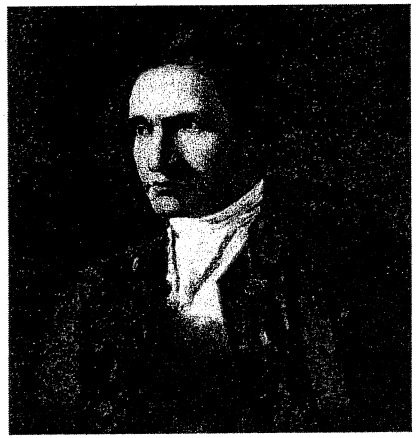


HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY | NEW YORK

Blue Latitudes

Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before

Tony Horwitz

Chapter 2

TAHITI:
Sic Transit Venus

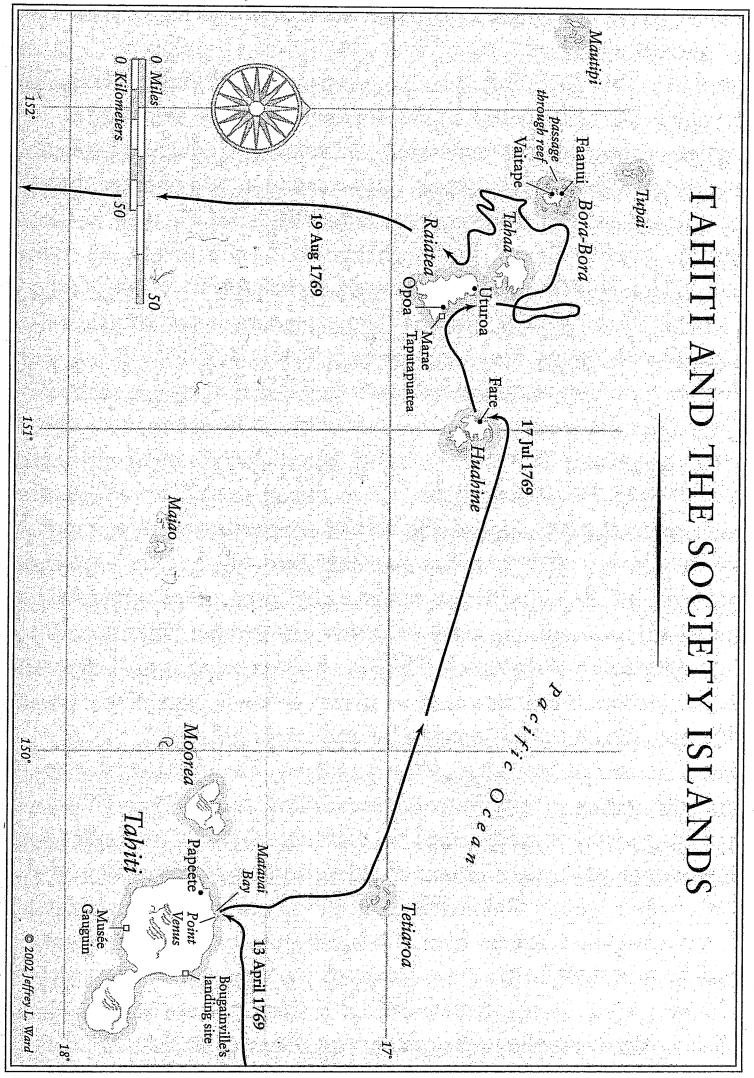
The alurements of disipation are more than equal to anything that can be conceived.

—CAPTAIN WILLIAM BLIGH, WRITING ABOUT TAHITI AFTER THE MUTINY ON THE *BOUNTY*

In late May 1768, two months before the *Endeavour*'s departure from England, a ship called the *Dolphin* anchored near the mouth of the Thames. Dispatched two years earlier on a voyage of discovery, the scurvy-racked vessel had found only one place of consequence: a mountainous isle in the South Pacific. The wondrous tales told of this island by the *Dolphin*'s crewmen, and by French sailors who visited soon after, stirred Western imaginations in ways that still shape our vision of the Pacific today.

The island was temperate and fertile, abounding in everything a man long at sea might dream of: fruit, fowl, fresh water, and females more enticing than any in the world, bare-legged and bare-breasted, with flowers garlanding their jet-black hair. The women lined the beach and tempted the English with "every lewd action they could think of," one crewman reported. It was a vision straight out of the Odyssey.

So was the scene that followed. Sailors coupled with native women on the beach, on the ship's deck, in huts along the shore. The English gave the women nails: highly prized metal that native men molded into fishhooks. Before long, the *Dolphin*'s sailors had pried so much iron from their ship that cleats loosened and two-thirds of the men had to



sleep on the deck, having removed the nails that held up their hammocks. Officers caught one sailor stealing nails and forced him to run the gauntlet, or sprint between two lines of men armed with whips. His mates barely flogged him, and they soon began giving women their shirts instead of nails.

Even the *Dolphin*'s sour, sick commander, Samuel Wallis, eventually succumbed. On his first trip ashore, islanders carried the captain to a hut where young women undressed and massaged him. Wallis found "great benefit" from "the chafing," as he called it, and allowed himself to be dressed in native cloth and carried by a chief's wife, a large, handsome woman whom Wallis christened "my Princess, or rather Queen." The enchanted captain named the island after King George and sailed off with embraces and "such tenderness of affection and grief, as filled both my heart and my eyes."

Ten months later, on another shore of the island, two French ships arrived under the command of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, a classicist and gentleman as well as a naval officer. "The young girl negligently allowed her loincloth to fall to the ground," he wrote of a woman who climbed aboard the ship, "and appeared to all eyes as Venus showed herself to the Phrygian shepherd. She had the Goddess's celestial form." A naturalist on board wrote even more rhapsodically about island lovemaking, much of which was public: "Here, modesty and prudery lose their tyranny. The act of procreation is an act of religion; its preludes are encouraged by the voices and songs of the assembled people, and its end is greeted by universal applause."

The French felt as though they'd walked into the pages of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Discourses* extolling "natural man," uncorrupted by society, were the rage of Parisian salons. "I thought I had been transported to the Garden of Eden," Bougainville wrote of the island's lush interior. "Restfulness, a quiet joy and all the semblances of happiness reign everywhere." Bougainville entertained islanders with a flute-and-violin concert, followed by fireworks. At the end of this ten-day idyll, Bougainville named the island "New Cythera," after the Greek isle where the love goddess Aphrodite emerged from the sea foam. "What a country! What a people!" he exclaimed.

Natives had their own name for the island: O Tahiti. This was

Cook's destination in 1768, and the paradise to which I planned to follow him after setting up base in Australia.

SYDNEY IS HOME to the world's best archive of rare books and manuscripts on Cook. It is also the hometown of my wife, Geraldine, who looked forward to living there with our son while I researched Cook and roamed the Pacific. She found us a row house with a view of the Sydney docks. We'd been there three days when a close friend from our previous stay in Sydney, Roger Williamson, appeared at the door carrying a bottle of wine in each hand. Like most males in Australia, Roger drank too much. Whenever I was with him, I did the same.

Over the first bottle, I shared my plan for traveling in Cook's wake. Over the second, Roger declared that he'd go with me. "I grew up in Yorkshire, like Cook," he said. "I understand the man."

"You'd be a bad influence."

"Very bad. That's the point."

Roger had spent his first twenty-six years in North Yorkshire, exactly as Cook had. His mother still lived in Whitby, the port from which Cook first sailed. Roger was also a skilled sailor who spent every free moment on the water.

"It's my trip," I told him. "I'd have to be captain."

"Fine. You can bend me over the boom and flog me. I like being beaten. I'm English."

"Okay," I said, pouring him another glass. "Free-associate. What do you think of when I say 'Captain Cook'?"

"Roast beef, silly wig, funny hat. All that grim-lipped, hunchbacked British sense of duty I came to Australia to escape." He paused. "Also the greatest sailor of all time. I'm an utter poltroon compared to Cook."

"And Tahiti?"

"Coconuts. Swaying hips. Grass skirts. Mostly to do with crumpet."

"Crumpet?"

"Sheilas. Or whatever you call them in America. Warm, willing flesh." Roger had recently separated from his wife and decamped to a dismal flat in downtown Sydney. Crumpet was much on his mind.

"We'll put on wigs and stockings and march onto the beach at Tahiti, like Cook and his men," he went on. "I'd look good in stockings."

This was probably true. Like many English émigrés to Australia, Roger came from pale, pinched working-class stock, but during twenty years in Sydney he'd leisured himself into a handsome, bronzed Aussie. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with sun-streaked blond curls, and blue eyes set in a perpetually tanned face. I rarely saw him out of the Sydney summer uniform: T-shirt, shorts, deck shoes.

