

Captain Cook Oration

16th October 2014

by Rob Southey

Gentlemen

It is a pleasure to be here today, and to speak to you about Captain Cook. However I should make it clear that I do so as a friend of Cook's 27th October soul mates, not as a scholar of the great navigator. Indeed, asking me to speak on Cook to an erudite gathering such as this is, to use the words of the scriptures, to lay upon a grasshopper the load of a camel.

I will restrict my comments to exploring two questions. First, how did the son of a Yorkshire farm labourer, with scant education and no apparent patronage, become the greatest navigator the world has known? And, second, how is it that a man who was so renowned for his humanity, and loved by the islanders of the Pacific, should come to die at the hands of those islanders on the western shores of Hawaii?

To start with Cook's remarkable seamanship, I believe that the secret to understanding Cook's navigational abilities lies precisely *in* his humble background. Cook did not go into the Royal Navy as a midshipman, as did most of the officers not only at that time but well into the 20th century. Rather, he served his apprenticeship in the coastal coal trade.

At the age of 17, while working in a general store, young Cook's imagination was caught by the graceful ships lying in Whitby harbour, and he persuaded some local ship-owners to take him on as an apprentice on their barques, which took coal and other goods from the north-eastern ports down the coast of England and up the Thames to London.

Therefore, rather than sailing in deep water with the Royal Navy, Cook spent almost 10 years in the coal trade, tacking up and down the unlit coasts of England, in and out of tidal estuaries, dodging shoals and sandbanks, and battling storms.

For this shallow water navigation, a man needed to know intimately the outline of the coast and the nature of the sea bottom, the tides, the currents and the shoals - a navigation of keen eye and caution. James Cook came to maturity, as it were, on a lee shore, with the lead line as a key tool of navigation. What better background could one have for picking one's way through the shallow, treacherous, uncharted coral reefs of north-east Australia and the Pacific? If you have been to the top of Cook's Look on Lizard Island, as I have, and scanned the waters to the east for a passage out to the open sea beyond the breakers, you will feel respect not only for Cook's navigation, but for his courage, too.

I believe that it was this apprenticeship in the coastal coal trade that was the secret of Cook's remarkable seamanship and navigational skills close to shore.

The second aspect of Cook's extraordinary achievements relates to the era in which he lived. Cook was fortunate to live in an age of great instrument-makers. He was not a scientist but he was a connoisseur of the instruments he used - and he could use them, when he got them, with a skill and an accuracy that few others could match.

The invention of the quadrant in the first decade of Cook's life, and its modification into the sextant only two years after he joined the Navy, made it much easier to determine one's

latitude. But neither of these instruments dealt with the most difficult navigational problem of the time, that of finding your longitude at sea.

Up to this time, for their longitude even the best sea captains had to rely on what was known as dead reckoning. This involved, crucially, measuring the speed of your ship by using a log and log-line. The compass would then tell you in which direction you were sailing; and with experience you could estimate current and leeway. Putting all these components together, under good conditions, you could fix an approximate daily position - if you were lucky.

And, for those of you who are not sailors, it might be worth reminding you that the word log, as in log book, comes from the plank of wood - literally, the log - that was dropped back from the stern of the ship, attached to a long reel of line known as the log line, to tell how fast the ship was sailing. In the same way, the term knots - as in nautical miles per hour - comes from the knots that were tied into the log line. It was the number of those knots, running through his hand in a minute, which the seaman used to calculate the speed of the ship.

The key to resolving longitude turned out to be the chronometer - specifically, John Harrison's fourth chronometer, a large flat watch which Harrison built in 1761. This clock would continue to show the correct time at Greenwich wherever the ship was, whatever its movements and regardless of conditions of heat or cold or storm. If you could ascertain your own local time, astronomically or by pocket watch, you could then multiply by 15 the difference between your own time and Greenwich time and that would give you your exact longitude in minutes.

The timing was thus fortuitous for Cook, who was the first to trial Harrison's chronometer in a circumnavigation of the world. In point of fact, Cook's clock was actually a copy made by the London watchmaker, Larcum Kendall, hence Cook's name for it, "Mr Kendall's watch".

Joseph Gilbert, who was master of the Resolution, refers in his diary to "Kendal's watch, which is most certainly the greatest piece of mechanism the world has yet produced."

Kendall's watch cost the Admiralty 450 pounds, or just over \$100,000 in current values, and you can still see it, in its burnished silver case, ticking steadily on in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

It is not to diminish Cook's achievements to say that he had access to instruments and methods that were denied to other men in earlier ages. As a marine surveyor and hydrographer he remains without peer, and it is typical of his generous spirit that he was always quick to register his indebtedness to the great scientific inventors and instrument makers who made his exploits possible.

Perhaps the second aspect of Cook worth exploring is to attempt to answer the question of why this most humane and respectful of explorers should have died in a sordid scuffle in the Sandwich Islands.

