

Captain Cook and Pacific Islanders: "All Imaginable Humanity"?

by

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The mixed feelings people in Hawaii have shown about celebrating the major anniversaries of Captain Cook's arrival in 1778 remind us rather forcibly that Pacific Islanders have good cause to both detest and honor the memory of James Cook. For the non-Pacific world the grim events at Kealahakua Bay on February 14, 1779 propelled an already famous explorer into "the lofty realms where only saints and martyrs and heroes dwell."¹ Secure though Cook's place in history will always be, the human dimensions of Cook's encounters with Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders continue to trouble their descendants.² Our consciousness of the mistakes made at Kealahakua Bay by an aging, exasperated and irascible man in his eighth year of Pacific voyaging prompts the question: How well did Cook live all those years by the lofty standards he promulgated to his men when they arrived in Matavai Bay on his first voyage?--"To endeavour by every fair means to cultivate a friendship with the Natives and to treat them with all imaginable humanity."³

¹ Bernard Smith, "Cook's Posthumous Reputation", draft manuscript for paper delivered at Captain James Cook and His Times Conference, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby B.C., Canada, 1978. Typescript courtesy of author.

² See the Maui-based Valley Isle, January 18-31, 1978, for readers' perceptions of Cook's character. "Captain Cook was a mahu," said one. Maui had no bicentennial celebrations.

³ J.C. Beaglehole, ed., The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery, 4 vols. (London: 1955), I, 75. Cook's wording condensed his original instructions (p. cclxxx).

The test of this policy did not come in Tahiti where the people had already learned the dangers of resistance from the guns of their first European visitor, Captain Wallis, and had prudently decided on a strategy of hospitality and friendship. The first real test occurred on the New Zealand landfall at Poverty Bay where the Maoris made no secret of the pleasure they would derive from braining their visitors and sampling their salty flesh. Cook, not being of a mind to accept that kind of dinner invitation, acted to protect himself and his men not only resolutely but - it must be said - with far more force than was needed. Wanting to take hostages whom he could convince of his friendly intentions, Cook intercepted a canoe of five or six people coming in from fishing. When they unexpectedly resisted with everything they could wield or throw, Cook ordered his men to fire into the canoe killing "either two or three."⁴ The others dived overboard and three teenage youths were captured and taken up into the ship. That evening the unhappy captain and Joseph Banks reflected on what the latter called "the most disagreeable day My Life has yet seen."⁵ The Englishmen were determined to make some amends by giving the three survivors a happy time: "they were clothed and treated with all imaginable kindness and to the surprise of everybody became at once cheerful and as merry as if they had been with their own friends."⁶

The contrast here between two or three bloody corpses in the canoes and three genial teenagers carousing on deck dramatises the tension that

⁴ Journals, I, 170.

⁵ Journals, I, 171, n. 2.

⁶ Journals, I, 171.

to some extent is present in all of Cook's encounters with Pacific Islanders. Cook himself had much to say on this subject. In 1774, with several years experience of the Pacific now behind him, he expanded on his thesis that ethical business was good business--writing of the Tahitians:

Three things made them our fast friends, Their own good Natured and benevolent disposition, gentle treatment on our part, and the dread of our fire Arms; by our ceasing to observe the Second - the first would have wore of f of Course, and the too frequent use of the latter would have excited a spirit of revenge and perhaps have taught them that fire Arms were not such terrible things as they had imagined, they are very sencible of the superiority they have over us in the numbers and no one knows what an enraged multitude might do.⁷

When one thinks forward to Kealakekua there is dramatic irony in these last words which reveal Cook's keen sense of the fragile balance he had to maintain between intimidation and friendliness, between relaxation and the vigilance needed to make sure neither his men or their hosts would get out of hand. Cook was a man with a mission to roll back the dense fog of obscurity over the lands and seas and peoples of the Pacific--in that order. The safety of his men and the success of his expeditions set the professional limits, so to speak, for his interaction with islanders. Within those limits, though, he strove to be fair and decent--not just because it was (as he often noted) more profitable, but chiefly because James Cook was that kind of man anyway.