"Of course," he said, "I can assure you as a proud Yorkshireman that Cook didn't disgrace himself by rooting the natives. Only filthy sailors did that. They were rough as boots." He chuckled. "You can play Cook."

We finished off the wine. I woke some hours later with a sore head, and lay awake mulling the notion of taking on crew. "Only those associated with the sea can appreciate Cook and his achievements," Horatio Nelson observed. Perhaps Roger could explain some of that to me. At the least, he'd be good company.

The next day, Roger phoned from Melbourne, where he'd gone on business. He worked for a firm that sold books to libraries. It was Roger's job to charm librarians into buying the titles his company peddled. He was good at this, so he had time and money to devote to his sailboat and wine cellar—or to bumming around the Pacific with me.

"It's bloody gray and awful here, like Yorkshire," he said. Most Sydneysiders disdain Melbourne as dull, with dismal weather. "Let's go to Tahiti. Now."

"Not now. It's the wet season there, ninety degrees every day and a hundred and ten percent humidity."

"Yes, it'll be vile. We'll get scrotum rot." Roger laughed. "Don't be a pathetic Yank. You think Cook was put off by a little rain?"

BY THE TIME Cook reached Tahiti in 1769, he'd been sailing west for eight months, the longest ocean passage of his career to that point. He'd endured a chilly reception from the Portuguese in Rio (who suspected the English were smugglers), rounded Cape Horn, and lost five men, including "a good hardy seaman" who had served with him in Canada. "Peter Flower seaman fell over board and before any Assistance could be given him was drown'd," Cook wrote with customary terseness. "In his room we got a Portuguese."

During the ten-week Pacific passage, along a more southerly course than any ship had sailed before, a despairing marine threw himself overboard and drowned. The wine ran out. Banks felt his gums swell and "pimples" form in his mouth: early signs of scurvy. Whatever else Cook might have worried about as he neared the tropics, rain was certainly the least of it.

The *Endeavour* dropped anchor on April 13, 1769, in Tahiti's Matavai Bay, the same inlet the *Dolphin* had visited two years before. Sydney Parkinson, an artist aboard the *Endeavour,* painted a word-picture of the scene: "The land appeared as uneven as a piece of crumpled paper, being divided irregularly into hills and valleys; but a beautiful verdure covered both, even to the tops of the highest peaks."

Several of the *Dolphin*'s men had joined the *Endeavour* and inflamed the crew with tales of the island's bounty. On first landing, however, the English found both food and islanders scarce. "No very agreeable discovery," Cook grumbled, "to us whose Ideas of plenty upon our arrival at this Island was carried to the very highest pitch."

The *Dolphin* veterans insisted that the bay had changed, and it had; an attack by islanders from the interior had driven much of the population away. But exploring a little farther, the English encountered the welcome they'd hoped for. Islanders greeted Cook and Banks with green boughs (a symbol of peace), calling them *tiao,* or friend, and giving them presents of perfumed cloth. Then they escorted several officers and gentlemen to an open longhouse. Women pointed at mats on the ground, "sometimes by force seating themselves and us upon them," Banks wrote. Unlike his French predecessor, the English naturalist saw virtue in privacy. "The houses being intirely without walls, we had not an opportunity of putting their politeness to every test."

Cook, a staid family man, made no mention of this scene. But Banks, a twenty-six-year-old bachelor—albeit a bachelor engaged to a soon-forgotten Englishwoman—pressed on. "I espied among the common croud a very pretty girl with a fire in her eyes," he wrote of a feast later the same day. Beckoning the girl to his side, Banks gave her beads and other trinkets. A jealous chief's wife, seated on the botanist's other flank, plied him with fish and coconut milk. "How this would have

ended is hard to say," Banks wistfully reported. At that moment, several of his companions realized they'd been pickpocketed, losing a snuffbox and spyglass. The English angrily demanded the items' return, and eventually got their possessions back—but not before the girl with fire in her eyes had fled.

The next day, as the English set up camp on a promontory Cook named Point Venus, a Tahitian snatched a sentinel's musket. The young officer on duty ordered his men to fire and one of them shot the thief dead. The Quaker artist, Sydney Parkinson, was appalled: "What a pity, that such brutality should be exercized by civilized people upon unarmed ignorant Indians!" Cook explained to the Tahitians "that the man was kill'd for taking away the Musquet and that we still would be friends with them."

How he communicated this concept isn't clear. The *Dolphin* veterans doubtless acted as interpreters, though they knew only a smattering of the local language; the rest had to be conveyed with hand signs. Nor do we hear the Tahitian side of the story. Attempting to divine islanders' thoughts from the English journals is like watching a movie with the volume off; most of what we get are reaction shots. "No sign of forgiveness could I see in their faces, they lookd sulky and affronted," Banks wrote of a later confrontation.

Four days after the English landing, Alex Buchan, a landscape and figure painter in Banks's retinue, died during an epileptic seizure. "His Loss to me is irretrievable," Banks wrote, "my airy dreams of entertaining my friends in England with the scenes that I am to see here are vanished." It fell to Parkinson, a draftsman who specialized in plants and animals, to fill the gap. The artist faced an added challenge: Tahiti's voracious flies. "They eat the painters colours off the paper as fast as they can be laid on," Banks wrote, "and if a fish is to be drawn there is more trouble in keeping them off than in the drawing itself."

Flies and pickpockets aside, the English were enchanted by their surrounds. Wandering inland, Banks found "groves of Cocoa nut and bread fruit trees loaded with a profusion of fruit and giving the most gratefull shade I have ever experienced, under these were the habitations of the people most of them without walls: in short the scene was the truest picture of an arcadia of which we were going to be kings that the imagination can form."

The islanders inspired similar awe. "I never beheld statelier men," wrote Parkinson, who described them as tall, muscular, and tawny, with large black eyes and perfect white teeth. They seemed to possess a natural grace: in their gait, in their manners, in their fluid athleticism when swimming and canoeing. But it was the women who captivated the English most of all. They bathed three times a day in a river near Point Venus, shaved under their arms (as did the men), bedecked their hair with blossoms, and anointed themselves with coconut oil. (Banks, who disliked the oil's smell, nonetheless judged it preferable "to the odoriferous perfume of toes and armpits so frequent in Europe.")

Islanders also displayed as little inhibition with the *Endeavour*'s crew as they had with the *Dolphin*'s. "The women begin to have a share in our Freindship which is by no means Platonick," the ship's master, Robert Molyneux, observed soon after the *Endeavour*'s arrival. He returned to the subject a few weeks later: "The Venereal Disorder made sad work among the People." So sad that more than a third of the crew showed signs of infection.

Cook, always mindful of his men's health, tried to contain the disease's spread by barring infected men from going ashore. "But all I could do was to little purpose for I may safely say that I was not assisted by any one person in ye Ship." Cook also feared for Tahitians, presciently observing that the disease "may in time spread it self over all the Islands in the South Seas, to the eternal reproach of those who first brought it among them."

Who had brought it remained unclear. The *Dolphin*'s crew hadn't reported any cases of venereal disease—or, as Cook and his crew variously termed the illness in their journals, "this filthy distemper," "the fowl disease," "the Pox," "a Clap," "that heavy Curse," and "that greatest plague that ever the human Race was afflicted with." A month before the *Endeavour*'s arrival in Tahiti, Cook's surgeon had checked the men and found only one sailor afflicted; he was barred from contact with Tahitian women. So Cook consoled himself with islanders' reports that the disease had arrived with other European visitors.

The Frenchman, Bougainville, disputed this. He wrote that syphilis was already present when he landed ten months after the *Dolphin*. Hence another chapter in the cross-Channel blame game, whereby the English termed syphilis the French disease and the French referred to it

as *le mal Anglais*. To complicate matters, some scholars believe that the sickness wasn't syphilis but yaws, a tropical skin disease that produces symptoms similar to those of venereal disease.

To afflicted islanders, the source of the contagion made little difference. Nor was venereal disease the deadliest consequence of Western contact. When Cook returned to Tahiti in 1773, islanders complained of another scourge, brought by a Spanish ship that had visited in the interim. "They say that it affects the head, throat and stomack and at length kills them," Cook wrote. "They dread it much and were constantly enquiring if we had it." Cook didn't identify this influenzalike ailment, but he wrote that Tahitians called it *Apa no Peppe* (the sickness of Pepe), "just as they call the venereal disease Apa no Britannia or Brit-tanee, notwithstanding they to a man say that it was first communicated by M. de Bougainville."

As Tahiti became a popular port of call in the decades following Cook's visit, other diseases took hold: tuberculosis, smallpox, measles, whooping cough. Alcoholism and internecine warfare, abetted by Western weapons and mercenaries, became rife as well. The toll was catastrophic. In 1774, Cook estimated Tahiti's population at 204,000. By 1865, less than a century after the first European visit, a French census recorded only 7,169 native inhabitants remaining on the island.

