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# HAMPTON SIDES

## *THE WIDE WIDE SEA*

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Imperial Ambition, First Contact  
and the Fateful Final Voyage  
of Captain James Cook

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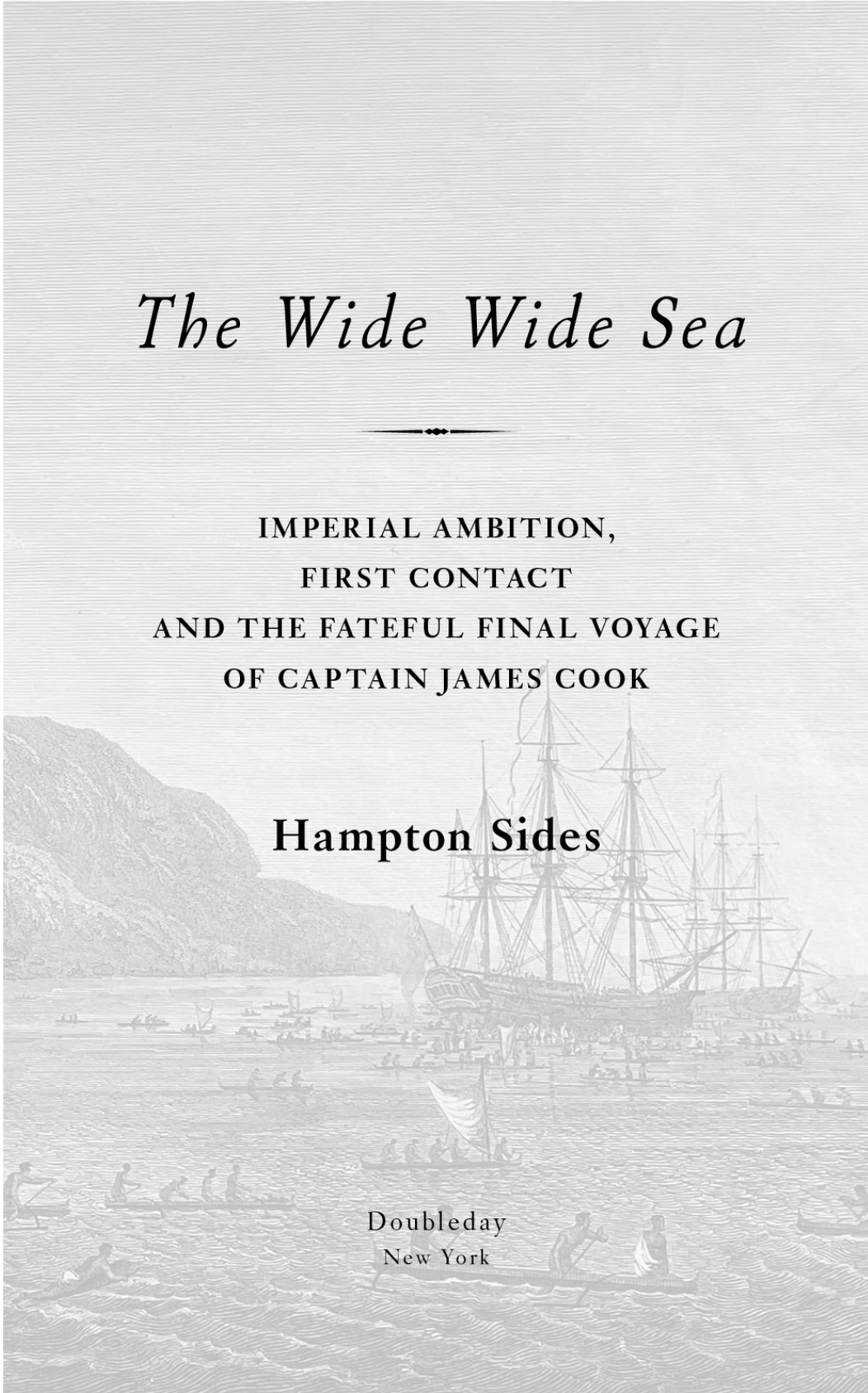
*On Desperate Ground*

# *The Wide Wide Sea*

IMPERIAL AMBITION,  
FIRST CONTACT  
AND THE FATEFUL FINAL VOYAGE  
OF CAPTAIN JAMES COOK

## Hampton Sides

Doubleday  
New York





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*for ANNE ALMIGHTY*  
*with all my love*

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony.

