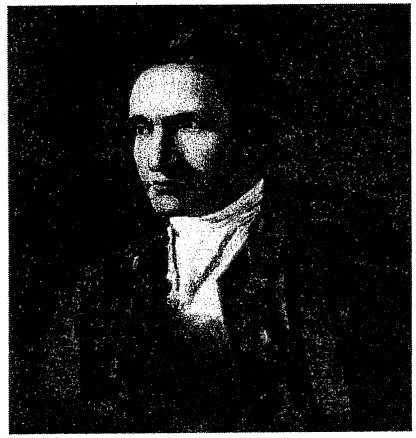

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Blue Latitudes

Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before

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Tony Horwitz

PROLOGUE:
The Distance Traveled

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. —THE JOURNAL OF CAPTAIN JAMES COOK

Just after dark on February 16, 1779, a *kahuna,* or holy man, rode a canoe to His Majesty's Sloop *Resolution,* anchored off the coast of Hawaii. The *kahuna* came aboard with a bundle under his arm. Charles Clerke, the ship's commander, unwrapped the parcel in the presence of his officers. He found "a large piece of Flesh which we soon saw to be Human," Clerke wrote in his journal. "It was clearly a part of the Thigh about 6 or 8 pounds without any bone at all."

Two days before, islanders had killed five of the ship's men on the lava shoreline of Kealakekua Bay, and carried off the bodies. Nothing had been seen of the corpses since. Unsure what to make of the *kahuna*'s grisly offering, Clerke and his men asked whether the rest of the body had been eaten. The Hawaiian seemed appalled by this question. Did Englishmen eat *their* foes?

Hawaiians weren't cannibals, the *kahuna* said. They cut up and cooked the bodies of high chiefs to extract certain bones that possessed godly power. Islanders distributed these remains among their leaders and discarded the flesh. Hence the *kahuna*'s return of the deboned thigh, "which," Clerk wrote, "he gave us to understand was part of our late unfortunate Captain."

PROLOGUE

James Cook, the *Resolution*'s captain, was one of the five men who had died on shore. There was no way of knowing for certain if this pungent thigh belonged to him. But several days later, the Hawaiians delivered another package, bundled in a feathered cloak. This one contained scorched limbs, a scalp with the ears attached and hair cut short, and two hands that had been scored and salted, apparently to preserve them. Fifteen years earlier, a powder horn had exploded in Cook's right hand, leaving an ugly gash. This "remarkable Cut," one of his lieutenants wrote, remained clearly visible on the severed right hand delivered to the ship.

While the Hawaiians were parceling out Cook's bones among their leaders, the English performed a parallel ritual aboard the *Resolution*. Officers and "gentlemen" divided and sold the captain's clothes and other effects, in accordance with shipboard custom. Two and a half years out from home, in waters no other Europeans had sailed before, the English needed the useful items in the dead captain's kit.

On the evening of February 21, the English put their flags at half-mast, crossed the ship's yards, tolled bells, and fired a ten-gun salute. "I had the remains of Capt Cook committed to the deep," Charles Clerke wrote, "with all the attention and honour we could possibly pay it in this part of the World."

The thirty-seven-year-old Clerke, who had inherited command of the *Resolution* following Cook's death, was himself dying, from tuberculosis. As the ship weighed anchor, he retired to his cabin, turning the quarterdeck over to Lieutenant James King and to the ship's brilliant but testy young master, William Bligh.

"Thus we left Karacacooa bay," King wrote, "a place become too remarkably famous for the very unfortunate & Tragical death of one of the greatest Navigators our Nation or any Nation ever had."

HALF A WORLD away from Kealakekua Bay, in a sodden Yorkshire churchyard, a single headstone honors the family into which James Cook was born. "To Ye Memory of Mary and Mary, Jane and William," the inscription reads, listing siblings who perished by the age of five. The stone also mentions James's older brother, John, who died at the age of twenty-three. A second epitaph commemorates the

mother and father of this short-lived brood: "James and Grace Cook were the parents of the celebrated circumnavigator Captain James Cook who was born at Marton Oct. 27th, 1728," the inscription says, "and killed at Owhyhee Dec. 14th, 1779."

