CAPTAIN COOK REDISCOVERED

Voyaging to the Icy Latitudes

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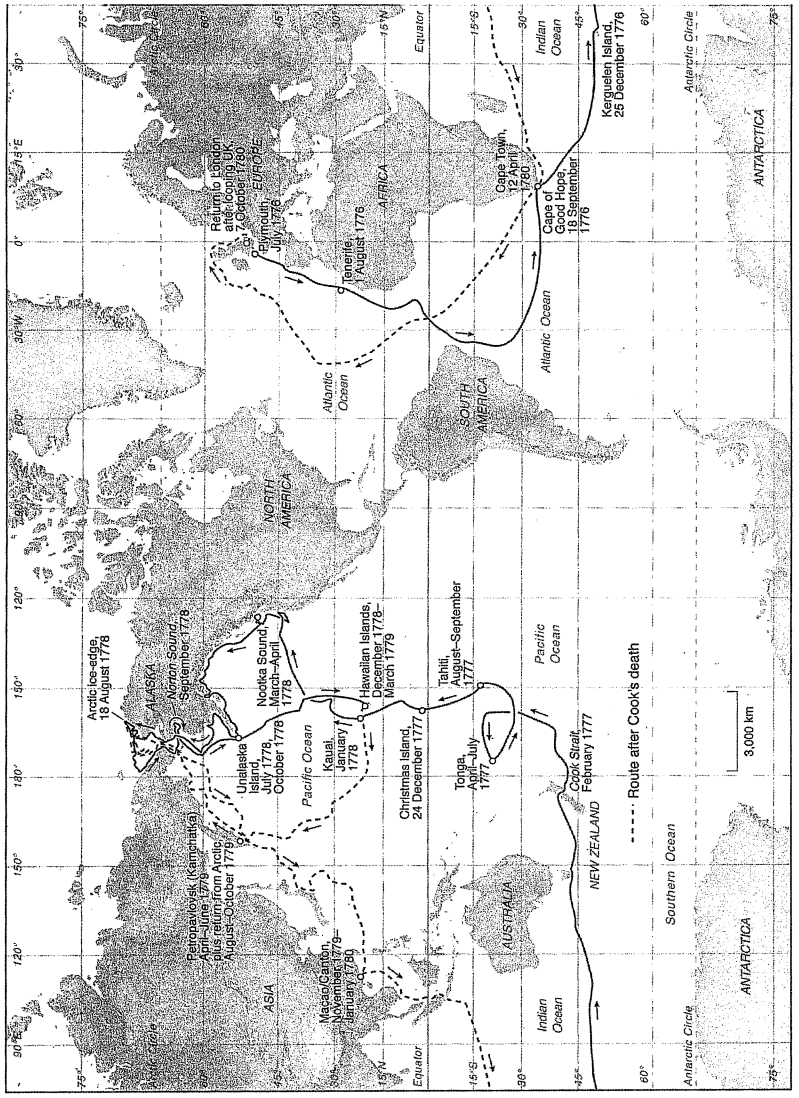

Cook's Third Voyage, *Resolution*, 1776–80. Route of exploration and return journey to England after Captain Cook's Death. Map by Eric Leinberger

Introduction

On January 30, 1774, in the mid-summer sun, James Cook's *Resolution* stretched southward at an unprecedented rate. Cook was on his second voyage, a quest for Terra Australis Incognita, the hypothetical southern continent that mirrored the Eurasian land mass. Cook had just crossed the Antarctic Circle (66° 33' S) for the third time, once in the Indian Ocean and earlier that same season in the Pacific. In the previous instances, after crossing the line, he had encountered the ice pack, which prevented him from sailing farther south. Before *Resolution* had taken to sea, Joseph Banks, a nobleman-naturalist and the most celebrated figure from Cook's first voyage, had joked about the prospect of cruising directly to the South Pole. In a fit of egotism, Banks talked himself out of accompanying Cook on the second voyage. But to all aboard *Resolution* in that day's long light and remarkably mild weather, heretofore unprecedented at that or any near latitude, it seemed Banks's quip was about to be realized.