In an age better known for conquest than humanity towards indigenous people, it is worth mentioning the advice given to the officers of the *Endeavour* not by the Lords of the Admiralty - whose secret orders were largely scientific and geo-political - but by the President of the Royal Society, a body to which Cook himself was elected in 1776.

The Earl of Morton told Cook, Banks and Solander (and I quote) "to exercise the utmost patience and forbearance with respect to the natives of the several lands where the ship may

touch. To check the petulance of the sailors and restrain the wanton use of fire arms. To have it still in view that shedding the blood of those people is a crime of the highest nature ... They are the natural, and in the strictest sense of the word, the legal possessors of the several regions they inhabit.” He added: “The natives ... should be treated with distinguished humanity and made sensible that the crew still considers them as lords of the country.”

Legal possessors? Lords of the country? Not being a lawyer, I cannot say how one might square these views with the doctrine of *terra nullius*. However, while neither Lord Morton nor anyone else knew anything of the Australian aborigines, it seems to me that in asserting that the natives of the Pacific were “the legal possessors of the several regions they inhabit,” Morton may have been two hundred years ahead of his time.

As leader of the expedition, Cook realised that when the smooth running of voyages depended on reliable Polynesian bases, good relations with the natives were essential. His behaviour towards the islanders was therefore based on the most sensible prudential motives as well as a genuine respect and sympathy for the island peoples and their way of life.

Indeed, one could say that it was his humanity which brought Cook’s voyages their success, just as much as the soundness of his seamanship and the brilliance of his navigation.

Even so, in Cook’s eyes there were a few unforgivable offences: theft, attempted desertion, the loss of weapons by sentinels ashore, and maltreatment of native people.

Cook was a temperate man, with strength of mind, a sense of duty, persistence, foresight, understanding and affability of conversation. But while a temperate man, he could also be short of temper, though his anger was short-lived.

How was it, then, that Cook met his end when he did, in an affray with the Hawaiians, men with whom he had been on excellent terms? It is one of the great ironies of Pacific exploration.

Put briefly, there were faults and misfortunes on both sides. It seems that by early 1779, after nearly ten years of more or less incessant exploration, and three long voyages including two circumnavigations of the globe, Cook was close to physical and mental exhaustion. Certainly Beaglehole, on whose judgment I rely, believes that on his third voyage Cook was not consistently quite the man he had been before. He did not venture into the islands with the same elasticity of spirit. The sternness was a little more evident, the quick temper not so constantly dampened down.

When in January 1779, Cook put into Kealakekua Bay, he was enthusiastically welcomed by the Hawaiians. His officers and men were popular and could wander and explore where they liked in perfect safety, and aided in every possible way. The only drawback was the assiduousness with which the locals stole - stole anything, but particularly anything of iron. Stole skilfully and brazenly by day, stole surreptitiously by night.

It was the theft of the Discovery’s cutter which provoked Cook’s anger and his last trip ashore. His plan was to take a chief as hostage for return of the boat - a peaceful operation which had often succeeded before. The chief was reluctant to come; the crowd grew menacing; Cook’s temper suddenly frayed. He fired a warning with small shot and, when that had no effect, he used ball and shot a man dead; and then it was the turn of the Hawaiian tempers. Cook immediately regained control of himself; his last gesture, as he was struck down into the water on the beach, may have been to order his men to stop firing.

A tragedy, crammed into a few minutes, of the great man betrayed by a tiny flaw in his greatness.

For those of you who have made a study of Cook and his achievements, I fear that little of this will be new. Indeed, is there anything I could possibly tell you about Cook that you don't know already?

Well, one thing, perhaps - slight but just possibly of inconsequential interest. And that is, that the first monument to James Cook in this colony was erected in Geelong. Its ruins are still there, where I located them a fortnight ago, almost covered by acanthus, in the grassy bowl which is Johnstone Park, those gardens just in front of the Art Gallery and not far from the boundary of the electorate of Corangamite.

It was a modest monument - a wooden pump and drinking fountain - built on a stone foundation by an English migrant, Stitt Jenkins, in 1859.

Approaching the fountain from the north side, one used to encounter a plaque, now long lost, on which could be read the following inscription: "Until Australians think it time to provide a better monument, This little fountain is erected, Commemorative of Captain James Cook, Who was born at Marton in Yorkshire, 1728, and Died for England 14th February 1779. Respect this humble tribute and harm it not."

Why is this monument so little known, and why has it been allowed to fall into decay? Perhaps the explanation can be found in the inscription one encountered on the *south* side: "Geelong Total Abstinence Society. Sober concerts for the people, Temperance Hall, Little Malop Street, each Monday evening."

Yes, a call for abstinence from that now fortunately endangered species, the Geelong teetotallers. Little wonder that our member for Corangamite chose not to oversee its repair and restoration.

And now, in case you fear that I have been contaminated by this research, may I ask you to see that you have something in your glasses, and to stand, and join me in drinking a toast to the great man -

to CAPTAIN JAMES COOK.

Thank you.