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE,  
*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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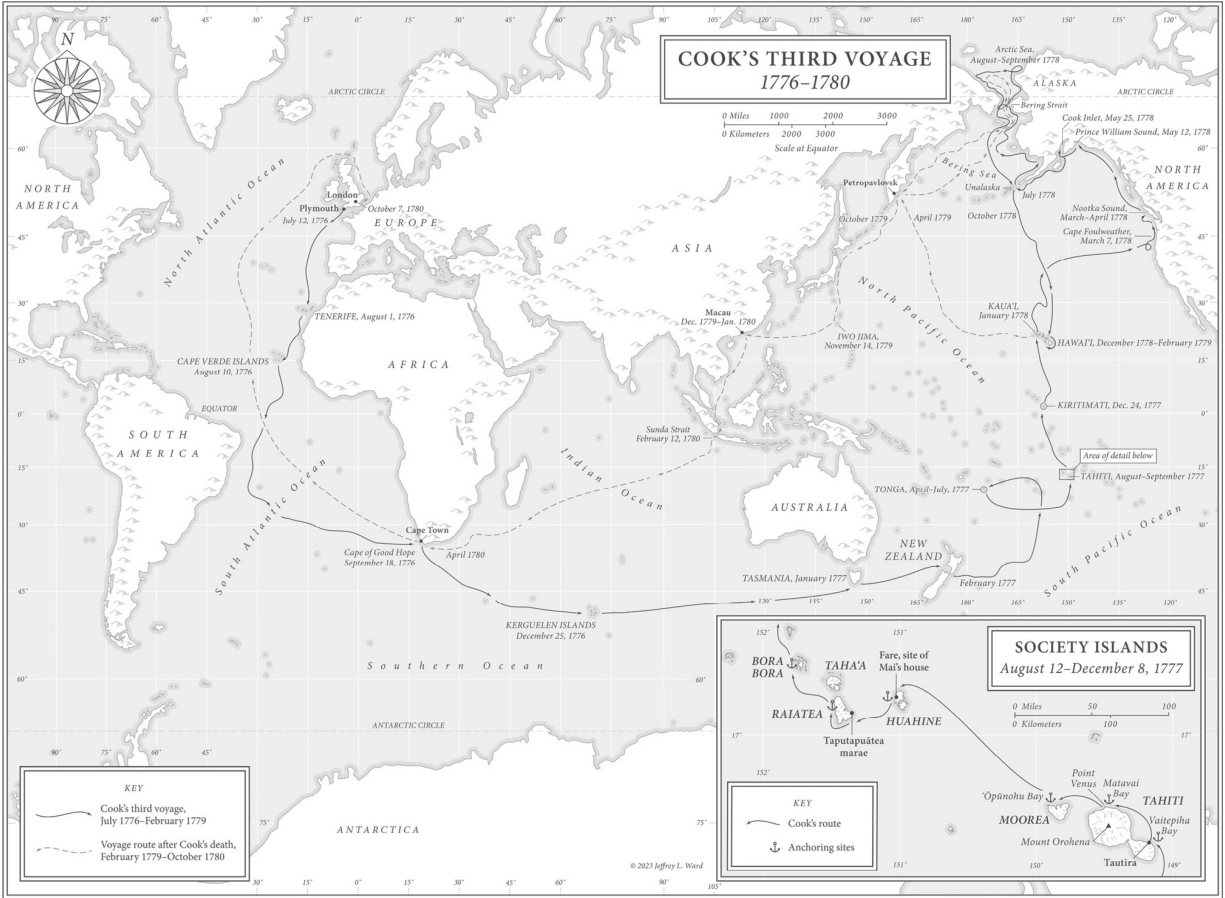
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**COOK'S THIRD VOYAGE  
1776-1780**