Nature was only teasing, of course, because Cook soon detected the blink, the sun's reflection off the impenetrable ice pack guarding Antarctica's shore. Cook reached 71° 10' S, nearly four degrees of latitude closer to the pole than his previous high mark. At this juncture, southwest of Cape Horn, Cook inscribed in his journal the most famous line of text that he or any other explorer has ever committed to writing: "I whose ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has been before me, but as far as I think it possible for man to go, was not sorry at meeting with this interruption, as it in some measure relieved us from the dangers and hardships, inseparable with the Navigation of the Southern Polar regions."[1]

Cook turned north at that point to winter in the tropics before resuming his search for Terra Australis in the South Atlantic the next year. But this passage was later immortalized. In the space age of the 1960s, Gene Roddenberry adapted it into the epigram for his *Star Trek* series. Stylistically, the passage also prefigured Neil Armstrong's famous "great

leap for man" exclamation, made when he first set foot on the moon, two hundred years to the month after Cook left Tahiti, his defining destination for the *Endeavour* voyage, in 1769. More recently, Tony Horwitz adapted Cook's text for the subtitle of his popular book *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before* (2002).[2]

It is ironic that the forceful imagery and narrative expressiveness that Cook employed on reaching the farthest south became the emblematic expression for his career. It is virtually the only aspect of his voyages into the icy latitudes that students of his career are intimately familiar with. The only incident that comes close came during Cook's third voyage in search of a Northwest Passage across the top of North America. In the summer of 1778, north of the Alaskan subcontinent that he would be the first to delineate cartographically, Cook and his men on *Resolution* saw another blink, presaging that the Arctic ice pack would stymie their progress to the northeast and Baffin Bay. This time, Cook turned west, hoping to flank the ice. He then sent some of the crew out in the ship's small boats to hunt walruses to supplement the provisions stored on board. There was some grumbling about this unappetizing meat recorded in the journals of a few midshipmen. Historians later conflated these remarks into a larger narrative that Cook had, by this point, lost his touch as a commander, a mere six months before he would be killed in Hawaii. Yet this same community of historians has long recounted a similar story from the *Endeavour* voyage to favourably illustrate how Cook implemented dietary controls in his legendary battle against scurvy. During that voyage, the crew rebelled over having to eat sauerkraut until Cook cagily directed that the officers be seen eating it. Cook recorded: "Altho it be ever so much for their good yet it will not go down with them and you will hear nothing but murmurings gainest the man that first invented it; but the Moment they see their Superiors set a Value upon it, it becomes the finest stuff in the World and the inventer an honest fellow."[3]

These vignettes underscore the two major revisions to the Cook story presented in this book. First, Horwitz's travelogue falls comfortably within what I call the palm-tree paradigm. Notwithstanding that Horwitz subtitled his book after Cook's legendary statement from the edge of the Antarctic ice pack, he focuses on the sun-drenched beaches of Hawaii, Tahiti, and other South Pacific islands – where Cook's famous cross-cultural encounters occurred. But Horwitz largely ignores Cook's travels to those parts of the world that are of ever-increasing significance in the twenty-first century: the icy latitudes of the Indian, Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic oceans.

Horwitz dismissed reading about Cook's Antarctic probes as "the literary equivalent of chewing on ice cubes."[4]

Most historians, indeed Cook's contemporaries, seized on enchanting island venues as the essential setting for understanding his expeditions. The icy latitudes and their cold temperatures never generated comparable interest in the literature, in the eighteenth century or since. Simon Winchester argues that palm trees became "central to Pacific imagery" because they provide "a picture-perfect and theatrically green backdrop for every beach scene."[5] That the polar zones are lightly inhabited and infrequently visited should not make them less relevant to the study of Cook. Given the current global climate crisis, the opposite could be true.

The anthropological perspective that dominates Cook discourse comes at the cost of understanding the full geographic scope of his endeavours, including their new climatological relevance.[6] In most books about Cook, the story is largely confined to the following formula: no encounter, no voyage. But taken as environmental history, Cook's experience in frigid seas can be considered a compelling indicator of the pace of global warming. This perspective is particularly true of his final voyage in search of the Northwest Passage. If Cook had sailed through the Bering Strait in the conditions of August 2020 instead of August 1778, he might have passed eastward through the northern Canadian archipelago, emerged at Baffin Bay, and headed home to England. In that sense, Cook did not fail to discover the Northwest Passage: he was merely ahead of his time.

