing features, Cook resolved the ancient enigma. This mysterious land, imperfectly represented, that had intrigued and baffled Europeans for years, was reduced to true size by Cook and forever set in its precise geographical position in the Pacific and Great Southern Oceans.

On Cook’s three great voyages, he travelled over 120,000 miles, circumnavigated the world twice, and established sailing routes to Australia. Cook crisscrossed the Pacific, located numerous island groups including Hawaii and New Caledonia, charted long stretches of North American coastline, penetrated Bering Strait and surmised accurately that there was no navigable North-West Passage⁶. Being the first man to cross the Antarctic Circle (crossing it three times), Cook concluded that any land in “the Southern Polar regions” was perpetually icebound and inhospitable: there was no Great South Land. In January 1774, at the highest Southern latitude 71° 10’ any ship had ever reached, he wrote in his Journal:

*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 men to go...*⁷

This spirit of courageous exploration still sustains Cook’s heroic stature. Young Australians today, yearning for overseas travel, can warm to Cook’s sentiments expressed in a letter to his friend, Sir Hugh Palliser: Cook explains why he must reject a sinecure and embark on his third voyage,

*...a few months ago the whole southern hemisphere was hardly big enough for me, and now I am going to be confined within the limits of Greenwich Hospital, which are far too small for an active mind like mine...*⁸

Cook understood the dangers ahead but chose to risk all for the deep satisfaction of new discoveries.

Cook’s explorations were part of the new era of scientific research in 18th century Britain. He assimilated and put into practice much of the new mathematics and science of his day. By proving the accuracy of the Harrison chronometer, for example, he settled the immense problem of calculating longitude. For his achievements—navigational, geographical and scientific—Cook was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, the most prestigious scientific body of the time. He was awarded the Copley

⁵ Lister, Raymond: *Antique Maps & their Cartographers*, 1970, G. Bell & Sons.

⁶ ‘...there can be little doubt that there is a northern communication of some sort by sea between this Ocean and Baffin’s Bay, but it may be effectually shut up against shipping by ice and other impediments.’ From Cook’s Journals, cited in Stamp, Tom and Cordelia: *James Cook Maritime Scientist*, 1976, Caedmon of Whitby p.132

⁷ Cited in Badger, G. M.: *Captain Cook: Navigator and Scientist*, 1970, Australian National University Press p.132

⁸ *ibid* p. 104

Gold Medal⁹ for two scientific papers, one on the tides on the east coast of New Holland, and the other on scurvy and the maintenance of health on long voyages.

Returning from his second voyage, Cook found himself a celebrity in British society. An account of his first voyage, published in his absence, had become a best-seller. Boswell, in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, recorded his impressions of Cook in 1776:

*I gave him an account of a conversation which had passed between me and Captain Cook, the day before at dinner at Sir John Pringle's, and he was much pleased with the conscientious accuracy of that celebrated circumnavigator, who set me right as to many of the exaggerated accounts given by Dr Hawkesworth of his Voyages. I told him that while I was with the Captain, I caught the enthusiasm of curiosity and adventure, and felt a strong inclination to go with him on his next voyage.*¹⁰

Cook's voyages captured the imagination of a nation. His leadership abilities, his initiative, discipline and courage were qualities especially valued in 18th century British society. Honour was readily given to those who risked their lives on dangerous sea voyages for scientific and geographic exploration, and for expanding and resourcing the British Empire.

Over the years, new Australians also could feel a special empathy with Captain Cook. Many migrants, leaving family and familiar surroundings, have struggled to find the same courage that enabled Cook to travel far from home. Cook's humble beginnings in Yorkshire, his self-education and remarkable ascent in his profession through resolve and hard work—these characteristics speak to young Australians today, just as they inspired young 19th century colonials to overcome poverty and class divisions in the building of this country.

Cook's remarkable rise from farm-worker's son to "illustrious navigator"¹¹, his success as a self-made man, honoured by academics of the Royal Society—these aspects of Cook's biography remain especially encouraging to young Australians who hold dear the qualities of independence, courage and endurance. In these qualities, Cook takes his rightful place in Australian history with the hard-working emancipists, the free settlers who pushed beyond the mountain barriers, the gold-seekers who made their stand at Eureka, and the laconic heroes at Gallipoli. It is in this tradition that Cook's hero status in Australian history remains unassailable.

⁹ This seems to have been an honour comparable to a Nobel Prize today but without the monetary rewards!

¹⁰ Boswell, James: *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 2, 1791, Folio Society p. 57

¹¹ Cited in Kitson, Arthur: *The Life of Captain Cook*, 1907 [online]

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