

The Endeavour Voyage Across the Pacific, 1768-1771

Editor's Introduction | James Cook's first journey across the Pacific, in 1768-71, provides the most superb visual record of one of the early voyages that characterised this period of eighteenth-century discovery. During his important mission in search of a southern continent--a find that would consolidate Britain's trading power--Cook and his crew, including Joseph Banks and the artist Sydney Parkinson, accumulated a mass of natural history and ethnographic material that would astonish the scientific establishment around the world. However, death and disease would have a catastrophic bearing on the fortunes of all those involved.

In the spring of 1768, James Cook, a 39-year-old master in George III's Navy, had every expectation that he was about to leave his pregnant wife and three young children to return to North America where he had served more or less continuously for the previous 10 years. He had built up an enviable reputation as a surveyor, usually undertaking the field work during the summer months and working on the charts back in England during the winter. It was this work to which he expected to return in 1768. But the Admiralty had other ideas; it was about to promote him to Lieutenant and give him command of the first of three great voyages which changed our knowledge of the Pacific.



National Portrait Gallery, London
James Cook by John Webber.



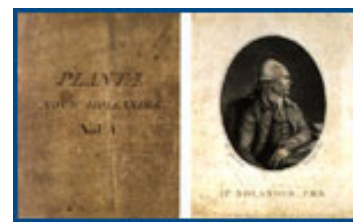
From the website: Captain
James Cook, the World's Explorer
The Endeavour.

The principal objective of this first voyage was to observe the transit of Venus, that is, the passage of the planet across the face of the sun as viewed from the earth. Knowledge of the precise times taken for the transit as observed from different points on the earth's surface would enable astronomers to calculate, amongst other things, the distance between the earth and the sun. The last transit had been in 1761--when, despite the efforts of 120 observers from nine nations, the results had been poor--and the next would not be until 1874. It was imperative to do better this time and all of the appropriate nations including, of course, the recently-at-war Britain and France, were anxious to participate. As part of the British effort, the Admiralty had agreed to send an expedition to make the observations from Tahiti, discovered only the year before by Captain Samuel Wallis in the Dolphin. But a voyage of such magnitude needed to satisfy more than one objective. Although the Pacific had been crossed many times in the previous two centuries, it was still largely unknown. At the very least, Cook was expected to discover new lands and take possession of any that promised benefit to the British crown. More particularly, he was to sail across the southern Pacific in search of the confidently expected, but so far undiscovered, Terra Australis Incognita, assumed to occupy much of the southern part of the globe as a sort of counterbalance to the mass of land in the northern hemisphere. Such a continent would surely abound with resources that would be an enormous asset to the first nation to locate and take possession of it.

The vessel chosen for the voyage, a 33-metre-long (106-foot-long) Whitby-built collier, suited Cook very well. Strongly built, extremely capacious, but with a very shallow draught, the ship was not fast, but was very manoeuvrable and ideal for sailing in unknown and potentially dangerous waters. Less than four years old when the navy bought her, she was renamed *Endeavour* and refitted, her hull reinforced with a sheath of thin wooden planks heavily armed with large-headed nails as protection against the notorious shipworm of tropical waters.

Apart from accommodating the needs of her naval complement of 85, the *Endeavour* and her captain also had to accept an entourage of civilians, including an astronomical observer, Charles Green, to assist Cook with observations of the transit. Green had learned his trade as assistant to two previous Astronomers Royal and had accompanied the incumbent Nevil Maskelyne to Barbados in 1763 to test John Harrison's new chronometer. Harrison's invention was soon to revolutionise the determination of longitude by navigators, including Cook on his second Pacific voyage. But on this occasion, traditional methods of astronomical observation--more difficult and less reliable--were to be used, and Green was to prove invaluable to Cook in this respect.

Green's presence meant some reorganisation of the cabin spaces, but nothing like that required just a month prior to sailing when Cook was informed that he would also be accompanied by "Mr Banks and his Suite," no less than nine persons in all. The 25-year-old Joseph Banks was handsome, rich, intelligent, well-connected and already a Fellow of the Royal Society. He saw the voyage as an exciting chance to further his study of natural history, particularly botany, and persuaded the Admiralty that he should accompany Cook at his own expense. He insisted on taking four servants, a secretary, two artists, a botanist, two dogs and a vast amount of baggage. Although finding room on the small and already crowded ship undoubtedly caused some upset, particularly among the more junior officers whose accommodation was directly affected, Banks and his retinue must take some credit for the overall success of the voyage. Certainly, nothing like the quantity of natural history and ethnographic material, particularly the extensive botanical collections accumulated by Banks and his botanist Daniel Carl Solander (1736-82), would have been collected in their absence. Banks' insistence on artistic coverage on this voyage also resulted in a superb visual record; and it set a precedent for taking dedicated artists on such voyages.



The Natural History Museum
Daniel Carl Solander.