0 Miles 1000 2000 3000  
0 Kilometers 2000 3000  
Scale at Equator

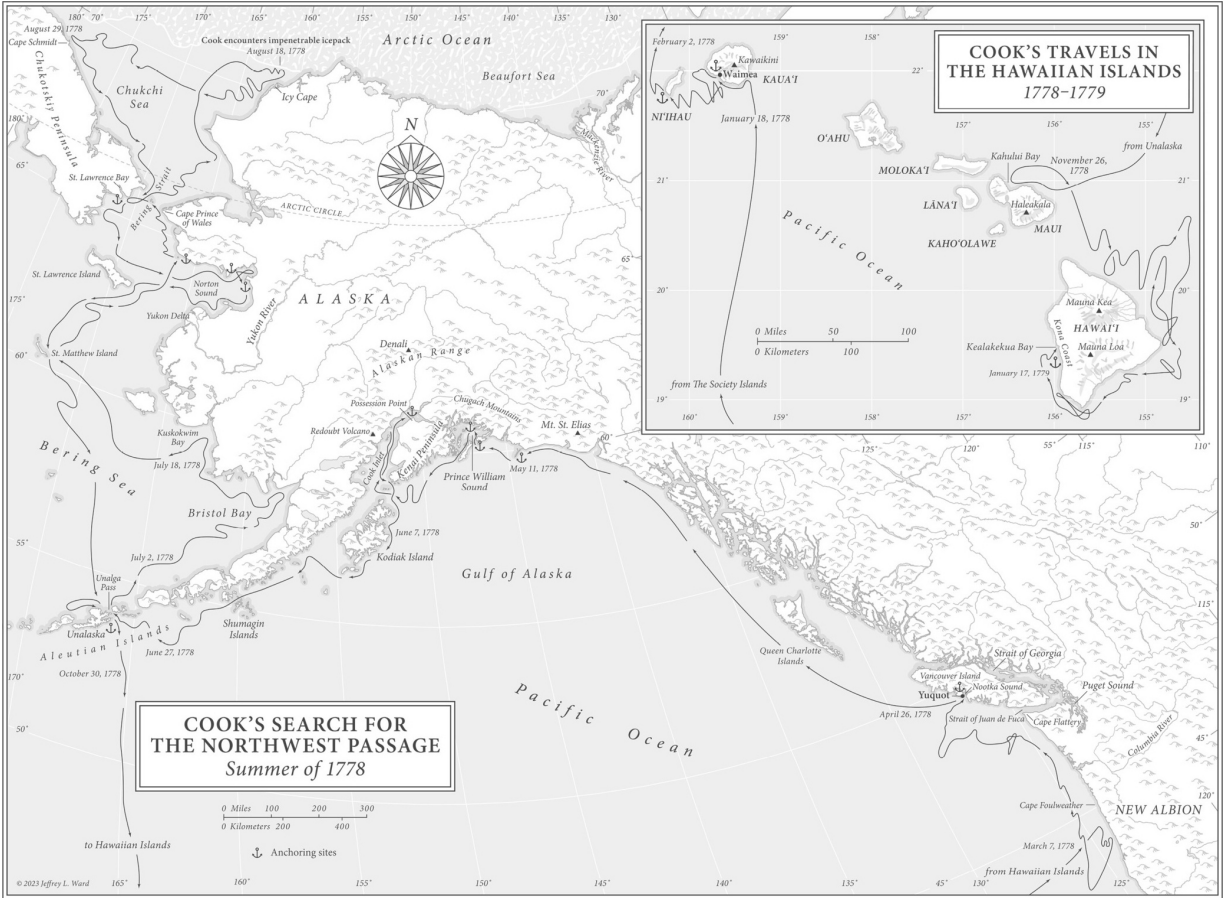
**KEY**  
 — Cook's third voyage, July 1776-February 1779  
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**SOCIETY ISLANDS  
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0 Kilometers 100 200

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 ⚓ Anchoring sites

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## *Author's Note*

In recent years, the voyages of Captain James Cook have come under increasing attack as part of a larger reassessment of the legacy of empire. Cook was an explorer and a mapmaker, not a conqueror or a colonizer. Yet throughout history, exploration and the making of maps have usually served as the first phase of conquest. In Cook's long wake came the occupiers, the guns, the pathogens, the alcohol, the problem of money, the whalers, the furriers, the seal hunters, the plantation owners, the missionaries.

And so for many Native people across the Pacific, from New Zealand to Alaska, Cook has become a symbol of colonialism and of the ravages that came with European arrival. In many corners of the world, his name has been vilified—not so much for what he did, but for all the trouble that came after him. And also because the Indigenous peoples he encountered were ignored for so long, their voices rarely heard, their perspectives and cultural significance scarcely considered.

Over the past few years, monuments to Cook's explorations have been splattered with paint. Artifacts and artworks stemming from his voyages, once considered priceless treasures, have been radically reinterpreted or removed altogether from museum and gallery collections (in some cases, rightly returning to the lands from which they originated). The people of the Cook Islands have been talking seriously of changing the archipelago's name. In 2021, in Victoria, British Columbia, protesters toppled a statue of Cook into the city harbor. Cook, in some respects, has become the Columbus of the Pacific.

There was a time when Cook's three epic expeditions were seen by many as swashbuckling adventures—worthwhile and perhaps even noble projects undertaken in the service of the Enlightenment and the expansion

of global knowledge. Cook sailed in an age of wonder, when explorer-scientists were encouraged to roam the world, measuring and describing, collecting unfamiliar species of plants and animals, documenting landscapes and peoples unknown to Europe. In direct ways, Cook's voyages influenced the Romantic movement, benefited medical science, bolstered the fields of botany and anthropology, and inspired writers ranging from Coleridge to Melville. The journals from Cook's odysseys were turned into bestselling books and became the impetus behind popular plays, poems, operas, novels, comics, even one TV show set in outer space. (Captain James Kirk of the USS *Enterprise* is widely thought to have been inspired by Captain James Cook.)

Yet today, Cook's voyages are passionately contested, especially in Polynesia, viewed as the start of the systematic dismantling of traditional island cultures that historian Alan Moorehead famously called "the fatal impact." Moorehead said he was interested in "that fateful moment when a social capsule is broken into," and Cook's expeditions certainly provided an excellent case study of the phenomenon. Taken together, his voyages form a morally complicated tale that has left a lot for modern sensibilities to unravel and critique. Eurocentrism, patriarchy, entitlement, toxic masculinity, cultural appropriation, the role of invasive species in destroying island biodiversity: Cook's voyages contain the historical seeds of these and many other current debates.