The latter date is incorrect; Cook died in Hawaii on February 14. But this simple gravestone speaks more eloquently to the distance Cook had traveled than any of the grand monuments erected in his name. Cook was born just a few miles from his family's grave plot, in a mud-and-thatch hovel: a building type known in the North Riding of Yorkshire as a biggin. Farm animals wandered in and out of the hut's two small rooms. Sacking and meadowsweet, spread on the dirt floor, kept down the damp and odor.

Cook's father worked as a day laborer, close to the bottom of Britain's stratified society. The prospects for a day laborer's son were bleak, even if he survived the harsh conditions that killed most of Cook's siblings in early childhood. Public education didn't exist. There was very little mobility, social or geographic. The world of the rural poor remained what it had been for generations: a day's walk in radius, a tight, well-trod loop between home, field, church, and, finally, a crowded family grave plot.

James Cook didn't just break this cycle; he exploded it. Escaping to sea as a teenager, he became a coal-ship apprentice and joined the Royal Navy as a lowly "able seaman." From there, he worked his way to the upper reaches of the naval hierarchy and won election to the Royal Society, the pinnacle of London's intellectual establishment. Cook's greatest feat, though, was the three epic voyages of discovery he made in his forties—midlife today, closer to the grave in the eighteenth century.

In 1768, when Cook embarked on the first, roughly a third of the world's map remained blank, or filled with fantasies: sea monsters, Patagonian giants, imaginary continents. Cook sailed into this void in a small wooden ship and returned, three years later, with charts so accurate that some of them stayed in use until the 1990s.

On his two later voyages, Cook explored from the Arctic to the Antarctic, from Tasmania to Tierra del Fuego, from the northwest shore of America to the far northeast coast of Siberia. By the time he died, still on the job, Cook had sailed over 200,000 miles in the course of his career—roughly equivalent to circling the equator eight times, or

voyaging to the moon. "Owhyhee," a sun-struck paradise unknown to the West before Cook arrived, was as far as a man could go from the drear Yorkshire churchyard he seemed destined at birth to occupy.

Cook not only redrew the map of the world, creating a picture of the globe much like the one we know today; he also transformed the West's image of nature and man. His initial Pacific sail, on a ship called *Endeavour,* was the first of its kind in Britain—a voyage of scientific discovery, carrying trained observers: artists, astronomers, naturalists. The ship's botanists collected so much exotic flora that they expanded the number of known plant species in the West by a quarter. This seeded the modern notion of biodiversity and made possible the discoveries of men such as Charles Darwin, who followed in the *Endeavour*'s path aboard the *Beagle*.

Similarly, the art and writing of Cook and his men, and the native objects they collected, called "artificial curiosities," transfixed the West with images of unfamiliar peoples: erotic Tahitian dancers, Maori cannibals, clay-painted Aborigines. Sailors adopted the Polynesian adornment called tattoo, and words such as "taboo" entered the Western lexicon. A London brothel keeper offered a special night to her clients, featuring "a dozen beautiful Nymphs" performing the ritualized sex Cook had witnessed in Tahiti. Poets and philosophers seized on the South Seas as a liberating counterpoint to Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, Benjamin Franklin issued an extraordinary order, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, commanding American naval officers to treat Cook and his men as friends rather than foes.

For the lands and peoples Cook encountered, the impact of his voyages was just as profound, and far more destructive. His decade of discovery occurred on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution. The steam engine and spinning jenny emerged as Cook set off on his first Pacific tour; Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, as Cook embarked on his last. His explorations opened vast new territories to the West's burgeoning economies and empires, and all that came with them: whalers, missionaries, manufactured goods, literacy, rum, guns, syphilis, smallpox.

Cook, in sum, pioneered the voyage we are still on, for good and ill. "More than any other person," writes the historian Bernard Smith, "he helped to make the world one."