The Cook we think we know, the tropical Cook, is a narrative construct – he is largely the product of other writers, including the editors of his accounts. The modern literature analyzing his career, though voluminous, is remarkably orthodox. The double standard evident in the walrus meat and sauerkraut stories highlights the most constant assertion in contemporary Cook historiography and the second revisionist theme of this book: that Cook never should have conducted his fatal third voyage because he was exhausted after piloting the first two and fatally overextended himself by overseeing another. The most salient sub-elements of this view are 1) that Cook had become complacent, perhaps careless or cruel, in his relations with Indigenous peoples; 2) that he lacked his customary professional detachment, resulting in a more fractious relationship with his crew; and 3) that he was not as geographically curious on this voyage as he had been during his first two expeditions. It is routinely observed that these presumptive failings prefigure his inevitable demise at Kealakekua Bay in February 1779.

The interpretive homogeneity applied to Cook's third expedition is a function of the oversized influence of John Cawte Beaglehole, editor of *The Journals of Captain James Cook.* Few historians have had such sway over a subject. His summative biography of Cook, which grew out of his editorial work, created such an indelible image that it has become difficult to see Cook outside of Beaglehole's lens. Historians Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston asserted a generation ago that Beaglehole "dominated the field of Cook studies in a way that no individual now can or, perhaps, ought to do." In the introduction to their 1979 edited volume, *Captain James Cook and His Times,* they maintained that the best scholarship emanated from the South Pacific and that no figure exemplified "antipodean domination" more than Beaglehole, a native New Zealander. Fisher and Johnston's goal was to bring geographic balance to the interpretation of Cook's career. One of the contributors to the volume, Michael Hoare, confidently claimed that "the pendulum of Cook scholarship is moving back to Europe, to the north Pacific, its islands and coasts."[7]

Yet this shift never happened. What Fisher and Johnston could not have anticipated was the academic dust-up between Marshall Sahlins, Gananath Obeyesekere, and scholarly book reviewers that raged in the 1990s. The Cook-Lono debate – on whether Hawaiians treated Cook as a deity and how related circumstances precipitated his death – solidly reinforced Cook studies within the palm-tree paradigm. Although this literary intensity has ebbed in the quarter century since, one consequence endures: Cook's story in the icy latitudes is still relatively unknown.

Cook's fastidiousness as a navigator is oft remarked on, but one facet of his style has been overlooked – his fidelity to mission. His strict adherence to the strategic purpose of the third voyage is a probative example. Historians of the Pacific Northwest commonly disparage Cook's competence by noting that he missed the outfall of the Columbia River and the Straits of Juan de Fuca when he sailed up the Pacific Coast in 1778. But, as stipulated by Admiralty instructions, he was not to look for the Northwest Passage until he reached "the Latitude of 65°, or farther, if you are not obstructed by Lands or Ice." This specification had been informed by Samuel Hearne's terrestrial exploration northwest of Hudson Bay earlier that decade. Cook was cautioned "not to lose any time in exploring Rivers or Inlets" until he got to 65° N. Only then was he to search for those openings "as may appear to be of a considerable extent and pointing towards Hudsons or Baffins Bay."[8]

Cook scrupulously adhered to this guidance. But because he was occasionally out of sight of land, he never recorded those mid-latitude apertures, exposing himself to second-guessing by maritime fur traders who followed his track more minutely. Historians conventionally posit George Vancouver's expedition as a corrective to Cook's supposed inadequacies, but Vancouver's and Cook's missions differed. Vancouver was looking for a different version of the Northwest Passage – the one pelt merchants and hypothetical geographers had conjured in Cook's wake. Ironically, Cook's faithful adherence to the specifications of his third voyage – including avoidance of attractive nuisances such as rivers and inlets – caused his thoroughness to be called into question.