It was in the midst of this gathering antipathy toward Cook that I began to research the story of his third voyage—the most dramatic of his journeys, as well as his longest, both in terms of duration and nautical miles. It seemed a good time to try to reckon with this man whose roving have stirred so much acrimony and dissension. It was curious to me: Other early European mariners who had crisscrossed the Pacific—Magellan, Tasman, Cabrillo, and Bougainville, to name a few—don't seem to generate so much heat or attention. What is it about Cook that has singled him out?

I don't have an easy answer for that—more likely there are many not-so-easy ones—but I hope this book will lead readers toward some broader understanding. Perhaps part of the current resentment toward Cook has to

do with the fact that on his final voyage something wasn't quite right with the formidable captain. Historians and forensic medical researchers have speculated about what was ailing him, whether it was a physical or mental malady, perhaps even a spiritual one. Whatever the root cause, his personality had definitely changed. Something was affecting his behavior and his judgment that marred the conduct of his last voyage. It may have even led to his death.

Whenever it has seemed relevant and interesting, I've let present-day controversies infuse and inform this book. I've tried to present the captain, and the goals and assumptions behind his third voyage, in all their flawed complexity. I neither lionize, demonize, nor defend him. I've simply tried to describe what happened during his consequential, ambitious, and ultimately tragic final voyage.

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**A CAVEAT HERE** about the word *discovery*: I hope I've made it clear throughout the narrative that James Cook did not “discover” many of the places he's often mistakenly credited with having discovered—New Zealand, Hawai'i, and Australia, for example. It's obvious and yet no less important to stress that these and other lands that figure into this story had already been found and settled far earlier by intrepid explorers like the ancient Polynesian wayfarers. Most of the geographical features and life forms that Cook and his fellow expedition members named and described already had Indigenous names and contexts. Locations described in the voyage accounts as “uncharted” or “untouched” had been inhabited for centuries, if not millennia.

In some places, it's fair to say Cook was the first European discoverer, or one of the first European discoverers. In others, it might be more accurate to say that Cook and his sailors were merely visitors—albeit significant early ones.

What made Cook different from most explorers was that he was also a preternaturally accurate mapmaker, a skill aided by his use of the latest

navigational technology and his deep understanding of astronomy. When he came home, the places he visited were forever fixed on maps, some of them widely published, showing exact coordinates. His reports told where the best anchorages were, which peoples were friendly, where good food and water might be found. It was as though Cook had revealed the secret addresses of many remote islands whose inhabitants had lived in splendid isolation for ages. Now these places could never hide from the eyes of the world again.

—

AN ISSUE THAT frequently crops up in accounts of Cook's voyages has to do with the concept of private property. At many of his anchorages, but especially in Polynesia, he complained constantly about objects—almost always *metal* objects—going missing from his ships. His journals are rife with accounts of what he refers to as stealing, and of the punishments he visited upon Indigenous people he viewed, essentially, as criminals. This very issue, in fact, is central in the story of his death.

Polynesians and other Indigenous groups Cook encountered during the voyage held ideas about property and ownership that differed greatly from European ideas. To Polynesians, for whom most possessions were considered communal, swiping objects from Cook's ships was hardly a crime—especially since Cook and his sailors were already taking (*stealing*, one might say) so much from their island communities in the way of food, water, fodder, timber, and other finite resources. In many islanders' view, Cook was being stingy with a substance—metal—that came from the earth and should be communally shared; his ships had an abundance of iron, while their islands had none. Although there are only so many descriptors to characterize what Cook and his officers unequivocally viewed as theft, in portraying these incidents I've generally tried to use neutral terms, while taking note of the deeper context behind what was often a tricky clash between cultures concerning the nature, meaning, and purpose of physical possessions.

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**ONE MORE DELICATE** matter that repeatedly arises in the story of the voyage is the question of sexual mores. Most of Cook's crewmen were in their late teens and twenties, and naturally they were fixated on the subject of sex—as were many of the officers and scientists. While Cook himself is said to have abstained from encounters with local women, his sailors assuredly did not. Their often one-dimensional view of women as erotic playthings can make for difficult reading here in the twenty-first century. Still, their prurient yet often joyful descriptions loom so large in their journals that the theme is impossible to ignore. In Tahiti, Hawai'i, and other locations, Cook's men found the women to be quite willing and enthusiastic participants; in many cases, deeper romantic bonds began to form. But because few written records exist to tell us what the women themselves thought and felt about the subject, our knowledge of what happened (and why) must rely on the existing accounts—which unfortunately are almost all from the English, and male, perspective.