ROGER AND I arrived in Tahiti after a ten-hour flight from Sydney to Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia (a French protectorate that includes Tahiti and 117 other islands sprinkled across a swath of the South Pacific roughly the size of Europe). Men in floral shirts strummed ukuleles as we waited for our baggage in a decrepit terminal cooled by ceiling fans. After passing through immigration, we were met by honey-colored women in tight floral dresses cut high up the thigh. They greeted us with wreaths of pink and white hibiscus and signs touting package holidays: "Tahiti Legends," "Pacific Escapes," "Exotismes."

We changed money and found flowered beauties adorning the banknotes. I bought a bottle of mineral water while we waited for a bus to our hotel. The label bore a reproduction of a Gauguin maiden, bare-

breasted, in a colorful wrap. The tourist brochures offered similar images of bronzed women in string bikinis. Whatever else might have changed, Tahitians still sold sex as aggressively as they had to the young sailors who landed here in the 1760s.

We woke late the next morning in a hotel at the edge of Papeete. Roger pulled aside the curtains and exulted, "It's just like the pictures! Palm trees, emerald sea, smoky verdant hills!" He opened the door to the balcony and stepped halfway through—only to be blown back, as if by a nuclear flash. "Good God, it's an inferno," he gasped, slumping by the air conditioner.

Rather than hike several miles to the center of town, we stood on the boulevard in front of the hotel, waiting for the local bus service, called *le truck*. A dense clot of mopeds and French sedans motored past, belching lead-fumed exhaust. *Le truck* resembled a cattle car, open-air, with hard, spine-rattling benches. I found myself squeezed between enormous women in shorts, T-shirts, and flip-flops. Almost all the passengers smoked, despite a sign saying *"Defense de Fumer."* No one returned my smile.

The view from *le truck* was just as deflating. Papeete seemed a congested, honking mess, combining Parisian insouciance with Cairo-like infrastructure. Cars double-parked on crumbling sidewalks; motorists plowed through pedestrian crossings; signs toppled from cement-block buildings. We climbed out at Papeete's central market and watched women whisk flies from fruit and fish. Then we wandered up Rue Colette and Rue Paul Gauguin, past peeling shopfronts and eateries called American Wave, Bip-Bop Burger, and Snack La Vague.

"It's an utter shitbox," Roger said, as we took refuge in a café crowded with sweat-stained Frenchmen smoking Gitanes and sipping Pernod. "The architects who designed this town must have been unemployable anywhere else."

No settlement had existed here at the time of the *Endeavour*'s visit. But the traders and whalers who followed Cook to Tahiti chose Papeete's sheltered bay as the island's best port. In 1842, the French seized Tahiti from the British in a bloodless coup and made Papeete the administrative center of their growing Pacific colony. The twentieth century brought devastating cyclones, a German naval bombardment

in World War I, and French nuclear tests, which pumped billions of francs and thousands of French soldiers and bureaucrats into Papeete. Rural job seekers followed, swelling the town's population to include more than half of the 220,000 people living in all of French Polynesia. Whatever charm Papeete might once have possessed had long since vanished beneath ferroconcrete, car fumes, and billboards touting second-rate European goods dumped on the Pacific market at ruinous prices.

The only rental car we could find, at almost $100 a day, was a dwarfish box called a Fiat Panda Jolly, barely big enough for Roger to squeeze inside. "Special features—none," he declared, discovering that the car had neither a radio nor a parking brake nor seat belts. We filled the Panda with $5-a-gallon gas and puttered ten miles east to Matavai Bay, the site of the *Endeavour*'s anchorage. At one end of the bay lay Point Venus, the peninsula on which Cook built a small fort to enclose his astronomical instruments and house his men when on shore. There was no road sign for the point, just an unmarked turnoff between Venustar Supermarché and a grocery called Chez Faty.

The road ended at a litter-strewn parking lot. Point Venus, the setting of so much Polynesian lore, now spread before us, a swampy peninsula edged by black volcanic sand. In the broiling afternoon sun, the beach looked about as romantic and welcoming as a tar pit. I later learned that producers of the 1962 Marlon Brando film *Mutiny on the Bounty* had imported white sand from America so Matavai Bay would match the Hollywood image of a tropical island.

A weekend crowd spread across the black sand. Most of the sunbathers appeared to be French or *demis*, the local word for islanders of mixed European and Polynesian descent. (French and *demis* make up about a quarter of the population, with Tahitians comprising two-thirds, and the rest mostly Chinese.) Almost all the women were topless.

We found a quiet spot at the end of the beach, beside a woman with two small children. I'd brought a copy of the "Hints" provided to Cook by the Earl of Morton, who was the president of the Royal Society, advising the commander on proper behavior toward islanders. Cook used the "Hints" in formulating the rules of conduct he read aloud to his men before touring Matavai Bay. I decided to do the same.

" 'Exercise the utmost patience and forbearance with respect to the Natives,' " Morton began. " 'Check the petulance of the Sailors, and restrain the wanton use of Fire Arms.' "

"That was roundly ignored," Roger said. "But I promise not to be petulant."

" 'No European Nation has the right to occupy any part of their country,' " I read on, " 'or settle among them without their voluntary consent.' "

Roger nodded and turned to the woman beside us. "Do you mind if we claim your beach for Britain?"

"Excusez-moi?"

In rusty high school French, I told her that we'd come to replay Cook's landing in 1769.

"Where is your boat?" she replied in English.

"It sank," Roger deadpanned. Then he reached into his bag. "Don't be alarmed by what you're about to see."

He pulled out two wigs from a costume shop in Sydney. I'd taken Roger up on his wine-soaked proposal in Sydney that we inaugurate our visit to Matavai Bay as proper Englishmen. However, eighteenth-century naval hairpieces weren't easy to come by. So I'd opted for the next best thing: huge white mops made of an itchy synthetic.

"This is lamentable," Roger said, pulling his on. "It'd fit anyone's head. It'd fit two heads." He climbed into white stockings while I buttoned up knee-length britches. Then I followed him into the warm, shallow water. We gazed up at the majestic green hills, wreathed in clouds. "This is a solemn moment," Roger declared. "We're seeing just what Cook saw. Tropical mountains, swaying palms, topless crumpet."

He took out the last of our props, a Union Jack. "Made in the Republic of Taiwan," he said, studying the label. Then we waded parallel to the beach, in waist-deep water, with Roger wrapped in the flag. A few children in the water pointed at us and giggled, but their parents, reclining on the beach, barely turned their heads.

"This wig is hot and heavy," Roger complained. "The history books don't mention that." He navigated ashore, steering toward a young *demi* in a bikini thong. Roger spread out the Union Jack and sprawled on top of it. In his wet tights and drooping wig, he looked

like an unemployed clown. Roger smiled at the young woman beside us and said, "*Nous sommes les Anglais qui arriver ici* a very long time ago." She shrugged, smeared her bare chest with coconut oil, and lay back on her towel.

I opened Cook's journal and read another of Lord Morton's hints: " 'If a Landing can be effected, whether with or without resistance, it might not be amiss to lay some few trinkets, particularly Looking Glasses upon the Shore.' " Roger reached in our bag: sunscreen, passports, car keys. "We could rip the rearview mirror off the Fiat Panda, if it's got one."

" 'Observe the natural Dispositions of the people,' " Morton continued. " 'The Characters of their Persons, Features, Complection, Dress.' "

Roger glanced at the topless woman on the beach towel beside us. "No great call on the world's fabric here, that's one thing that hasn't changed."

We read awhile longer, until the sun and burning black sand chased us into the woods skirting the beach. Here the crowd was mostly Tahitian, with families playing *boule* or lining up before snack stands. I tried to strike up a conversation with a vendor, asking him, "*Connaissez-vous Capitaine Cook?*" He stared blankly and handed me a Coke.

We walked the rest of Point Venus, trying to reconstruct the narrow promontory described in English maps and journals. A river from which the *Endeavour*'s crew had filled water casks was now a muddy, trash-choked trench. At the approximate site of the fort the English erected, sanitation men raked coconut husks, plastic bottles, Styrofoam, and other refuse into piles and set them alight, filling the air with industrial-smelling smoke.

Farther back from the water stood a tiny stucco lighthouse, with an enigmatic plaque quoting Robert Louis Stevenson: "Great were the feelings of emotion as I stood with my mother by my side and we looked upon the edifice designed by my father when I was sixteen and worked in his office during the summer of 1866." Stevenson's father designed lighthouses in Scotland, and the writer didn't visit Tahiti until 1888, twenty years after a French engineer built the edifice we were looking at.