LIKE MOST AMERICANS I grew up knowing almost nothing of Captain Cook, except what I learned in fifth-grade geography class. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I also absorbed his adventures through episodes of *Star Trek*. A suburban kid, growing up in a decade when even the moon had been conquered, I never ceased to feel a thrill at the TV show's opening words: "These are the voyages of the Starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before!"

It wasn't until years later that I realized how much *Star Trek* echoed a true story. Captain James Cook; Captain James Kirk. The *Endeavour*; the *Enterprise*. Cook, the Yorkshire farm boy, writing in his journal that he'd sailed "farther than any other man has been before." Kirk, the Iowa farm boy, keeping his own log about boldly going "where no man has gone before!" Cook rowed jolly boats ashore, accompanied by his naturalist, his surgeon, and musket-toting, red-jacketed marines. Kirk "beamed down" to planets with the science officer Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and phaser-wielding, red-jerseyed "expendables." Both captains also set out—at least in theory—to discover and describe new lands, rather than to conquer or convert.

In my twenties, I fell in love with an Australian and followed her to Sydney. Geraldine and I found a house just a few miles from the beach where Cook and his men, landing in 1770, became the first Europeans to visit the east coast of Australia. My new surrounds seemed wondrous but disorienting: the sun blazing in the northern sky, scribbly gums that shed bark instead of leaves, fruit bats squeaking at night in the fig trees. One day at an antiquarian bookshop, I found a copy of Cook's journals and read his own impressions of this strange land over two centuries before me.

"It was of a light Mouse colour and the full size of a grey hound and shaped in every respect like one," Cook wrote of a creature he saw fleetingly near shore. "I would have taken it for a wild dog, but for its walking or running in which it jumped like a Hare or a dear." Unsure what to call this odd beast, Cook referred to it simply as "the animal." Later, he inserted the native word, which he rendered "kanguru." The

Endeavour carried home a skull and skin, the first kangaroo specimen in the West. It resided in a London museum until destroyed in the Blitz during World War II.

Even stranger to Cook and his men were Aborigines, who possessed almost nothing—not even loincloths—yet showed a complete disdain for European goods. To well-born gentlemen aboard the *Endeavour*, this was evidence of native brutishness. Cook took a much more thoughtful and humane view. "Being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary conveniences so sought after in Europe, they are happy not knowing the use of them," he wrote. "They live in Tranquility which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition."

I returned to these words years later, while reading on the back porch of my house in America. After a decade of circumnavigating the globe as foreign correspondents, Geraldine and I had settled down, bought an old house, planted a garden, had a child. At forty, I'd tired of travel, of dislocation. Part of me wanted to rot, like my porch in Virginia. Then, one lazy summer's day, I picked up my neglected copy of Cook's journals. In Australia, I'd only scanned them. This time I read for days: about human sacrifice and orgiastic sex in Tahiti, charmed arrows and poison fish in Vanuatu, sailors driven mad off Antarctica by "the Melancholy Croaking of Innumerable Penguins." And, at the center of it all, a man my own age, coolly navigating his ship through the most extraordinary perils imaginable.

"One is carried away with the general, grand, and indistinct notion of A VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD," James Boswell confided to Samuel Johnson after dining with Cook in London. Perched in a cane rocker on my back porch in Virginia, lawn mowers murmuring in the distance, I felt the same impulse. Apart from the coast near Sydney, I'd seen none of the territory Cook explored: Bora-Bora, the Bering Sea, the Great Barrier Reef, Tonga, Kealakekua Bay—the list of alluring destinations seemed endless.

I wondered what these places were like today, if any trace of Cook's boot prints remained. I also wanted to turn the spyglass around. Cook and his men were as exotic to islanders as natives seemed to the English. What had Pacific peoples made of pale strangers appearing from the sea, and how did their descendants remember Cook now?

I wanted to probe Cook, as well. His journals recorded every detail of where he went, and what he did. They rarely revealed why. Perhaps, following in Cook's wake, I could fathom the biggin-born farm boy whose ambition drove him farther than any man, until it killed him on a faraway shore called Owhyhee.