

Captain James Cook's Return to the South Seas, 1772-1775

Editor's Introduction | Captain Cook's expedition to the South Seas in 1772 continued his search for a southern continent. During the voyage, which left just a year after the return of his *Endeavour* expedition across the Pacific, he came dangerously close to death but was lucky to recover and to continue completing detailed surveys of coastlines and adding to his extensive collection of ethnographic and natural materials. Tony Rice outlines how Cook coped with both the physical hardships of the trip and the difficult personality of his fellow scientist Johann Reinhold Forster.

Following the success of the *Endeavour* voyage, both James Cook and Joseph Banks were convinced there should be another expedition to the South Seas to settle once and for all the question of whether or not there was a large southern landmass. But in view of the difficulties experienced during the previous voyage, particularly the perilous passage inside the Great Barrier Reef, Cook wisely felt that two vessels should be involved this time. The Admiralty agreed, and by the end of September 1771, less than three months after the *Endeavour's* return, the Navy Board was instructed to purchase two suitable vessels. Cook oversaw the purchase and again chose colliers from the same Whitby yard where the *Endeavour* had been built: the *Resolution*, to be commanded by Cook, with a complement of 112, and the *Adventure*, to be commanded by Tobias Furneaux, with a complement of 80.



The Natural History Museum, London

An eland, a type of South African antelope, seen at the Cape Menagerie in 1772.

Cook had hoped to sail in March 1772 but problems with Banks delayed his departure until July. On this trip Banks had proposed to take a team of no less than 16--naturalists, artists, servants, and even two hornplayers. All were to be accommodated on the *Resolution*, which would have to be modified accordingly. Cook was to give up his cabin to Banks and move to new accommodation on an added upper deck. But when the additional accommodation made the ship unseaworthy and had to be removed, Banks threatened to withdraw his people en masse. He had employed this technique several times already to get his own way, but this time the Admiralty accepted Banks' withdrawal and quickly appointed its own scientific team, including Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-98) as naturalist, with his 18-year-old son George (1754-94) as assistant and artist.

The elder Forster was born in Poland where he studied theology and natural history at Halle University and then spent 12 years as a country parson near Danzig. During this time he married and raised a family of seven, the eldest being George, and continued his scientific studies. He moved to England in 1766 to teach mineralogy, entomology and other natural history subjects at the highly regarded Dissenters Academy at Warrington. But despite his undoubted talents, he was a difficult character and was sacked in 1769, moving with his family to London where he became well known in scientific circles. This brought him to the notice of the Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, and so to the post on the *Resolution*. Given his temperamental personality, however, he was to prove an irritation to virtually everyone on board and the difficult task of trying to compensate for Johann's shortcomings fell to his son George.



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King penguin, *Aptenodytes patagonicus*, South Georgia, 1775, by George Forster.

George Forster was extremely gifted, both intellectually and artistically. His father had tutored him in natural history from an early age and he had broadened his education at the Warrington

Academy during Johann's period there, but he seems to have had a natural talent for art. During the ensuing voyage he sketched and painted many of the plants and animals seen or collected by his father and himself, particularly those that could not be easily preserved and illustrated later. His plant and zoological drawings from the *Resolution* are preserved in The Natural History Museum in London, having been purchased by Joseph Banks in 1776. Most of the views and landscapes produced during the voyage were actually the work of the *Resolution's* other official artist, William Hodges (1744-97).

Cook finally left Plymouth on 13 July 1772, intending to sail first to the Cape of Good Hope. From here he was essentially to circumnavigate the globe as close to the South Pole as possible, but this time in an eastward direction to take advantage of the assumed generally westerly winds in these southern high latitudes. He was to investigate any large landmasses that he came across in this process, but was to switch his attentions to suitable lower latitude areas during the southern winters. During the first leg of the voyage to the Cape, the two Forsters described and illustrated a variety of marine animals and aquatic birds whose skins began to fill their cabins. The three-week stay at the Cape, and the further five weeks spent there three years later on the way home, gave the Forsters the chance to examine the South African wildlife, some of it in the menagerie in Cape Town, and for George to illustrate some species for the first time. They were overwhelmed by the abundance of undescribed animals and plants around the settlement. So when Johann met Anders Sparrman (1748-1820), a young Swedish doctor, an ex-student of Linnaeus and an accomplished natural historian, he persuaded Cook that Sparrman should join the scientific party on the *Resolution* to assist them.



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Halcyon leucocephala action, or the grey-headed kingfisher, is from the Cape Verde Islands, where Cook stopped en route to the Cape of Good Hope.