Also puzzling was a nearby plinth, topped by a cannonball-sized

sphere. The pillar's pedestal appeared etched with the points of a compass. Only later did we learn that this was Tahiti's sole memorial to Cook, erected by Britain's Royal Society and Royal Geographical Society in 1901. The plaque had long since fallen off or been stolen, and high weeds had grown up around the shaft.

Much better tended was a large sculpture in the shape of a ship's prow. It commemorated the arrival on March 5, 1797, of emissaries from the London Missionary Society aboard a vessel called the *Duff*. "After years of resistance and indifference the people of Tahiti embraced the gospel," the inscription read, "and, following the path of the setting sun, bore its words to the uttermost islands of the Pacific Ocean." March 5 remained a holiday in French Polynesia, marked by church gatherings and a celebration at Point Venus.

"Cook's forgotten, but these hair shirts get a bloody big monument," Roger grumbled. "I was raised with all that, I've done guilt. I was riddled like Swiss cheese. It was getting me nowhere."

As the monument suggested, the missionaries had met with mixed success, at least at first. Seventeen evangelicals, plus five of their wives and three children, disembarked at Tahiti in 1797. Eight missionaries fled on the next boat out, to Sydney. One of the remaining missionaries married a native woman and left the church. The first English child born on the island ran off with a Tahitian chief. "They in general treated our message with a great deal of levity and disregard," one of the missionaries wrote of Tahitians. The churchmen also received a cool reception from Western sailors calling at Tahiti, who feared the Gospel would interfere with their traffic in rum, tobacco, and women.

But reinforcements arrived, including a very determined missionary named William Ellis. Tahiti's alcoholic young king decided to embrace Christianity, and his subjects followed. Before long, the missionaries had imposed their austere creed. They banned "all lascivious songs, games or entertainment," as well as the wearing of flower crowns in church. Island women hid themselves in the all-concealing gowns known as Mother Hubbards. "It was a thousand pities that the Tahitians did not convert Mr. Ellis," wrote Robert Keable, a former English vicar who lived in Polynesia in the early twentieth century.

French influence, mass tourism, and a Tahitian cultural revival in recent decades had gradually eroded the missionaries' grip. The skin

on display at Point Venus gave evidence of that. So, too, we were about to discover, did Papeete's nightlife, which recalled the extraordinary scenes that Cook and his men witnessed more than two centuries before us.

SOON AFTER THE *Endeavour*'s arrival, a procession of canoes entered Matavai Bay. One bore the stately woman that Samuel Wallis of the *Dolphin* had called Queen of the island. With great pomp, she presented the English with a hog and bunches of plantains. Cook reciprocated with trinkets. "What seem'd to please her most was a childs Doll which I made her understand was the Picter of my Wife."

That's what Cook wrote at the time. He later deleted this rare flash of humor—and the only mention in his journal of his wife—from the official version he submitted to the Admiralty. J. C. Beaglehole, the greatest of Cook's biographers and the editor of his journals, believes the navigator omitted the doll episode "as unworthy of the dignity of such a document." This instinctive self-censorship has left us an image of Cook that is probably sterner and more formal than he was in person.

Joseph Banks, who felt no such constraint, provides much richer detail of the light, often titillating side of the *Endeavour*'s stay in Tahiti. Of the Queen (whose name was Purea), the botanist wrote that she was "about 40, tall and very lusty, her skin white and her eyes full of meaning." Though married to a chief, she had taken "a hansome lusty young man of about 25" as her lover. Purea also made advances toward Banks, who appears in youthful portraits as a handsome, dark-haired man with full lips and fine clothes adorning his six-foot, four-inch frame (in Tahiti, he wore a white jacket and waistcoat with silver frogs). The botanist rebuffed the Queen, having already attached himself to one of her young attendants, whom he called "my flame."

Whole weeks pass in Banks's journal with barely a mention of botany. Instead, he reports on elaborate feasts, wrestling matches, archery contests, traveling minstrels playing nose flutes, and long hot nights sleeping naked in islanders' homes or beneath the thatched awnings of their canoes. During one such sleepover, Banks awoke to find his clothes had been stolen. No matter; dispatching a Tahitian to

recover the garments, Banks wrote, "I heard their musick and sav lights near me; I got up and went towards them." It was a *heiva,* or fes tival of dance and song.

The next morning, when the Tahitian returned with only part o Banks's wardrobe, Purea gave the botanist native cloth to wear ir place of his jacket. "I made a motley apearance," Banks wrote witl obvious delight, "my dress being half English and half Indian." Late in his journal, Banks makes passing mention of "a turban of Indiar cloth which I wore instead of a hat." Eventually, he went entirely native, joining two women as a performer in a mourning ceremony. "I was next prepard by stripping off my European cloths and putting me on a small strip of cloth round my waist, the only garment I was allowd to have," he wrote. "Neither of the women were a bit more covered than myself. Then they began to smut me and themselves with charcoal and water."

If Cook wrote with an eye to the Admiralty, Banks obviously looked to the drawing rooms of London. But Banks wasn't just a hedonistic fop. Like Richard Burton and T. E. Lawrence, later British travelers who shared Banks's taste for steamy exoticism, the botanist was a sensitive observer whose headlong immersion in native culture gave him access and insights denied less adventurous men. Cook, a keen judge of character, quickly recognized this, and put the botanist in charge of the delicate task of managing trade between the English and Tahitians. "Mr. Banks," Cook wrote, in an uncommon expression of praise for any of the *Endeavour*'s men, "is always very alert upon all occations wherein the Natives are concern'd."

Tahitians seemed as eager to sample English ways as Banks was to taste theirs. As a result, the *Endeavour*'s visit—much longer and more intimate than that of the *Dolphin* or the French ships—became a prolonged feast of mutual discovery. The islanders served the English a local delicacy, roasted dog, which Banks found "a most excellent dish," and Cook declared "next to an English Lamb" in taste. The English invited Tahitians to dine on Western fare and drink to His Majesty's health. "He imitates our manners in every instance," Banks wrote of one chief, "already holding a knife and fork more handily than a Frenchman could learn to do in years."

One night, islanders dragged Banks to the home of a sick, vomiting

man. His family believed the man was dying "in consequence of something our people had given him to eat," Banks wrote. The islanders presented the botanist with the remains of the man's dinner as evidence. "This upon examination I found to be a Chew of tobacco which he had begg'd of some of our people, and trying to imitate them in keeping it in his mouth as he saw them do had chewd it almost to powder swallowing his spittle." Banks prescribed coconut milk and the man soon recovered.

The English, for their part, submitted to a strange and painful form of Tahitian adornment. Natives dipped a sharp comb into the sooty juice of burnt candlenut and beat the comb's teeth into their skin with a mallet. "The stain left in the skin, which cannot be effaced without destroying it, is of a lively bluish purple, similar to that made upon the skin by gun-powder," wrote the artist, Sydney Parkinson. He and several crewmen "underwent the operation" on their arms, becoming the first Europeans to adopt the badge of seamen ever since: the tattoo, or, as the *Endeavour*'s crew rendered the Tahitian word, *tat-tow* or *tataow.* (The Tahitians, who had never seen writing, applied the same word to the strange figures the English inked on paper.)

The English and Tahitians also tried, with limited success, to explain their beliefs to each other. And so another novel word entered the Western vocabulary: *tapu,* or "taboo," the intricate system by which Polynesians ordered the world into sacred and profane. It was *tapu,* for instance, for Tahitian women to eat in the presence of men. "They never gave no other answer but that they did it because it was right," Cook wrote of his vain attempts at understanding this segregation. Curiously, a woman might sometimes break this taboo when alone with English men, "but always took care that her country people should not know what she had done."

Cook, judging from his journals, was not a pious man. A product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, he valued reason above all else, and showed little patience for what he called "Priest craft" and "superstition." But the Articles of War, and Lord Morton's "Hints," ordained that Cook conduct "divine service" for his men. Banks invited some Tahitians to attend one such observance at Point Venus. The Tahitians closely mimicked the English, kneeling and standing,

Banks wrote, and "so much understood that we were about something very serious that they calld to the Indians without the fort to be silent."

Later that same Sunday, at the gate of the English fort, the Tahitians reciprocated by performing a rite of their own. "A young fellow above 6 feet high lay with a little Girl about 10 or 12 years of age publickly before several of our people and a number of the Natives," Cook wrote. He guessed this public copulation was ceremonial, since venerable women stood coaching the young girl "how she should act her part, who young as she was, did not seem to want it." (By "want it," Cook meant that she didn't need instruction.) Cook's description of this scene would be widely popularized in writings about the voyage and create a sensation back home, prompting condemnation by English churchmen and the publication by literary wags of pornographic verse.