Stories of Cook's supposed nonfeasance along the Northwest Coast are a regional extension of Beaglehole's notion that the Cook of his first and second voyages would not have let slip the opportunities for exploration that the third afforded. Before reaching North America, Cook passed on chances to survey dozens of South Pacific islands. Many were mere reefs and sandy islets, but Beaglehole was shocked that even when it came to Samoa and Fiji, the great Cook was "content to enquire into them no further." Seeming to take Cook's alleged indifference to the southwest Pacific as a regional slight, Beaglehole then put forward his defining proposition: "Can there be any doubt that Cook on his second voyage, if he had heard of their existence ... would have been after them, fastened them down securely on his Pacific chart, even at the cost of minor disorganization to his time plan?" Beaglehole followed this suggestion with the most influential question ever asked about Cook's career and certainly about his execution of the third voyage: "Is it possible that, just as unsuspected strain on his mind was beginning to affect his attitude to the human situation, so, in relation to unexpected geographic possibilities, he was beginning to experience a certain tiredness?"[9]

In *Cook: The Extraordinary Voyages of Captain Cook,* Nicholas Thomas highlights that this single rhetorical question led to the conventional view that Cook should have quit after his first two expeditions. From its careful, tentative birth in Beaglehole's introduction to the journals of the third voyage, the notion that Cook was experiencing fatigue became the fundamental premise for understanding his last expedition. The idea was especially favoured and expanded on, Thomas argues, by postcolonial authors whose allegiance lay with the aggrieved Indigenous peoples whom Cook visited. In these historians' hands, Beaglehole's merely fatigued Cook becomes a violent and irrational man whose compromised judgment led to his death.[10]

Beaglehole contended that the third voyage differed from the others in the obvious sense of geographic scope but more critically, if elusively,

in feeling. Like most hypotheses, Beaglehole said his could be controverted, but no one has tried. Books published this century still habitually posit the axiomatic James Cook – that is, the diminished-third-voyage-explorer trope stipulating that his "behaviour had shifted significantly" or that he was acting "out of character." Usually, such assertions have a teleological purpose; one author noted that Cook "had become a tired and sick man, and his condition may have contributed to his death."[11]

Most authors treating Cook's career follow the narrative convention of disentangling his life in chronological order. This book is sequential, too, but it deviates from the norm in not privileging Cook's first voyage (briefly treated in Part 1) or, more generally, the time he spent in the tropics during all three voyages. In these pages, the emphasis is on his second and third voyages, particularly in the icy latitudes. Though he has been cemented in the popular and scholarly imaginations within the tropics, Cook was a polar explorer of the first rank. Even less appreciated is that he was a pioneering ice scientist. In the Arctic, that honour is sometimes bestowed on William Scoresby – a whaler who studied the natural history of the region, including sea-ice formation – based on a paper he delivered at a scientific meeting in Scotland in 1815. Others credit the better-known Fridjof Nansen, whose ice-embedded voyage in the *Fram* (1893–96) gained worldwide attention. James Eights, the naturalist aboard Nathaniel Palmer's 1829 sealing and exploratory voyage is often acclaimed as the first Antarctic scientist. Turning the palm-tree paradigm on its head, I argue that James Cook and Johann Forster, chief naturalist on the second voyage's circumnavigation of Antarctica, were the true originators of polar climatology.

Any discussion of Cook in the icy latitudes must take into account the prevailing theory that deep saltwater did not freeze. Cook's contemporaries believed that icebergs and packed ice were frozen masses that had emanated from rivers. This was an ancient idea, popularized in Cook's time by Daines Barrington, a member of the Royal Society with connections to the British Admiralty (though the foremost contemporary theoretician was the Swiss bibliophile Samuel Engel). The now preposterous notion that seawater did not freeze fed a corollary proposition almost more incredible to modern sensibilities – that the North Pole was altogether free of ice because no land was thought to be proximate to it. As shown in Part 2, the great masses of ice that Cook and Forster encountered while criss-crossing the Southern Hemisphere's empty high latitudes, juxtaposed with the shrinking size of any putative southern continent at or near the South Pole, informed their skepticism of reigning glaciological theory.

Cook then refined their scientific breakthroughs during his subsequent voyage to the Arctic. Our modern understanding of polar hydrology owes much to his observations.