After leaving South Africa in late November 1772, they continued due south, sighting the first of many icebergs on 10 December. A few days later they were stopped by ice and for a month the ships sailed first westward and then eastward along the edge of the pack but with no sign of land. In mid-January the sea to the south was clear and on the 17th the ships crossed the Antarctic Circle--for the first time in history. Finally, at 67° 15'S, solid field ice stopped them, only 120 kilometres (75 miles) from the undiscovered Antarctic continent. Cook then sailed north-east into the southern Indian Ocean, but lost touch with the *Adventure* in thick fog on 8 February. Furneaux had orders to rendezvous with him at Queen Charlotte Sound in New Zealand under such circumstances so the *Resolution* continued north-east to about 45°S then south-east to 62°S by which time she was again surrounded by huge icebergs. On 24 February, Cook decided they could go no further south and for almost a month they sailed eastwards.

Finally, on 17 March 1773, Cook gave up his high latitude search for the season and bore north-east to New Zealand, sighting the South Island on the morning of the 25th. He spent the whole of April in Dusky Sound, a remote stretch of water near the South Island's southern tip which he had discovered during the *Endeavor* voyage. There were ample supplies of fresh water and food to replenish the *Resolution's* seriously depleted stores, and plenty of opportunities for exploring the Sound's numerous inlets and islands and for meeting the Maoris. By 5 April the Forsters and Sparrman had collected and described 19 birds, three fish and six plants. By the time they left Dusky Sound in May they had collected many more, but in the process the naturalists' conditions on board became less than pleasant. Johann wrote that his cabin "was a Magazine of all the various kinds of plants, fish, birds, shells, seeds etc. hitherto collected: which made it vastly damp, dirty, crammed, & caused very noxious vapours ..."



The Natural History Museum, London

The naturalists on board the *Resolution* had the opportunity to see and study the rich--and then almost undocumented--bird life in the region, which included the fulmar (above).

Cook made his way along the west coast of the South Island, reaching Queen Charlotte Sound on 18 April to find the *Adventure* awaiting him. There was to be no prolonged and relaxed stay in their "winter quarters" as Furneaux, and no doubt most of the seamen, had expected and hoped. Instead Cook intended to use the time to sweep yet another unexplored section of the Pacific. From New Zealand he intended to sail east as far as about 135°W at between 41° and 46°S, quite a high latitude for this time of year. He would then turn north and return to New Zealand via Tahiti and various more-or-less unexplored island groups.



The Natural History Museum, London

Barringtonia speciosa--now renamed *Barringtonia asiatica*, a plant not yet known to botanists when collected and painted by the Forsters in August 1773.

The two ships sailed on 7 June and followed Cook's plan very closely. They actually sailed further east than he had originally intended, reaching 133° 3'W without sighting land before turning north towards the Tuamotu Islands, then west to Tahiti. A month later they left with their decks groaning under the weight of new supplies and extensive natural history and ethnographic collections and many of George's drawings. But instead of returning to Queen Charlotte Sound by the shortest route, Cook now sailed west, through the Society Islands and the Friendly Islands before finally leaving Tonga on 8 October. Towards the end of the month, as they approached the western entrance to Cook Strait through which they would have to pass to reach the Sound, they were hit by appalling weather. Cook did not get the *Resolution* safely into her anchorage until 3 November--but there was no sign of the *Adventure*. Furneaux eventually got her into Queen Charlotte Sound, but not until after Cook had already left. Furneaux eventually left New Zealand in late December and returned home via the Cape, arriving in England in July 1774.

In the meantime, Cook made his second great sweep of the Pacific including two more forays south of the Antarctic Circle. When she arrived in Queen Charlotte Sound the *Resolution's* rigging

was repaired and she was thoroughly cleaned, her planking re-caulked and her stores restocked. A note was left in a bottle for Furneaux giving him an outline of Cook's plans including his intention to visit Tahiti, Easter Island or the Society Islands the following winter. After a final search for the *Adventure* around the New Zealand coast, the *Resolution* left alone on 26 November 1773. As they travelled south the weather worsened. Despite the dangers, Cook pressed on, crossing the Antarctic Circle on 20 December. They spent four intensely cold days inside the Antarctic Circle before re-crossing it again on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day was calm and, despite the presence of many icebergs, Cook allowed the crew to celebrate it in the usual drunken and ribald way. Johann, though, was depressed, for he saw these long ocean passages as a waste of his time and depriving him of the opportunities to make significant discoveries which Banks and Solander had enjoyed on the previous voyage.