Cook later learned that the lovers outside the fort at Point Venus were *Ariori,* a class of Tahitians who devoted themselves to performing erotic songs, dances, and ritual sex. The *Ariori* belonged to a religious sect or fertility cult, one that also required its members to remain free by smothering any children born of their promiscuous unions. Needless to say, this horrified the English. And Cook, while no prude, believed the *Ariori*'s public orgies reflected the general lewdness of the culture. "Both sexes express the most indecent ideas in conversation without the least emotion and they delight in such conversation behond any other. Chastity indeed is but little Valued."

The Tahitians were just as shocked by aspects of their visitors' behavior. Discipline had begun to deteriorate within days of the *Endeavour*'s arrival, and Cook duly punished his sailors; mindful of the *Dolphin*'s experience, he dispensed two dozen lashes, double the usual sentence, to a man who stole nails. When the ship's butcher insulted an island man's wife, the English invited Tahitians to watch the man flogged, to demonstrate the severity and evenhandedness of Western justice. "They stood quietly and saw him stripd and fastned to the rigging," Banks wrote of the Tahitian audience, "but as soon as the first blow was given interfered with many tears, begging the punishment might cease a request which the Captn would not comply with."

Cook also ratcheted up his reprisals against native thefts. When a man stole a coal rake from the fort, Cook seized twenty-five fishing

canoes loaded with fresh catch. Though the rake was returned, "Captn Cooke thought he had now in his hands an opportunity of recovering all the things which had been stolen," Banks wrote. "He therefore proclaimed to every one that till all the things which had been stolen from us were brought back the boats should not stir."

Banks regarded this punishment as disproportionate and misdirected, "as the Canoes pretty certainly did not belong to the people who had stolen the things." Not only did the islanders fail to return the stolen items, they retaliated by halting all trade of breadfruit and other goods. Cook stubbornly held out for several weeks before finally releasing the canoes.

Mutual incomprehension over notions of property and justice would plague Cook throughout his Pacific voyages. Polynesians, for the most part, lived communally and had few personal possessions. The climate in Tahiti was benign and bountiful; islanders gathered as much fish and fruit as they needed for their immediate wants. If they had extra, they shared it. Extravagant gift giving was—and still is—a point of honor in Polynesia, an expression of how much a host values his visitor.

Given this custom, what were Tahitians to make of a ship stuffed with dazzling surplus? The English helped themselves to fish, fresh water, and other of the island's resources. Why shouldn't the Tahitians help themselves to muskets, tools, watches, and whatever else they could lay their hands on—even the ship's lightning rod and quadrant?

The English, for their part, hailed from a society in which property rights were so sacrosanct that to poach a rabbit was a capital offense. Accustomed to public hangings and the severity of shipboard discipline, young sailors could hardly be expected to show mercy toward nimble-fingered Tahitians. Cook's behavior, however, seems out of character. In almost every other circumstance, he treated natives with tolerance and restraint. Yet the theft of even minor goods unhinged him, and the more it occurred, the harsher his reprisals became. This was, perhaps, Cook's tragic flaw. The cycle of larceny and retribution that began at Tahiti would continue for a decade, until it claimed Cook's own life on a beach almost three thousand miles from Matavai Bay.

THE DANCE SHOW at the Captain Bligh Restaurant began with bare-chested men thumping drums. Lithe women in coconut-shell bras and palm-frond skirts shimmied onto the floor, shaking their hips side to side, fast and furiously. A lone woman followed, stripping off a sarong and performing a sinuous pelvic motion. Men in loincloths came next, opening and closing their legs rapidly, sweat glistening on their bronzed thighs.

"These are some traditional dances of Tahiti," the emcee announced, in French and English. "Now we will see dances from other islands of Polynesia." A woman in a Hawaiian *mu'umu'u* made feathery motions with her fingers. Tongans in ankle-length gowns did various tricks with wooden sticks. The Maori of New Zealand swung balls attached to strings in what seemed like a cheerleader routine. Then, just as the audience's attention began to drift, the half-naked Tahitians returned, thrusting their hips to a pulsing drumbeat.

The message was hard to miss. Tahiti, as its tourist literature proclaimed, was "the Island of Love," a title that none of its neighbors dared challenge. The show, despite its touristy presentation, also gave some inkling of the "indecent dances" Cook and his men described. "You've been at sea for months, you've been lashed, fed filthy food, and haven't seen a woman forever, and never seen one like this," Roger said, his eyes trained on a dancer's undulating hips. "Can you imagine? It's a miracle they didn't all desert."

From the Captain Bligh, we headed to Papeete's waterfront strip of bars and nightclubs: Manhattan Discoteque, Hotel Kon tiki, Paradise Night. Crowded with French soldiers and young Tahitians, the clubs didn't look very enticing. A girl of about fifteen stumbled out of one of the bars and came up to us mumbling something I didn't understand.

"Pardon?"

She reached for my groin. "*Je* suck?"

We wandered away from the water to Rue Colette and found a dance joint called the Kikiriri. Inside the dark bar, couples performed the Tahitian waltz, a fast, close dance in which the men planted their hands low on their partners' buttocks. A few tourists bravely took to

the floor and mimicked the Tahitians' motions. "They look like Christmas turkeys, pale and waddling, flapping their wings," Roger observed. He ordered another glass of overpriced *vin ordinaire.* "Two days in this place and I already feel a tremendous sense of racial inferiority. I'll never look at a white woman again. And I don't stand a chance with the locals."

"We could try the men."

"What?"

I led Roger down Rue des Ecoles to a place I'd read about in our tourist guide, called the Piano Bar. Cook and his men had written about the masculine quality of some Polynesian women, and noted islanders of mixed or ambiguous gender. These were probably *mahu,* Tahitian boys raised as girls, wearing women's clothes and performing traditionally female tasks. *Mahu* remained a strong presence in Tahiti, nowhere more so than at the Piano Bar, Papeete's premier transvestite club.

"Think of it as research," I said, dragging Roger past the jolly eunuchlike bouncers at the door. Inside, we found a table beside the dance floor, which was crowded with couples performing the same, groin-grinding waltz we'd seen at the Kikiriri. Except that many of these dancers were tall and broad-shouldered, wearing pink lamé miniskirts, halter tops, and high-heeled pumps.

We'd arrived on a special night: an annual beauty contest to elect a new Miss Piano Bar. Five contestants in long sequined dresses and strapless black gowns appeared. An emcee sang "Queen of the Night" as the contestants sashayed around the floor to loud hoots from the audience. Half of Papeete seemed to have crowded into the bar, including a tall, elegant beauty who squeezed into a chair beside Roger, smiling and rubbing his thigh.

"Bloke or sheila?" Roger whispered to me.

"Bloke, I think."

Roger shrugged. "I like it here. At least I feel challenged."

The contestants reappeared in bathing suits: high-cut, one-piece costumes exposing smooth backs, slim arms and legs, and what looked like cleavage. "Transvestite crumpet," Roger said. "Perfect skin, glossy hair, exquisite thighs. If they were girls, they'd be fantastic."

An evening-wear competition and talent contest followed. Samantha, a six-foot-two stunner, won the beauty contest by acclamation,

blowing kisses and throwing a bouquet into the crowd. Then the danc
ing resumed and we staggered out into Rue des Ecoles. It was three A.M
and the street remained packed, *mahu* mingling with French sailor
tourists, Tahitian couples. "No wonder we barely turned a head a
Point Venus," Roger said. "In our stockings and wigs, we fit right in."

ON JUNE 3, 1769, from nine in the morning until half past three in th
afternoon, the English peered through their telescopes at the transit c
Venus across the face of the sun. Though the sky was clear, Cook note
a "dusky shade" blurring the planet's fringe. This caused him and hi
fellow observers to record differing times for the crucial moment c
contact between the planet and star. Only later would astronomer
learn that the entire exercise, carried out at Tahiti and seventy-si
other points across the globe, had little value; the telescopes and astro
nomical knowledge of the day weren't precise enough to accomplis
the complex task.

Banks, at least, had his customary good time, tagging along with
small observation party to a nearby isle: "3 hansome girls came off i
a canoe to see us," he wrote, ignoring the celestial Venus. "They chat
ted with us very freely and with very little perswasion agreed to sen
away their carriage and sleep in the tent."

Returning to Matavai Bay, Banks promptly set off on anothe
adventure. He and Cook boarded the pinnace (one of the ship's boats
"to make the Circuit of the Island," the navigator wrote, "in order t
examine and draw a Sketch of the Coast and Harbours thereof." Thi
is Cook in his element: surveying the contours of uncharted lands an
setting down their coordinates on paper.