Banks' artists were Alexander Buchan, who was expected to illustrate people and landscapes, (and the already well-known Sydney Parkinson (1745-71), who was to draw the plants and animals collected. Buchan, however, died a few days after the Endeavour reached Tahiti. As a result, Parkinson had to take on the enormous task of producing all the illustrations, with some help from Banks' Swedish secretary, Herman Spvring, until both he and Spvring died within a couple of days of one another in January 1771 as the ship sailed across the Indian Ocean on the way home. The son of a Quaker brewer in Edinburgh, Parkinson had already been employed by Banks to illustrate natural history material collected during a visit to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1766 and to copy some of Pieter de Bevere's illustrations of Ceylonese animals. But he had never had to cope with the problems of painting on a heaving ship, nor of working in the discomfort of tropical climates.



The Natural History Museum
Self-portrait by Sydney Parkinson.

The voyage, however, began smoothly. Cook left England in August 1768, called briefly at Funchal in Madeira before arriving at Rio de Janeiro on 13 November for a three-week stay. From Rio, Cook sailed direct to the Strait of Le Maire to round South America, and landed shore parties in Tierra del Fuego before finally passing Cape Horn and entering the Pacific in late January 1769. The Endeavour then sailed more or less continuously to the north-west, arriving at Matavai Bay, Tahiti, on 13 April, seven weeks before the transit was due. The observatory was set up, the transit successfully observed, and the ship made ready to sail by mid-July. Parkinson was showing remarkable resilience to the rigours of life in the tropics. Among his many problems were the Tahitian flies which, according to Banks, "... eat the painters' colours off the paper as fast as they can be laid on, and if a fish is to be drawn there is more trouble in keeping them off [it] than in the drawing itself. Many expedients have been thought of, none succeed better than a mosquito net which covers chair, painter and drawings, but even that is not sufficient, a fly trap was necessary to set within this to attract the vermin from eating the colours."



The Natural History Museum
A Scorpion fish, painted by Parkinson in 1768.

From Tahiti, Cook sailed south to beyond 40°S, fulfilling instructions in his search for the southern continent. Having found no sign of a major land mass he turned first north-west then south-west and finally westwards to hit the eastern coast of Abel Tasman's "New Zeland," the western seaboard of which the Dutchman had come across in 1642. Cook sailed anti-clockwise round the North Island, then through the Cook Strait and clockwise around the South Island. Although several short land excursions were made, the remarkably accurate chart Cook produced was mainly the result of a "running survey," that is, by sailing along the coast and taking thousands of careful bearings of land features and hundreds of astronomical observations.

Cook finally left New Zealand on 31 March 1770. Having achieved both principal objectives of the voyage, he could now have made his way home either back via Cape Horn or round the Cape of Good Hope. Since it was too late in the season to undertake the easterly route, Cook settled on the

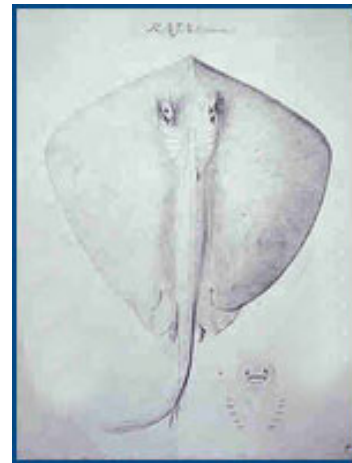
latter alternative, but decided that on the way he would chart the east coast of Australia northwards from where Tasman had left it 130 years previously. So began one of the most remarkable pieces of navigation and charting even by Cook's own high standards. At the same time it produced a wonderful collection of natural history material and some of Parkinson's best illustrations.



The Natural History Museum
Originals from which engravings were made.

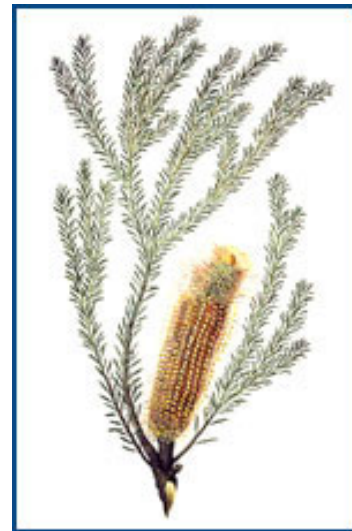
Arriving at the south-eastern tip of the continent on 19 April, the Endeavour sailed more than 2,000 miles along the whole of the east coast, including the dangerous shoals inside the vast Great Barrier Reef, at one point spending an agonising 36 hours aground on the reef and all but being destroyed. Apart from the excellent charts produced over five months of extremely difficult and hazardous navigation, several land excursions were made, by far the most important being south of present-day Sydney, in Botany Bay, so-named because of the wealth of new plants collected there.