As I sifted through these accounts, I couldn't help wondering: How could these young Polynesian women have possibly found Cook's men attractive—these aliens with rancid teeth and shabby clothes rank with the stench of long months at sea? Were the overtures of the women really as passionate and as genuine as the British sailors described them in their journals? Were powerful Native men—priests or chiefs—orchestrating events behind the scenes, instructing daughters, sisters, and nieces to beguile these strange new visitors? What hidden strategy could have been afoot—a belief, perhaps, that sexual union might be a way to absorb, or neutralize, whatever powers Cook's men might possess?

These are questions that have been debated by historians of Polynesia, as well as by anthropologists and even modern-day sexologists. Some anthropologists have speculated that sex was a way for young women to defy, at least for a moment, a stratified, male-ruled society that had boxed them in with draconian taboos. Others have suggested that the true answer might be simpler: Maybe it was about pleasure and little else—an



adventure, a diversion, a sporting fling with strangers. In expressing their sexuality, young Polynesian women were remarkably free. They had no Judeo-Christian stab of shame about nudity, no gnaw of guilt, no code of celibacy. They had a measure of latitude they'd learned to use and enjoy—and in this arena their power, their sense of agency and autonomy, was quite real.

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**SUBSTANTIAL PORTIONS OF** this book are based on the journals, logs, and other writings of Cook and many other voyage participants. Some of these were “official” accounts, while others were written in secrecy and published without the authorization of the British government. In quoting from these antique documents, I’ve made occasional edits for clarity, concision, and readability, striking some confusing archaic expressions and streamlining erratic capitalization, spelling, and punctuation styles that might trip up the modern eye or ear (turning “ye” into “the,” for example, or “&” into “and”). And because I’m an American writer with an American publisher, I’ve generally Americanized British spellings and copy styles. Otherwise, the words I’ve quoted are exactly as they flowed from those eighteenth-century quills. It’s been consistently amazing to me how clear and strong their voices come across on the page, even after two and a half centuries.

Inevitably, readers will find an imbalance between the voluminous record conveying the English perspective and the limited written sources that shed light on the Native perspective. Still, wherever possible, I’ve tried to bring in Indigenous points of view by employing oral history passed down through the generations and collected by Native speakers. In places, I’ve integrated the oral history with insights from archaeology, anthropology, and natural history, as well as from my own travels to many of the places Cook’s third voyage visited. Time and finances, as well as the obstacle of a global pandemic, prevented me from visiting all the spots where Cook anchored, but over the years I was able to make some

unforgettable trips to places important to the narrative—including New Zealand, Tasmania, the Society Islands, the Oregon and Washington coasts, Vancouver Island, Alaska, the Russian Far East, Hawai‘i, and England.

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**A FINAL DISTINCTION:** This is not a biography but a narrative history with a large, diverse cast of characters moving over many thousands of miles of oceanic expanse. It’s about a journey undertaken by more than 180 people in two wooden ships that embarked from England in July of 1776, a turning point in history. It’s the story not only of James Cook but of the men who accompanied him on his swan-song voyage to the Pacific. They took part in a monumental enterprise that left lasting impacts, good and bad, on the world.

Cook and his men sailed at a fascinating moment when there were still a few extremely large geographical mysteries left to solve, when there were few remaining swaths of our planet human eyes had never seen, and when it was still possible for radically different cultures from distant parts of the world to encounter one another for the very first time.

Your bodies, O Lono, are in the heavens,  
A long cloud, a short cloud,  
A watchful cloud,  
An overlooking cloud...  
Lono, the rolling thunder,  
The heaven that rumbles,  
The disturbed sea.

—ANCIENT HAWAIIAN CHANT

## *Prologue: And Louder Grew the Shouting*

**KAUA‘I, THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS, JANUARY 1778**

On the night the ships appeared, some fishermen were out on the ocean, working by torchlight. One of them, a man named Mapua, was bewildered by what he saw: An enormous silhouette approached, rising high above the surf, fire burning at its top. It had holes on its side, Mapua noticed, and a long spear in front like the sharp nose of a swordfish. Then a second creature appeared, much like the first. Mapua had no idea what they were, but he was sure they were something malevolent.

Mapua and his fellow fishermen paddled hurriedly to shore. According to oral accounts assembled by the Hawaiian historian Samuel Mānaiakalani Kamakau, they were “trembling and frightened by this wonderful apparition.” When they reached the village, Mapua immediately informed the high chief, Kaeo, about this strange and disturbing sight.

By the next morning the two leviathans had drawn closer to shore. What were they? Where had they come from? What did they *want*? An onlooker, thoroughly astonished by them, is said to have wondered, “What are those branching things?” (Probably the ships’ masts, sprits, and spars.) Another replied, “They are trees moving about on the sea.”

No, the local priest countered, they were the floating heiaus, or temples, of the gods. “This is not an ordinary thing,” the kāhuna insisted. He said the branches must be steps reaching toward heaven.