This is Banks in *his* element: "Many Canoes came off to meet u
and in them some very hansome women who by their behaviou
seemed to be sent out to entice us to come ashore, which we most read
ily did," he wrote, two days out from Matavai Bay. "I stuck close t
the women hoping to get a snug lodging by that means as I had ofte
done." Cook wrote of the same spot: "there are also harbours betwee
this and the Isthmus proper and convenent for Shipping made by reef
of Corral rocks."

Midway down the island's eastern shore, Cook and Banks came t

the place where Bougainville had landed the year before. Questioning Tahitians, the English learned little of the French visit, except that a peculiar passenger had been aboard. The valet of the ship's naturalist was actually a woman disguised as a man. The French hadn't realized this until they arrived at Tahiti. Islanders, as familiar with gender-bending then as they are today, immediately recognized the valet's deception. She continued to serve the naturalist and disembarked with him later on the voyage; little more is known of her fate.

Continuing on, through heavily cultivated countryside, the English visited a *marae,* or open-air temple, which Banks described as "a most enormous pile, certainly the masterpeice of Indian architecture in this Island. Its size and workmanship almost exceeds beleif." Cook surveyed the structure's precise dimensions: a platform measuring 267 by 87 feet, with steps rising 44 feet in a pyramid shape. The English were astonished by the fineness of the masonry: vast stones squared and polished, without iron tools. Banks judged the construction so expert that it might have been done "by the best workman in Europe."

Just as awesome was the collection of bones on the site. First, the English studied wooden altars strewn with the remains of hogs and dogs, sacrificed at the temple. Then Banks and Cook walked along a road by the *marae*. "Every where under our feet were numberless human bones cheifly ribs and vertebrae," Banks wrote. The English also found fresh jawbones hung in houses, and learned that these were the spoils of a recent massacre, "carried away as trophies and used by the Indians here in exactly the same manner as the North Americans do scalps." Tahiti was emerging as something other than the Arcadia the botanist had at first imagined.

Returning to Matavai Bay, Cook prepared for the *Endeavour*'s departure, dismantling the fort for firewood. Two marines, on what was probably their final watch ashore, slipped out of the English camp and disappeared into the hills. "They had got each of them a Wife & would not return," Cook wrote. To recover the deserters, Cook seized prominent chiefs, holding them hostage until the Tahitians returned the two men. The tactic worked, though at the cost of whatever goodwill the English had engendered. "We are likly to leave these people in disgust with our behavour towards them," Cook wrote, "owing wholy to the folly of two of our own people."

The spirit of desertion may have been more prevalent than Cook realized. At one point, the *Endeavour*'s master wrote of "Mutinous words spoke by some of our People." Twenty-one years later, following the mutiny on the *Bounty,* a former midshipman on the *Endeavour* confided in a letter to Banks that "most of the People" on Cook's ship had schemed to stay in Tahiti. The midshipman claimed he had forestalled this mass desertion with tales of "the Pox—the disease being there, their getting it certain & dying rotten most probable."

This account, if true, speaks to the "alurements of disipation" in Tahiti that Bligh later blamed for his own misfortune on the *Bounty*. It also reveals just how reckless and rootless were the young sailors Cook commanded, and how harsh life at sea must have seemed to them. Jumping ship in the eighteenth century, at the edge of the known world, meant severing ties to home and family in a way that is unimaginable today, even to FBI fugitives or Mafia informers in the witness-protection program. Yet some among Cook's crew were willing to risk all: for love (and lust), for a life of apparent ease, for escape from the horrors of maritime labor. Given what occurred during the rest of the *Endeavour*'s voyage, many of the men doubtless came to regret their decision to remain on board.

Cook, for all his severity, seemed to understand the temptations his men were subject to. He sentenced the two deserters to twenty-four lashes each, but quickly released them from confinement. In a curious postscript, one of the deserters, Samuel Gibson (described by the *Endeavour*'s master as "a wild young man"), joined Cook for both his second and third voyages, rising to the rank of sergeant and serving as a valued translator on Cook's return trips to Polynesia.

The *Endeavour*'s departure from Tahiti brought another surprise. A high priest named Tupaia, whom Cook described as a keenly intelligent man and very knowledgeable about the surrounding seas, wanted to sail on with the English. Cook was reluctant, apparently out of concern for Tupaia's welfare once he reached England. So Banks decided to take on the Tahitian as his own responsibility—and as his private pet. "Thank heaven I have a sufficiency," Banks wrote, referring to his personal fortune, "and I do not know why I may not keep him as a curiosity, as well as some of my neighbours do lions and tygers at a larger expence than he will probably ever put me to."

Tupaia brought along a servant boy named Taiata. The Tahitians' thoughts upon undertaking this astounding adventure—more daring, even, than that of Cook and his men—are lost to history. All we have is Banks's account of the *Endeavour*'s sail out of Matavai Bay, three months to the day after the ship first anchored at Tahiti. Banks and Tupaia climbed "to the topmost head where we stood a long time waving to the Canoes as they went off."

A FEW DAYS after our late-night bar tour, Roger and I climbed in the Panda to retrace Cook and Banks's circumnavigation of Tahiti. The trip was easier than in 1769: a seventy-mile, badly paved road circles the coast of Tahiti Nui, or Great Tahiti, the larger of the two landmasses that together form the hourglass-shaped island. Soon after we sprang free of Papeete's cement sprawl, buildings became scarce, except for churches, announced at regular intervals by signs saying *"Silence Culte."* The palm-fringed beaches were empty, as were the coconut groves rising up the steep green hills. It was beautiful but eerily abandoned, like so many rural areas the world over.

In Cook's day, Tahiti's bountiful landscape fed tens of thousands of people, as well as the hundred hungry sailors aboard the *Endeavour*. Now, the equation was reversed: a tiny fraction of Tahitians lived on the land, and roughly 85 percent of their foodstuffs were imported from Europe. Stopping to dip my toe in the surf, I found coconut shells intermingled with flip-flops, plastic containers of Nestle Lait Concentraté Sucré, soap bottles, and Coke cans.

Driving on, we crossed a small bridge that bore an inconspicuous plaque noting that *"L. A. de Bougainville a Debarqué sur ce rivage le 6 Avril 1768."* A flaming bougainvillea, the blossoming vine named for the Frenchman, was the only other memorial to the explorer. We parked and gazed at the scene. Unlike Point Venus, this part of the island remained the "Nouveau Cythera" of which Bougainville wrote: azure sea, a lazy river winding into tropical green hills, two boys pulling fish from the stream with a simple line and hook, no reel or rod attached.

We wandered up the road to a store marked *"Boulangerie Alimentation"* and chatted with the young Frenchman who ran it, Stéphan Petris. He had come to Tahiti as a sailor ten years before, married a Tahitian, and settled down. "I say, 'Why not? The sun, the sea, a beautiful woman, it is better than Toulouse.' " He rolled a cigarette. "But you can only have paradise for a month and then it is lost. You are bored, you need air, you need a plane to go away. I fly to New Zealand just to see snow. It is strange, no?"

I asked him what he thought about Bougainville's famous impression of the island. Stéphane pondered this for a minute, puffing on his cigarette. "What he saw, it is still true in a way. 'I need water, I drink. That is how Tahitians think. Not like in France. We make so many complications. I need a glass, ice; I must decide, water with gas or without gas? Here it is very simple. They live for today. A little house a little boat. That is all. Fish or go to the mountain for fruit."

Or to Stéphane's shop for *steak frites* and *chao-men*, the French Tahitian rendition of Chinese food. He ran another business that delivered baguettes to the curious, tubular mailboxes we'd seen along the road, called *boîtes de pain*. "Every citizen of France must have his fresh bread, no?" Stéphane said, excusing himself so he could serve several customers who had patiently stood waiting while we talked.

At sunset we pulled in at a guest house by the water. The rooms simple bungalows perched over a shallow lagoon, were open-air, like the Tahitian homes in which Banks and Cook often slept. We sipped rum as the moon rose over the water and felt, finally, as though we'd drifted into the Polynesia of lore. I lay on a mat on the floor, Roger climbed into the bungalow's loft. The air had grown sticky and hot. Then rain sheeted down. When it stopped, the air felt even heavier than before.

I kicked away my sweat-stained sheets and lay naked on the mat. Even the pillow became unbearable, like a hot water bottle at the wrong end of the bed. Then the insects arrived, silent and pitiless. We'd been warned about Tahitian *nonos*: microscopic bugs that don't so much sting as gnaw. But nothing had prepared me for the torment we now endured. I felt like one of Sydney Parkinson's canvases, my flesh standing in for paint.

"What *are* these fiends?" Roger gasped. "They're so bloated with

my blood they don't even buzz. They're just whacking against my body and falling down. It's like Gallipoli up here." He turned on a light and fumbled in his pack for the "Safari Strength" repellent he'd bought in Sydney. Studying the fine print, he reported, "It kills elephants."