At times Cook did break his rules; Polynesian thieving often had him at his wit's end to keep safe the merchandise, boats, and vital navigational equipment on which the safety of his crew and the success of his expedition depended. It is no joke to lose a quadrant or a chronometer 10,000 miles

⁷ Journals, II, 398. See also I, 282.

from another one. He flogged the culprits--he had the ears cropped of one, and crosses slashed in the arms of some Tongans. In one of the worst incidents the theft of a young goat on Moorea put him into a cold rage that sent him across the island with an armed party burning houses and war-canoes. His officers were upset; so is his biographer Beaglehole--who in a rare awkward moment warns the reader that he is "regretful and baffled, as at some odd unintelligible phenomenon."⁸ Yet we need these sins of Cook before us to get the true measure of the man; we need the red slashes and the black stains to contrast the background of white. To sift 4,000 pages of journals for the dirt on Cook is like letting loose two or three of those disgusting carp fish to pollute a mountain stream and make it unfit for all the varieties of life that were there before.

There is a wonderful variety of human encounters in Cook's journals--let me return to New Zealand, to the remote and magnificent wilderness anchorage called Dusky Sound. There, after four months of Antarctic sailing out of Cape Town on the second voyage, the crew feasted on seal, fish, oysters and wood hens. The people were few and extremely apprehensive, and it was twelve days before Cook made effective contact with them. Cook was coming back to his ship towards evening in his boat after a day exploring a bay with the artist Hodges and the two Forsters. Standing on a rocky point he saw a Maori and two women who stood there while the boat came close. Cook himself went to the bow of the boat, called to the man in a friendly way and threw him his white ~~handkerchief~~, which the man would not touch. Leaving his musket in the boat Cook then took some white sheets

⁸ J.C. Beaglehole, The Life of Captain James Cook (London: 1974), p.557.

of paper in his hand, landed on the rock, and held them out. The man was trembling, but took the paper and Cook grasped his hand and embraced him nose to nose--in the Maori-style he had learnt on his first voyage.

We were joined by the two Women, the Gentlemen that were with me and some of the Seamen, and we spent about half an hour in chitchat which was little understood on either side in which the youngest of the two women bore by far the greatest share (which occasion'd one of the seamen to say that women did not want tongue in no part of the world.).⁹

As the sun went down, one of these women performed a graceful dance of farewell. The following day Cook visited them again, met the whole family of seven, and spent a leisurely hour or two in their lean-to huts while Hodges drew their portraits. He promised the man that he would have a red coat made up for him, and he kept his word. About a week later the man and one of the women visited the ship to exchange valuable gifts.

Cook's attention to small acts of courtesy and generosity is striking proof of his sensitivity to Pacific Islanders and the genuine quality of many of his friendships.

On his return to Matavai Bay in 1773 he was met by a "venerable old lady" of rank whose son Toutaha had been of great service to Cook on his first visit: "She seized me by both hands and burst into a flood of tears saying Toutaha Tiyo no Toute matte (Toutaha the friend of Cook is dead).

I was so much affected at her behavior that it would not have been possible for me to refrain mingling my tears with hers had not Otoo come and snatched me as it were from her, I afterward desired to see her again in order to make her a present ..."¹⁰ Whether Cook was consciously adhering to

⁹ Journals, II, 116 including variation in footnote 5.

¹⁰ Journals, II, 207.

Polynesian etiquette here, or whether he was just following his own warm sense of what was appropriate, it is this side of Cook that secured him feelings and testimonials of real friendship from Pacific Islanders.

His return to Huahine brought tears again, tears which "trinkled plentifully" down the cheeks of Cook's old friend Ori and "sufficiently spoke the feelings of his heart."¹¹ Now Cook was hardly a sentimental man. These are striking instances of the high regard Cook had for individual islanders and they for him. One could question the fairness of some of Cook's trading exchanges, especially towards the end of his voyages when his stock of stores was low, but God help the man caught pillaging island gardens or defrauding the people of their agreed price. When Cook touched the coast of New Guinea after his troublesome adventures along the eastern coast of Australia, some of his men wanted to cut down the coconut trees they could not climb. Cook indignantly refused what he called "a thing that I think no man living could have justified."¹² On the contrary, we know most men entering the Pacific at that time would not have thought anything of sacrificing a few coconut trees, or a few islanders for that matter, especially if they were Melanesian.

On the whole it does not seem too much to claim for Cook that for all his calm confidence in his own culture, for all of Yorkshire that haunted him, for all his professional single-mindedness and, yes, for all his bloody mistakes, his essential humaneness found its echo in those who embodied the Pacific's own humanistic traditions. Pacific Islanders who celebrated Cook's

¹¹Journals, II, 217. Ori "received me more like a son he had not seen these four years than a friend." Of the people Cook wrote (p. 236): "they are the most obliging and benevolent people I ever met with."

¹²Journals, I, 410.

arrivals and returns with festivities of dance, **song**, drama and feasting, read him correctly, I feel; and their descendants would celebrate the anniversaries of those arrivals a little more warmly--if only they read him.