As the vessels moved still closer, wrote Kamakau, the villagers were captivated by this “marvelous monster,” and “great wonder came to the people.” A large crowd began to assemble on shore, “shouting with fear and confused thought.” Judging by the way the ships had appeared, silent and

ghostly, the edges of their sails furling and fluttering, backing and filling, they seemed to some like giant stingrays that had emerged from the sea.

A few canoes were dispatched to investigate, and the brave paddlers crept just close enough to catch glimpses of humanlike creatures walking upon the decks of the ships. Never having seen tricorne hats before, they thought these strangers' heads must be deformed. They mistook the odd, close-fitting uniforms for an epidermis. "Their skin is loose and folding," one said. Unacquainted with pockets, the paddlers imagined they were little doors that opened into the men's bodies. "Into these openings they thrust their hands, and take many valuable things—their bodies are full of treasure!"

As the ships edged closer to shore, the watching crowds on the beach grew larger and larger, the anticipation building to a frenzy. The people were full of fear and dread, but also a kind of rapture. They sensed something ominous was happening, that their island world was about to change forever.

"The harbor resounded with noise," wrote Kamakau. "And louder grew the shouting."

## ***BOOK ONE***

### *The First Navigator of Europe*



Cook was a captain of the Admiralty  
When sea-captains...  
Were more like warlocks  
...[and] drove their ships  
By their own blood, no laws of schoolbook steam,  
Till yards were sprung, and masts went overboard—  
Daemons in periwigs, doling magic out,  
Who read fair alphabets in stars  
Where humbler men found but a mess of sparks

—KENNETH SLESSOR, “FIVE VISIONS OF CAPTAIN COOK”

## 1 *Negative Discoverer*

It was the start of a very important year—1776—and James Cook had become a very important figure, a celebrity, a champion, a hero. Leading scientists wanted his opinions. The best portrait painters invited him to pose in their studios. Cook had met King George III and had received a promotion to the rank of “post-captain,” a position that could put him on a fast track to becoming an admiral.

This modest son of the Yorkshire moors, who had risen from virtually nothing, was moving in higher circles, mingling with London’s best and brightest at coffeehouses, in private salons, in gentlemen’s clubs. During a speech before the House of Lords, he was declared “the first navigator” of Europe. Some people in authority were beginning to tout him as the greatest voyager England had ever produced, even greater than Anson, Hudson, and Drake. He had been nominated to the prestigious Royal Society and would soon win its highest award, the Copley Medal. Some speculated he would be knighted.

Only six months earlier, Cook had returned home from his second circumnavigation of the globe. He had ventured into the frozen basement of the world and come back with important findings and magnificent maps of unfamiliar realms. He had been at sea for some 1,100 days and had probably sailed more than 100,000 nautical miles.

The main goal of his voyage had been to prowl the southern oceans and determine the existence, or nonexistence, of a hypothetical continent known as Terra Australis Incognita. Many scientists at the time posited that there must exist an immense southern landmass, far larger than Australia, to counterbalance the weighty preponderance of terrain in the northern hemisphere. Without a southern supercontinent, the earth would be so top-heavy, it would tumble into space. As the Flemish mapmaker Gerardus

Mercator ominously phrased it, such a wobbly planet would “fall to destruction among the stars.”

The imaginary continent had many champions, although none more ardent or vocal than a Scottish geographer named Alexander Dalrymple, who insisted not only that the mythic land existed but that it almost certainly was inhabited by millions of people. Cook had doubts, but he saw the merits of exploring the high southern latitudes, a part of the world that was virtually unknown.

Cook’s ship, HMS *Resolution*, along with a consort ship, HMS *Adventure*, left England in July of 1772. The *Adventure* lost contact with the *Resolution* off the coast of New Zealand and eventually headed back to England, but Cook continued onward, becoming the first captain known to have crossed the Antarctic Circle (though there are theories that Māori voyagers may have ventured that far south in ancient times). Cook made multiple dagger thrusts deep into the southern seas—at one point reaching latitude 71°10' South. He did not encounter anything that could be deemed a continental landmass, although he drew within a hundred miles of Antarctica, with towering icebergs floating around him, the ship’s rigging rimed in ice.

By November 1774 Cook had turned the *Resolution* north and threaded through the ice fields toward home. He pronounced the unknown continent a fiction, and the thoroughness and probity with which he had made his sweeps through the southern seas convinced the Admiralty that he was right. Cook had made an important contribution to “negative discovery”—that is, finding nothing where something was widely presumed to be. As one biographer put it, he had become an “executioner of misbegotten hypotheses.”

“If I have failed in discovering a continent,” Cook wrote, “it is because it does not exist...and not for want of looking.” Yet Cook seemed almost to have gotten the scent of Antarctica. Any large landmass that did exist, he concluded, was locked in ice farther to the south, unreachable by ship, and uninhabited—“a country,” as he put it, “doomed by nature never once to feel the warmth of the sun’s rays, but to lie forever buried under the



everlasting snow.” It would be more than a century before explorers reached the frozen shores of the continent of Antarctica—which, while substantial, was still nowhere near the size of the mythic Terra Australis.