Unfortunately, it didn't kill *nono*s. No matter how much repellent we slathered on, the insects kept coming. "No wonder the English had so many things stolen," Roger said. "They were knackered by the heat and the bugs. Cook had his stockings nicked from under his head, for God's sake. He was in a coma."

The last thing I heard was Roger croaking, "Pass up the rum, if I'm going to die I don't want to do it sober." Then I somehow drifted off, to wake at dawn feeling deranged by blood loss, sweat loss, and lack of sleep. Roger sat on the balcony staring into his drawers. "I've still got black sand in my crotch from Point Venus. Jock rot can't be far behind. And I've probably got dengue fever from all those bugs." He lit a cigarette. "I won't forget this thatched sweatbox for the rest of my life, all five days of it remaining to me."

We fled to the Panda and continued our circumnavigation of the island. At midday, we pulled in at the Musée Gauguin, a tribute to the painter's life. Abandoning France and his family for Polynesia, the forty-three-year-old artist had hoped to live "in a primitive and savage state." Arriving in Papeete in 1891, he discovered instead "the Europe which I thought to shake off. . . . It was the Tahiti of former times which I loved. That of the present filled me with horror." Gauguin found some solace in the arms of a fourteen-year-old mistress whom he lived with and painted near the site of the present museum. But the art he produced didn't sell in Paris; he contracted venereal disease and died in Polynesia in 1903, a bitter and impoverished man.

Disillusion seemed to come with the territory in Tahiti, beginning with the *Dolphin*'s men aboard the *Endeavour,* who declared the island utterly changed from their visit just two years before. Cook, returning to Tahiti on his second and third voyages, lamented its descent into prostitution and greed. The writers and artists who flocked to Tahiti in the nineteenth century traced a similar parabola. "God's best—at least God's sweetest—works: Polynesians," Robert

Louis Stevenson exulted, only to later despair: "I don't much lik Tahiti. It seems to me a sort of halfway house between savage lif and civilization, with the drawbacks of both and the advantages o neither."

Tahiti was a victim of its extravagant hype, and of the Western ill this hype had produced. "It's always the same story, isn't it," Roge said, once we'd toured the Gauguin museum. "You try to escape, t find simplicity, and end up bringing all your baggage with you. So yo end up turning paradise into the same hellhole you left." He bent him self into the Panda, scratching his *nono* bites. "Then again, you can' blame the West for black sand and bloodsucking bugs."

We drove on, toward the remains of the enormous *marae* Cook an Banks had described during their own circuit of the island. I'd picke up a booklet at the museum called "Sacred Stones and Rites" and rea aloud to Roger as he sat grumpily behind the wheel. "It's a hundre and twenty degrees out," he moaned, "I've got one pint of blood left and you want to go look at a pile of rocks!" As we neared the *marae* Roger did an abrupt U-turn and pulled in at a roadside café calle Beach Burger.

" 'The coastal *maraes* were formed in steps,' " I read on, as Roge drank beer, " 'generally three or four, but capable of reaching ten or s in number and 15 meters in height.' "

"I'm riveted," Roger replied. Desperate to stall the field trip, h tried out his French on a man drinking espresso at the next table. Th man smiled and corrected Roger's grammar. "I teach English at th local school," he said, holding up the papers he sat marking. H seemed as delighted to be distracted from his task as Roger was to skir ours. "It is very depressing," he said, showing us samples of his stu dents' work on a multiple-choice test.

Question: "Is she going to invite the Garretts?"

Answer: "Sorry, I've only got some green ones."

Question: "Have you got any French cigarettes?"

Answer: "No, they're not warm enough."

The man smiled wanly and invited us to join him at his table. "It would be a pleasure to speak proper English for a while. May I offe you a warm cigarette?"

TAHITI

James Pouant resembled a storybook fox, intelligent and squinty-eyed, with thick spectacles and graying brown hair. Raised in a village in Bordeaux, he'd been teaching in French Polynesia since 1969 and planned to stay when he retired in a few years. "I came here as a young man, for adventure," he said. "Now I am becoming an old man, and all I want is to sit in the shade, drink my wine, look at the sea. That is what happens in Tahiti. You lose focus. Or maybe your focus changes."

He pointed at a young woman standing by the entrance to the café, staring into space. "That is one of my former students. She looks content, no? And see that one?" He gestured at a man by the road, leaning against a tree. "He was here when I arrived at noon. It is now two. He has not moved a muscle. He will be here another hour, probably."

James, who spoke fluent Tahitian, said islanders had a word for this state, one that didn't really translate into any other tongue: *fiu* (pronounced "phew"). On one level, *fiu* signified "fed up" or exhausted. "Someone will start to mow your lawn, do half, then never come back to finish or collect money because they are *fiu,*" James said. "More often they will not show up in the first place because they are already *fiu.*" In this sense, the word also connoted boredom, blankness, lack of motivation. "Gauguin painted it on the faces of his women. It is a sort of ennui, except drained even of ennui."

"A Zen state," Roger suggested.

James laughed. "For us, Zen means to empty our minds. For a Tahitian to have Zen, he would first have to fill it up."

This sounded harsh, but James didn't mean it that way. He showed us a few more test papers, some of them covered in bright drawings of rainbows and coconut palms, the questions left unanswered. "They feel they can do without all this learning, and live in the old way," he said. "Without electricity, cars—just fish and breadfruit, a simple life, like hippies in the 1960s."

In the years James had spent in Tahiti, this attitude had started to change. It was still true to a degree for families living in the country, as many of his students did. But the exodus to Papeete brought money and exposure to Western goods, and upset the traditional balance of power within families. Women tended to stay in school longer than men, found better jobs than their husbands, and felt more at ease in the wider, French-influenced world.

"The men have an inferiority complex, they're shy, their language not so good, they keep their distance," James said. This helped expla the difficulty we'd had initiating conversations with Tahitian men; I tried a dozen times and rarely got beyond pleasantries, except wi government officials. The women were another matter. "We're lookir at them all the time, even when we do not realize it," James said. "O eyes just drift to the women. And they know it. Their beauty ar charm give them power."

I told him about our interest in Cook, and the strong impressic that Tahitian women had made on the sailors. James smiled. He sa that much of what Cook and Banks wrote still applied, particular Tahitian frankness about what the English called "indecent" topics. have had Tahitian girlfriends," James said. "In the villages, they te everyone the shape of your sex, what you are like in bed. And you a sure to be cheated on within a year. You must accept this. One gir friend, when I was away, boys were jumping through the window t see her. We have a sense of guilt, we impose limits. They do what the feel like doing."

James glanced at his watch. He had to return to the school. "Wh don't you come tomorrow and talk to my students?" he said. " would be good for them to hear examples of English speakers."

"Can we ask them about Cook?" I asked.

James gathered his papers. "You can ask. Just do not be disap pointed by the answers."

AT THE END of his Tahitian journal, Cook began a practice he woul repeat throughout his voyages, appending a summary description c each land he explored. His "Description of King Georges Island"– Samuel Wallis's name remained—reads rather like a guidebook, fille with useful tips for travelers: the best anchorages and approaches, th finest watering spots, the scarcity of firewood. With a farm boy's eye Cook also noted the quality of the soil and plant life and saw past th island's superficial splendor. "Notwithstanding nature hath been s very bountifull to it yet it doth not produce any one thing of intrinsic Value or that can be converted into an Article of trade," he wrote, "s that the value of the discovery consists wholy in the refreshments i

will always afford to Shipping in their passage through those seas."

This analysis is vintage Cook: shrewd, mercantile, and modest, weighing the true value of what he'd seen rather than inflating it to impress his superiors. He was equally precise in describing the island's man-made resources, devoting pages to the making of *tapa,* or bark cloth, and the construction of canoes. "They manage them very dextrusly," he wrote of Tahitians' skill with the largest crafts, some of them seventy feet long and rigged with triangular sails. "I beleive [the Tahitians] perform long and distant Voyages in them, otherwise they could not have the knowlidge of the Islands in these seas they seem to have." Here, as so often in his judgments, Cook was correct, and far ahead of his time. Only in recent decades have scholars appreciated the astonishing voyages undertaken by Polynesians, centuries before Cook, without the assistance of compass or sextant.

Equally characteristic was Cook's habit of telling the reader what he did *not* know. "Religion," he wrote, "is a thing I have learnt so little of that I hardly dare touch upon it." Cook, unlike other observers, also avoided hyperbole in describing Tahitians. He studied people rather as he surveyed coasts and currents, calmly noting their shape, length, and tendencies. "They are a very cleanly people," he wrote, "always washing their hands and mouths immidiatly before and after their meals . . . their features are agreable and their gate gracefull, and their behavour to strangers and to each other is open affable and courtious." Except, of course, for their thieving, in which they displayed "such dexterity as would shame the most noted pickbocket in Europe."

