

James Cook

October 1728 – February 1779

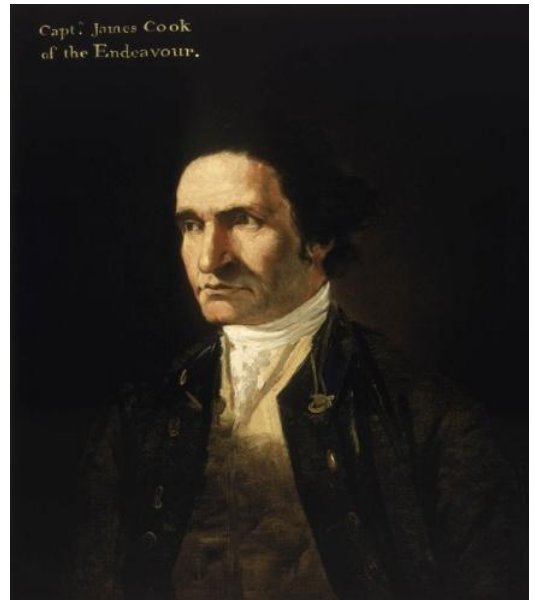
James Cook was born in a small Yorkshire village in England. He was the son of a Scottish day labourer. The young James had an aptitude for Mathematics and came to the attention of the lord of the local manor. He paid for James' education at Postgate School, a charity school in Great Ayton. When he was 12 James left school to work on the manor farm with his father. At the age of 18 James chose the sea as his occupation and was apprenticed to a ship owner and coal shipper in Whitby – one of the most picturesque, and the seventh largest, port in England.

For nine years he served as an apprentice working on colliers taking coal all around the coast of England and as far as Scandinavia. At age 27 he chose to join the Royal Navy with the rank of Able Seaman. England was at war with France and there were opportunities to be had for a capable and hard working young man! During the war, he sailed the Atlantic and learnt the art of surveying using astronomy and trigonometry. At war's end, he returned to England with money in his pocket and the desire to marry 21 year old Elizabeth Batts. They settled in London but four months later, James was off to sea again. This was the pattern of their lives.

Cook left for Newfoundland and won fame-and better pay-as a surveyor. He also won respect with the Royal Society for his astronomical observations. On 15th April 1768, the Admiralty appointed James Cook to the rank of First Lieutenant and gave him command of His Majesty's Bark Endeavour. His task was to sail to Tahiti – or Otaheiti as it was known then – in order to make scientific observations of the 'Transit of Venus' across the Sun. It was hoped that this would help scientists to mathematically calculate the size of the universe. After this, Cook was to open the sealed orders he had been given. He was to look for *Terra Australis Incognita*: a continent that was thought to exist in the Southern Pacific ocean.



Australian National Maritime Museum
HMB Endeavour Circumnavigation of Australia
Education Resources



Portrait of Cook, William Hodges (1776)
Courtesy National Maritime Museum,
Greenwich, London

On 26th August 1768 he set sail on one of history's finest voyages of exploration. Cook wrote in his journal:

'At 2pm got under sail and put to sea having on board 94 persons including Officers Seaman Gentlemen and their servants, near 18 months provisions, 10 carriage guns 12 Swivels with good store of Ammunition and stores of all kinds.'

Left: Cook's cabin on board HMB Endeavour Replica
Australian National Maritime Museum

These 'stores of all kinds' included 30 tonnes of water, ship's biscuit, salted beef and salted pork, beer and spirits. There were also three cats, 17 sheep, 24 chickens, four pigs, Bank's two dogs and a goat.

Cook was sympathetic towards the Aboriginal people he saw on the coast of *New Holland*, but he saw no planted crops, no permanent buildings or villages. He wrote:

'They seem to have no fix'd habitation but move about from place to place... in search of food.'

There is no evidence that Cook sought 'the Consent of the Natives' before he claimed the eastern part of the continent. Cook's justification was that 'it was never seen or visited by any European before us.' His charts and reports enabled the English to found a convict settlement 18 years later. Many people view this as an invasion and in Australia the issue of reconciliation with Aboriginal people has not yet been fully resolved.

However, Cook's contributions to navigation, exploration and science are exceptional. He was promoted to Captain after the success of his first Pacific journey and made two more voyages of exploration between 1772 and his death in Hawaii in 1779.



Two of the natives of New Holland advancing to combat
Reproduced from Sydney Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas in His Majesty's Ship the Endeavour*, London 1773
ANMM Collection



Figurine, Captain James Cook c 1845
Staffordshire Pottery
ANMM Collection

This glazed porcelain figurine of Captain Cook was produced by the Alpha Factory in England. High quality porcelain figures were popular items to decorate the home and often commemorated notable British celebrities.