During his long search in those icy latitudes, Cook had proclaimed, with breathtaking frankness, his larger aspiration: He wanted to go not only “farther than any man has been before me,” he wrote, “but as far as I think it possible for man to go.”

—

**JAMES COOK WAS** a taciturn man with a craggy forehead, a thicket of reddish-brown hair turning steel gray, and an austere face cured by weather. His large-boned frame—as a young man, he stood six feet three—was slightly stooped from years of crawling through holds and other confined spaces on His Majesty’s ships. He had a hawk’s nose, a strong chin with a slight cleft in it, and intense, deep-set eyes that seemed to bore through whatever met his gaze. His fingers were as rough as any seaman’s, yet they were also nimble, accustomed as they were to handling sextants, quadrants, and other fine instruments of astronomy and navigation. Running across the palm of his right hand, between his thumb and index finger, was an ugly scar from an accident he’d had in Canada as a young man, when a gunpowder horn he was holding exploded. The incident could have killed him, and for the rest of his life he sometimes wore a glove on his right hand.

Cook drank sparingly and, though he had a thunderous temper when aggravated, he never cursed. He was not particularly religious, but as an apprentice in the merchant marine, he had trained under Quakers. He had by all accounts absorbed their values—temperance, frugality, modesty, truthfulness, a ferocious work ethic, and a disdain for arrogance and ostentation. Like many Quakers, he was a master of directness. He spoke mostly in brusque, declarative sentences, packed with monosyllables, delivered with a slight lilt in his native Yorkshire brogue. Dourness, too, was said to be a Quaker trait, and Cook could seem dour at times, but a grin

sometimes crept across his face, and when one least expected it, a wry joke or turn of phrase might escape from his pen or his lips.

He strove for simplicity—in his dress, in his speech, in his surroundings, even in his food. He favored drab fare like sauerkraut and peas, but he would also go along with unfamiliar Polynesian dishes like baked dog, or pre-chewed kava spat into a bowl, with copious saliva, from the mouth of some chief's lowly servant. Cook wasn't particular—a midshipman who traveled with him thought Cook's taste buds were "the coarsest that ever a mortal was endowed with." He had a gastrointestinal tract made of iron and viewed it almost as his duty to sample what was set before him. "His stomach," wrote a young officer from one of his voyages, "bore without difficulty the...most ungrateful food."

Cook's lodgings were simple, too. He lived with his wife, Elizabeth, the daughter of a respected tavern keeper, in a snug brick row house on a road called Mile End. It was in a throbbing middle-class neighborhood just east of London, not far from the Thames—although during the past seven years he had hardly been there. He had been at sea during the births of most of their five children, and absent as well for the tragic early deaths of three of them. Their eldest son, James, twelve, was already in the navy, hard at work at his academy studies down in Portsmouth, and their son Nathaniel, eleven, had similar ambitions. Elizabeth was with child again. She was expecting in a few months.

Yet Cook was never exactly at home when he was at home. He surely enjoyed his intermittent visits with Elizabeth, a strong, no-nonsense woman thirteen years his junior. There was a formality, a respectful distance, to their relationship, which was not uncommon in those times, especially in marriages whose partners differed so greatly in age. She called him "Mr. Cook."

But the master mariner soon grew restless on dry land. He lived for the sure rhythms and protocols of a naval existence. He needed to be immersed in a project, an enterprise, a puzzle. "Action was life to him," wrote a navy officer who sailed with him, "and repose a sort of death." Cook seemed happiest when in command of a ship. "On land, he was at the mercy of

other people's chaos," one English biographer has written, but "within the confines of the ship his world was orderly, disciplined and emotionally safe—his word was law, and his men obeyed."

One of the extraordinary things about Cook is how little we know of his interior life—what he really thought and felt, his fears, his whims, his sorrows. Between his journals and his logs, he wrote more than a million words about his voyages, but in all those pages we rarely get a glimpse of Cook's emotional world. Most of his entries have to do with mundane minutiae like barometric pressure, wind direction, the amount of seaweed in the water, or the viscosity and color of the mud on the bottom of the bay where he might be anchoring.

Unfortunately, late in her life, for inexplicable reasons, Elizabeth destroyed nearly all her personal papers, including Cook's letters to her, thus obliterating the best chance historians might have had to glean deeper insights into his psyche—or, for that matter, into hers. "His inner thoughts and private life were a closed book, one of those old-fashioned books with a brass hasp," wrote a biographer. "Even in his private correspondence—what little of it has survived—this same iron reticence manifests itself."

Some of that reticence was the style of the times, and of his profession. Eighteenth-century navy captains operated in a close, mean, and competitive world and were seldom known to emote, whether on the page or in person. If the cliché had any merit, reticence was also the style of a Yorkshireman. People from Cook's part of northern England were said to be tough, practical-minded, and very much to the point. Cook was a hard person—hard to please, hard to fool, hard to reach, hard to know. One writer described his laconic persona this way: "There were depths, but the soundings were few."