But Cook strenuously avoided passing judgment, even on the delicate matter of sexual behavior. In noting young girls' performance of a "very indecent dance which they call Timorodee" (a rendering of the Tahitian phrase for intercourse, *ti moro-iti*), he nonetheless added, "in doing this they keep time to a great nicety." And he neither romanticized nor condemned the practice of free love. While Banks and others flattered themselves with their own seductive powers, Cook suspected that many, if not most, of the women who offered themselves to the English did so "merely for the lucre of gain." Expanding on this topic later, he cautioned against judging the whole population from the behavior of the few whom sailors met on the beach. "A stranger who visited England might with equal justice draw the Characters of the

women there from those which he might meet on board the Ships in one of the Naval Ports or in the Purlieus of Covent Garden."

Banks compiled his own summary, titled "Manners & customs of S. Sea Islands." Reading his words alongside Cook's, it becomes obvious that the two men compared journals and in some cases plagiarized whole sections from each other, almost verbatim. In virtually all such instances, it appears that Cook copied Banks, adopting turns of phrase that are much more the botanist's than the navigator's. Banks, free of shipboard duties, had time to wander the island and closely observe customs such as tattooing in a way that Cook did not, and his linguistic skills—Banks recorded dozens of Tahitian words, even whole songs, with remarkable accuracy—gave the botanist insights the commander couldn't hope to match.

The affinity between their journals also speaks to the remarkable collaboration, even friendship, that had developed between the two men. The effects of this unlikely union would become much clearer in the course of the long voyage. Cook gradually opened up to matters well beyond his established talents as a navigator and surveyor, even writing at times like a natural philosopher. After Tahiti, he leaned much less on Banks when summarizing his own impressions.

Banks, in turn, matured under Cook's steady hand, discarding some of his "airy dreams" of entertaining the salons of London and gradually becoming an inspired scientist. Later in the voyage, it was he who often cribbed from Cook, relying on the navigator's precision in geography and other matters. To put it a way that Banks and Cook never would, the two men found themselves in the course of their vast discoveries.

JAMES POUANT'S HIGH school stood a few yards from the beach. A warm tropical breeze wafted across the water, and waves tumbled against a distant reef. We found James cleaning a blackboard between classes. Thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds filtered in, the girls with flowers in their hair, the boys wearing baggy shorts and baseball caps. James began by asking students to read dialogue from a dated English text, its content comically remote from tropical Tahiti.

" 'Good afternoon! I've come for the flat in Park Street. I read your ad in the *Evening Standard.* Can you tell me how much the rent is?' "

" 'It is eighty-five pounds a week.' "

" 'Do you often go to the ice rink?' "

" 'Yes, I love skating. What about you?' "

Then James handed the class over to us. Roger explained that he'd been born in England, puffed out his chest, and sang "God Save Our Gracious Queen." The students laughed, a trilling, high-pitched giggle. Roger asked if they knew any English songs. A few girls began singing, "Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on!" One of them came to the blackboard and wrote in careful block letters: "Les Beetles." Roger asked how old she was. "Thirty-three!" she exclaimed, writing her name, Vai Ana, which James translated as "Shining Water."

It was my turn. "I'm from America," I began. "What do you know about my country?"

A boy with two earrings and a necklace raised his hand. "I am surfer dude. Okay, man, hey brud." He turned his cap backward. "This is *la mode* skateboard. I drive boogie board also." His classmates collapsed in giggles. I told them that Roger and I had come to Tahiti to learn about James Cook. Roger assisted me by putting on the wig he'd worn at Point Venus.

"Is that him?" a boy asked.

"No. Cook is the man who is very dead," another said.

"Cook came from Australia."

"He was hungry. He wanted our food."

"He was the first *taero* here. A bad man."

James explained that *taero* was Tahitian for the pulp of a coconut. It was used as slang for white men, and also for smegma. Then he gave examples of Tahitian words influenced by English. Hammer was *hamara*. Nail was *naero*. And a common greeting, *yoana,* was believed to have derived from the English "your honor."

All island words ended in vowels, and certain English consonants had no precise equivalent in Tahitian. This explained why the English journals recorded that islanders called Cook "Toote" and Banks "Opane." Tahitian words, many of them impossibly crowded with vowels, gave Westerners just as much trouble. James asked us to try pronouncing a few for the amusement of his class, such as *faaaanoraa,* which means "widening," and *mauruuru,* meaning "thank you."

When the class ended, James told us another word, one that had relevance to Cook's visit: *horoa,* meaning "to give" or "to lend." Tahitians, James said, made little distinction between the two. "When someone uses *"horoa"* it means, 'I may return it to you, I may not. I'm not sure.' Behind that you see their sense of property. They will take my markers and books without asking, and never return them. It is the same if I leave clothes on the line at home. To us this is stealing, but to them, if you leave something out it is theirs to 'borrow.' "

James walked us around the school during the break before lunch. On one wall, an art class had painted a huge mural of a bare-breasted woman. Nearby, teenaged girls gathered round a boom box and performed a hip-thrusting dance much like the one we'd seen at the Captain Bligh nightclub. Then they ran to outdoor showers and soaked themselves, fully clothed, emerging like contestants in a wet T-shirt contest. "They are very casual about sex, even at this age," James said. He gave us another Tahitian word: *taurearea,* a period of adolescent license during which young people were permitted to indulge their desires. "We must constantly remind them that they are not allowed to kiss or hold hands in class."

Lunch was even more of a surprise, at least by American standards. James led us to an outdoor table set with silver, wineglasses, and a vase of hibiscus and bougainvillea. Six other teachers joined us, and two coquettish teenagers in short black dresses announced the menu: *salade verte,* followed by mussels, shrimp, veal, and assorted desserts—all of it prepared by a chef from France. "This is the best restaurant in Tahiti," James said, pouring us rosé. The waitresses, he explained, were students training for hotel jobs.

The teacher sitting to my right taught history. He said he devoted only a few hours each year to Bougainville, Cook, and other explorers. "You must remember, Cook fought the French in Canada, so he is not so popular for us," he said. "The winners write the history, no? In Canada, we lost, but in this place, we won." He took a sip of wine. "But really, Tahitians care very little about these old Europeans, it does not seem relevant to them."

He had much better success with ancient history. "They like Greece best, they see parallels to Tahiti. A land of many islands, tall mountains, great gods, and brave sailors. They also like Egypt and its sun god. This means much more to them than Cook or Louis Fourteenth."

He suspected that this fondness for myth and story had contributed, in the nineteenth century, to the success of Christian missionaries. "The great tales from the Old Testament, this would have had meaning to their life." Though the evangelical hold on islanders had loosened, he said many Tahitians still thought of their history as an evolution from pagan darkness to Christian light.

The literature teacher sitting on my left had also adapted her curriculum to suit island students. "They love romance and cry very easily, they like the sweet stuff," she said. *Romeo and Juliet* went over well, as did farces such as Molière's *Tartuffe*. "But they do not like Molière's miser, they cannot understand why someone would keep money to himself." Most of all, though, her students loved poetry and song. "The oral tradition is still very strong here, they prefer action and theater to reading."

After lunch, stupefied by food and wine, we walked to the Panda with James. I asked him for directions to the *marae* I'd planned to visit before we'd met him at the café the day before. "It is nothing now," he said. With the encouragement of missionaries, Tahitians had long ago torn up the temple's massive stones and used them to pave roads. "The Tahiti of Cook's day," James said, "it is entirely gone."

Chapter 3

TO BORA-BORA:
Sold a Pup

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?—TITLE OF A PAUL GAUGUIN MURAL OF POLYNESIA

Exploration generally springs from grand ambitions, however basely these dreams play out in practice: saving heathen souls, honoring nation and Crown, advancing scientific knowledge. It comes as a surprise, then, to read Cook's rationale for exploring an island cluster near Tahiti before proceeding in search of the Southern Continent.

"The Ships company," he wrote, "were in a worse state of hilth then they were on our first arrival, for by this time full half of them had got the Venereal disease." Judging his men "ill able to stand the cold weather we might expect to meet with to the southward," Cook "resolved to give them a little time to recover while we run down to and exploar'd the Islands." In other words, the famed isle of Bora-Bora and its neighbors would appear on English maps thanks to a raging case of the clap. Venereal disease was generally treated—if treated at all—with mercury, which often took care of the visible symptoms but caused side effects such as drooling and loss of balance.

With the high priest Tupaia acting as pilot and intermediary, the *Endeavour* sailed two days west of Tahiti to the small island of Huahine. Cook "set about surveying the Island" while Banks botanized. Neither man was impressed. Cook found few provisions,