The *Resolution* left the ice in early January 1774 and by the 11th had reached more than two thirds of the way between New Zealand and South America at a latitude of about 48°S. Here Cook changed course towards Cape Horn and raised the hopes of some of the seamen that they were on their way home. But very shortly they turned further to the south and two weeks later crossed the Antarctic Circle yet again. By 30 January, solid field ice and thick fog forced Cook to turn north, convinced that the sea ice reached all the way to the pole.

The ship now left the Antarctic Circle, and the ice, for the last time, sailing first north-east then north in search of land that the navigator Juan Fernandez had supposedly found at about 38°S. Cook found no land and, towards the end of February, decided to give up the search and go directly to Easter Island. But as they started on the new course the Captain was taken dangerously ill with "bilious colick," probably from a severe gall bladder infection, which put him in bed for almost a week. To provide Cook with fresh food, otherwise totally unavailable, Johann Forster had a dog he had brought from Tahiti killed and cooked. It apparently worked, and to everyone's relief Cook gradually recovered.

After a four-day stopover at Easter Island in mid-March 1774, Cook sailed to the Marquesas, then to Tahiti, and west through the Polynesian islands, before sailing south and west of the Fiji group and arriving at an island group he named the New Hebrides. From late July to the end of August he made a detailed survey of the coastline, before sailing on to the fourth largest island in the Pacific, which he named New Caledonia. Here he spent the month of September, charting its treacherous 480-kilometre-long (300-mile-long) north-east coast. Cook and the botanists were ashore a few days later to examine the strange Cook Pine, *Araucaria columnaris*, which, at 30 metres (100 feet) high, has branches no more than 2 metres (six feet) long. These pines were the source of a good deal of amusement at the expense of the unpopular Johann who, when the crew were viewing them from the ship, had wagered a dozen bottles of wine that they were actually basalt columns. Halfway between New Caledonia and New Zealand, they came across another island with its own curious pine, the Norfolk Island Pine, before finally reaching Queen Charlotte Sound once more on 17 October 1774.

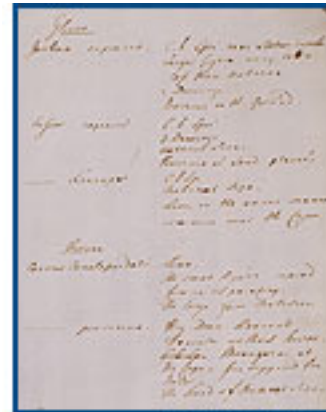


The Natural History Museum, London
A finished watercolour of a species of passion flower, *Passiflora aurantia*, dated 8 September, giving the locality as New Caledonia.

In these two great sweeps through the Pacific islands alone, Cook had achieved an enormous amount—charting, surveying and collecting. But all this was essentially an adjunct to the main purpose of the voyage, the search for the southern continent. To complete this work, Cook now had to traverse the southern Pacific again and search the southern Atlantic before returning home. But this last attempt was to be in vain. "I can be bold to say that no man will ever venture farther than I

have done and the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored," he wrote on 27 January 1775. "Thick fog, snow storms, Intense cold and every other thing that can render Navigation dangerous one has to encounter, and these difficulties are greatly heightened by the inexpressible horrid aspect of the Country, a Country doomed by Nature never once to feel the warmth of the Sun's rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice."

Cook finally reached England on 30 July 1775. Once home, he busied himself preparing the results of his second voyage for publication, and in the process became embroiled in a major row with Johann Forster. Forster claimed that it had been agreed he should write up the public account of the voyage. This was hardly likely, but early in 1776 a compromise was reached under which Cook and Forster would publish in collaboration. By the summer even this arrangement had broken down. Eventually, three separate accounts of the voyage were published. With the full support of the Admiralty, Cook's two-volume work appeared in May 1777, including 12 charts and 51 monochrome engravings of places, people and artefacts mainly based on originals by Hodges. But six weeks earlier George Forster had published a two-volume account prepared with his father, while Johann's own single-volume observations on "...Physical Geography, Natural History and Ethnic Philosophy" appeared the following year. With no money or time to undertake expensive engravings, and lacking official support, neither of the Forster publications contained illustrations.



The Natural History Museum, London
Pages from the handwritten catalogue of Johann Forster.

Despite the title of Johann's book, it contained very little detailed information about the natural history collections and, as in the case of Cook's first voyage, very little about them was published until much later. Many of the plants and animals collected were totally "new" at the time of the *Resolution* voyage, but Johann's descriptions of the specimens, many of them referring to George's illustrations, were not published until 1844, 46 years after Johann's death. By this time most of them had been described and named by other authors. The surviving botanical and zoological collections, and the illustrations from the *Resolution*, are justifiably revered and treasured for their historical, scientific and artistic value; but at the time they did not receive the attention, and certainly not the publicity, that they deserved.

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

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