Parkinson had already been busy since the beginning of the voyage, drawing marine animals and sea birds shot and collected from the ship during the ocean passages, and land plants and animals during the landfalls. But off the east coast of Australia he was overwhelmed. Banks and Solander were bringing in new material almost every day and Parkinson had to work frenetically to try to keep up, often working long into the night in cramped conditions by the flickering light of candles and oil lamps. He produced more than 400 sketches of plants while the ship was in Australian waters, though very few were actually completed during the voyage. Instead, his technique was to make detailed sketches, sometimes coloured, of important parts of each plant, presumably for completion later in conjunction with the dried specimen. In contrast, many more of his animal paintings were completed, though these were mostly of fishes and birds from the earlier part of the voyage and not his most celebrated Australian sketches of kangaroos, made in June 1770 near what is now Cooktown in Queensland. In fact, Parkinson illustrated very few mammals; only the kangaroos and a quoll were from Australia. This is perhaps not altogether surprising. Plants could be kept relatively fresh for some time wrapped in wet cloths, and small invertebrates and even fishes would not "go off" too rapidly. But a warm-blooded mammal was another matter--especially given that Parkinson drew in the ship's Great Cabin, where the officers and civilians had their meals.



The Natural History Museum
Herman Spöring drew *Raja testacea*, now known as *Urolophus testaceus*, a variety of stingray.

By the time the ship reached Cape York at the north-eastern tip of the Gulf of Carpentaria her hull and rigging were in an appalling state and Cook decided that a call for repairs at the Dutch base of Batavia (present-day Jakarta) was essential before they attempted the journey home. The Endeavour arrived at Batavia on 11 October and left on 26 December 1770, battling against contrary winds for a further three weeks before they could finally leave the land astern. Although the ship was now seaworthy, the stay in Batavia had been disastrous to the health of the crew. When they left, Cook wrote that "Batavia, I firmly believe, is the Death of more Europeans than any other place upon the globe of the same extent. We came here with as healthy a ship's company as need go to sea and after a stay of not quite three months left in the condition of a Hospital Ship, besides the loss of seven men." Things were to get much worse, for there were to be a further 13 deaths, including those of Spvring, Parkinson and the astronomer Green, mainly from malaria and dysentery, before they reached Cape Town on 15 March 1771.



The Natural History Museum
The watercolour version of Parkinson's drawing of *Banksia ericifolia*.



The Natural History Museum
A watercolour by John Frederick Miller.

The month-long stay in Cape Town was recuperative, all but three of those that arrived sick recovered, and new crew members were recruited. Finally sailing on 15 April, after a fairly uneventful passage, the Endeavour anchored in Plymouth on 12 July 1771. The crew members naturally received an enthusiastic welcome home, not least because in their absence they had several times been given up for lost. Cook was praised by both the Admiralty and the scientific establishment and was promoted to Commander in August. But Banks was lionised. Along with Solander, he became the toast of London society and his fame spread far and wide. Carl Linnaeus was so impressed by the natural history collections made during the voyage, including more than 1,000 plant species previously unknown in Europe, that he thought New South Wales should be named Banksia in his honour. Instead the name was given to a genus of plants.

In view of the obvious importance of the collections, and with Linnaeus' recently published *Systema Naturae* and *Species Plantarum* as superb guides, it is surprising that volumes on the new species obtained during the expedition were not published swiftly. Banks certainly intended to publish comprehensive accounts of the botanical material, and probably also the zoological collections--not only from this expedition but also those from Cook's second and third voyages, which he also acquired. But it never happened, mainly because Banks became more and more involved in other matters, particularly in his role as President of the Royal Society, a post he held for 41 years. Fortunately, the botanical specimens from all three voyages and most of the natural history illustrations were kept together and eventually came to



The Natural History Museum
Watercolour of *Abutilon indicum*, subspecies *albescens*.

the British Museum after Banks' death. Banks, however, was less interested in the zoological material, which, as a consequence, was given away or sold to a large number of private or institutional collectors both in Britain and abroad, much of it being destroyed or lost in the process.

Nevertheless, Banks tried to do justice to the almost 1,000 finished and unfinished botanical paintings and sketches Parkinson had left, together with several hundred illustrations of zoological and other subjects. Despite spending more than #7,000 and employing 18 engravers to produce 753 plates from Parkinson's originals, Banks failed in his lifetime to have them published. Aside from 318 lithographs of Australian plants published at the beginning of the 20th century, and a selection of his aesthetically most interesting botanical illustrations published in 1973, it was not until 1980 that Banks' *Florilegium* was printed and justice to Parkinson's efforts on the *Endeavour* voyage was finally done. Far fewer of the zoological illustrations have been published, though many of them were used by later naturalists as a basis for the description of new species. Nevertheless, the scientific and artistic significance of the most important achievements in the tragically short life of Sydney Parkinson are now fully recognised, albeit more than 200 years after the artist's death.

Books:

Title: Ferdinand Bauer : The Nature of Discovery
Format: Hardcover
Author: Mabberly, David
Date: 01-MAY-00
ISBN: 1858940877

Title: Voyages of Discovery : Three Centuries of Natural History Exploration
Format: Hardcover
Author: Tony Rice
Date: 01-OCT-99
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Title: Voyages of Discovery : Three Centuries of Natural History Exploration
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Title: The Letters of Sir Joseph Banks
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