As for his voyaging, Cook has been called a technician, a cyborg, a navigational machine. It could be said that he lived during a romantic age of exploration, but he was decidedly *not* a romantic. He traveled to some of the world's most gorgeous and pristine islands, but, as a professional mapmaker with little regard for sentiment, he rarely remarked upon their beauty. As one biographer noted, Cook had "no natural gift for rhapsody."

If sailing was a rough and ragged art, Cook had tried to make it a science. He had a systematic approach. He hated sloppiness or any lapse of schedule, just as he hated the exaggerations, superstitions, and tall tales in which sailors often reveled. Most of all, he valued exactitude. The writer James Boswell, who had become acquainted with Cook, called him a “plain and sensible man with an uncommon attention to veracity.” Cook, Boswell said, had “a balance in his mind for truth as nice as scales for weighing a guinea.” Now that Cook was ascending into higher circles, people at various gatherings were sometimes disappointed in his lack of social skills. He was, said one prominent London doyenne who met him several times, “studiously wrapped up in his own purposes and pursuits, and apparently under a pressure of mental fatigue when called upon to speak.”

In most things, Cook was understated and self-deprecating, and he had an aversion to drama. His instinct was to cast attention away from himself and to give others credit. It was remarkable that through all his travels, he’d never named a landmark or feature after himself or any members of his family. (True, Cook’s name would eventually become attached to scores of places—such as Cook Strait, Cook Inlet, Mount Cook, Cook Glacier, the Cook Islands, even a Cook Crater on the moon—but these were all appellations suggested by others, not the result of his own cartographic hand.) It was also true that Cook had an admirable habit of affixing an Indigenous name, when he definitively learned of one, to his charts. This was rarely true of European explorers, but Cook was respectful of local people and kept his ear attuned to what had come before.

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**JAMES COOK WAS** a farm manager’s son with scant formal education. Born in 1728, he’d grown up in the village of Great Ayton in a cottage made of mud and thatch. But as a teenager he had moved to Whitby, a tight hamlet of shipbuilders, whalers, and fishermen hunkered by the cold North Sea. There, starting as an apprentice, he worked his way up through the merchant marine, serving on sturdy vessels, known as “cats,” that were

designed to haul coal and timber. He learned how to manage the collier ships, how to read the mercurial storms of the North Sea, how to use dead reckoning and trigonometry to plot his location along complicated shorelines. In those early years he traveled as far as the Baltic coast, and even visited St. Petersburg.

But at the not-so-young age of twenty-seven, on the verge of promotion to become a commander of a merchant vessel, he quit the coal ships and volunteered for the Royal Navy. He started all the way back down the ladder as an ordinary seaman, but quickly climbed the ranks.

Cook displayed a genius as a surveyor, hydrographer, and mapmaker while serving in Canada. These were skills that played an important role in England's decisive victory over the French at Quebec City in 1759, during the Seven Years' War (which Americans know as the French and Indian War). Cook was assigned the herculean task of charting the St. Lawrence River, from its mouth to Quebec City, and during the siege of Quebec, he was responsible for re-marking the navigable channel after the French had removed their marker buoys to impede the British fleet. Cook's cartographic prowess, aided by his growing talent as an astronomer and mathematician, caught the attention of high officials within the Admiralty, especially after he earned the title of king's surveyor and produced, during several summer seasons, an elegant and painstaking map of Newfoundland, a glacier-carved island with one of the most intricate shorelines in the world. Comparing it against modern satellite images of Newfoundland, one can see that his chart was a cartographic masterpiece of almost chilling precision.

By the late 1760s the Admiralty had recognized Cook's value, and its lords rewarded him. His first round-the-world voyage of exploration, as commander of the HMS *Endeavour*, left England in 1768, bound for Tahiti. There, Lieutenant Cook (for that was his rank then) was instructed to witness and document the transit of Venus, a rare astronomical event that was of keen interest to the European scientific community. After leaving Tahiti, the *Endeavour* explored broad expanses of the South Pacific, charting the east coast of Australia and both islands of New Zealand, among

other lands virtually unknown to Europe. Along the way, Cook added more than five thousand miles of shoreline to the map of the Pacific. Through all these travels, he kept an eye out for the mythic Southern Continent but decided that a more thorough expedition would have to be mounted to give the search the time and dedication it required.

Upon his return to England in 1771, Cook's first voyage was hailed as a triumph, but it was the gentleman-scientist aboard the *Endeavour*, a young botanist and bon vivant named Joseph Banks, who captured most of the attention and garnered most of the praise for the expedition's successes. Cook earned the Admiralty's plaudits as well, but it was his second voyage, to search more definitively for the undiscovered continent, that sealed his reputation and catapulted him into the pantheon of English explorers.