Another common practice in Cook historiography since Beaglehole has been to view the alleged shortcomings of the third voyage through the gauzy lens that was turned on the first two – in other words, to emphasize supposed deviations from a previously exemplary pattern. I challenge that perspective by documenting the consistency of Cook's deportment across all three voyages. In doing so, I highlight activities on the earlier voyages that are typically unimpeached in the Cook literature but would not be if they had occurred during the third. Cook's last expedition is usually characterized as an anticlimactic quest for the Northwest Passage, as a mere prologue to his undoing in Hawaii. Here, I invert that model, for, if studied within the context of Cook's mission and not his death, the northern voyage was the most ambitious and consequential in terms of geographic comprehension.

In Part 3, I argue that Cook the navigator and geographic problem solver was as conscientious during the third voyage as he was during the first two. I present evidence that controverts the common supposition that Cook's abilities had been stretched too far by analyzing his time in the high northern latitudes on its own terms, not as an extension of the southern voyages nor as an interlude before his inevitable death in Hawaii. Cook was always conscious of the true mission of the final voyage, even if some of his shipboard contemporaries, and many modern authors, fault the way he executed it. After he completed the second expedition circumnavigating Antarctica, Cook considered himself "done" with the (south) Pacific.[12] Accordingly, as is documented in Chapter 8, prior to striking out for North America's Pacific Coast, Cook had no intention of making discoveries in Polynesia. The region was merely a staging area for the sail north.

Cook's Arctic campaign reached its crescendo in August 1778, when, off the Alaskan coast at 70° 44' N, he was stymied by a wall of ice twelve feet high. This was as far north as he would get, not quite matching the southern extremity reached on the second voyage. At his northern apex, twenty-five months after the expedition's launch, with cold and fatigue settling into the bodies and minds of his crew, Cook diligently probed westward along the ice edge for eleven more gruelling days. He exhausted every prospect for an opening through or around the ice pack and rarely had a clear view of his surroundings because of the Arctic fog. He relied on navigational guidance from the incessant barking of the walruses

abounding on the ice edge. Contrary to the tired-voyager hypothesis, it was the most vigorous sailing of his career, a mere six months before his death.

When Cook left Alaska in October 1778, the expedition, according to the original timeline, should have been coming to a close. But having come so far and unsatisfied with his first attempt, he announced a plan to extend the voyage into an unprecedented fourth year. Cook had so thoroughly inculcated a culture of diligent exploration and fidelity to mission that even after his death the expedition's demoralized crew, now commanded by Charles Clerke, returned to the Arctic in the summer of 1779. Most books treat Clerke's return and subsequent events in China as an afterthought; many ignore it completely. To an extent, this is to be expected; a biographical portrait can only extend to the duration of a subject's life. But this tendency need not apply to the history of an expedition, as opposed to a man. The interpretive pattern that presumes a supposedly lesser figure such as Clerke does not merit much attention has damaged our understanding of Cook's final voyage and its relationship to Arctic environmental history. In Part 4, we see an expedition still guided by Cook's logic model and ethos. Even after the second fruitless attempt in the Arctic, and Clerke's own death shortly thereafter, the surviving leadership team dedicated itself to making further contributions to Europe's understanding of East Asian geography. On its way home, Cook's expedition inadvertently seeded the maritime fur trade along the Northwest Coast, the one aspect of Cook's execution of the third voyage for which historians have given him more credit than he deserves. This mercantile development spurred a new vision for the Northwest Passage, one that culminated in the clarity that George Vancouver brought to regional geography.

Cook's final voyage was not a continuation of his earlier expeditions in the South Pacific, nor a fatal mistake, but a crowning navigational achievement. More largely put, by emphasizing Cook's work in the icy latitudes, where he spent more time under sail than in the tropical zones to which he is usually consigned (of necessity by anthropologists; for historians, by their choice), we can discover a new Captain Cook. In the twenty-first century, an age whose hallmark will be massive climate change, perhaps it is time to acknowledge that the environmental backdrop for a newly relevant Cook is not a warm sandy beach, nor even the ocean blue, but a cool summer along that Alaska coastline that leads to the Arctic ice pack.

PART ONE *Prequels*