

The Captain Cook Oration by Bill Ranken

Captain James Cook's Birthday October 27, 1728

Gentlemen,

Captain James Cook

27 October 1728 - 14 February 1779

50 years and 3 months.

I am honoured, but humbled and inspired by the speakers who have preceded me.

Thank you gentlemen for setting such a high bar!

I am unqualified for the task.

But it has been tremendous fun.

I seek your indulgence in advance for the many speculations I am about to make.

First I have for you a quick refresher course on life at sea

Then my view of some of the factors which contributed to Cook's career.

During which certain ship's rations will be distributed to those deemed worthy!

Then I will finish with a quick review of Cook's career

To begin:

Beaglehole, the eminent Cook historian asks,

"What combination of factors, including the mingled blood of a lowland Scots labourer, and a Yorkshire village woman, went to produce that remarkable career...?"¹

Cook forged his remarkable career on sailing ships.

So, what was life like on board?

Some details²:

- HMS Endeavor's crew was 116 souls.
- She was just under 30 metres long and had a beam or width of 9 metres
- (Or 98 feet by 29 feet).
- Can you pause a second gentlemen... and imagine all 75 of us, plus another 46 men, to make the full crew of 116, all confined together in the club dining room for 2 or 3 years?
- [HMS Resolution had 165 souls; she was just under 4 metres longer.]
- 27% of HMS Endeavor's crew died, vs 9% on HMS Resolution.
- [How did Cook keep order, when it was roughly one officer for every 30 men on board?]

¹ Beaglehole 1973 p3

² Denning 1994 p 382 - 386

- [13% of Endeavor's crew were punished vs 26% on Resolution]
- And the big one, for which a seaman could be fined 15 shillings or three weeks' pay:
- Gentlemen anyone care to guess at the percentage of Cook's men who caught VD?
- 34% of Endeavour's crew had VD, and a whopping 57% of Resolution's. This was at the high-end, it was by no means out of the ordinary.
- However, Cook cared for his men and they knew it. He saved many of them from scurvy.
- While discipline was violent, opportunities for promotion, and better pay, far outweighed fines.
- Some statistics:
- [on the 1556 men in the 15 Royal Navy ships which visited the Pacific at this time]:
- Roughly 20% of the crew were flogged after allowing for repeat offenders.
- less than 3% were fined , mostly 15-20 shillings or about a month's pay for an able seaman, but
- 18% were promoted,
- Types of punishment are fascinating, especially to those of us who attended boarding schools³:
- "Starting" was informal beating with a rattan rope was not formally recorded as punishment.
- "Running the Gauntlet" was rare: pressed from behind by a sword and walking to the slow beat of the Rogues March, between two rows of the whole crew, who wielded 'knittles', or small lines of rope.
- "Confinement in Irons" for a few days was common for being unclean, for rushing to the galley to stab the cook, or for up to three months for carelessly taking native lives.
- "Grampussing" was like modern water boarding, and a specialty of the lower deck.
- "Hanging" was very rare; for desertion.

Cook chose health care, physical punishment, promotion, and alcohol to preserve, control and motivate his men.⁴

Rations of alcohol were a gallon of beer a day while it lasted, or wine for the officers who could afford it, and then half a pint of Grog, which was slightly diluted rum.

Cook (and other Captains) added to the crew's grog rations at will, to celebrate, say at Christmas, and to "palliate harsh conditions".

Eminent historian, the late Dr. Greg Denning wrote that, "Temperance was a virtue neither on the quarter deck nor on the lower deck. It was a rare ship whose officers were never drunk."

Gentlemen take note: the rum was for both the officers and the crew, after the beer and wine ran out that is!

The first rum ration will be to the table chosen by our Captain General, and we will ask them for toast to Captain Cook!

Gentlemen, I give you: A great leader of men.
Who saved them from death by scurvy.
Captain James Cook - A Toast (Rum & Water)

³ Denning 1994 p 117 onwards

⁴ Denning 1994 p 120

Now, I wish to suggest there were other significant 'factors', which contributed to his 'remarkable career'.

The Second 'Factor'?

And now a small question gentlemen!

What was the influence of religion?

How significant was this for Cook and for Britain?

The Pope declared Martin Luther a heretic in 1521. Henry VIII created the independent Church of England in 1533.⁵

I suggest this was this important for Cook, two centuries later.

Four main reasons, briefly and then in detail:

1. **Defence by sea** - Britain was about to be invaded by Spain. For the next 500 years she would need sea power and sea-borne trade to defend her independence.
2. **Education on a grand scale** - becomes a religious requirement: in 1539 and 1541, 9,000 copies of The Great English Bible are published in English for the first time.⁶ It was required reading for everyone, by law. [Luther and the Protestants thought that individual reading of the bible was of central importance.] In 1611 The King James Bible is published and English eventually becomes the language of the world.
3. **Scientific method** - or at least a call to intellectual rather than superstitious thinking. The book of Genesis and its lessons in chapter one about scientific method, including its intelligible account of the cosmic order based on intelligible principles, not mythic or sensual ones, were for the first time ever, widely required to be read in English.⁷
4. **The Protestant ethic** - hard work, learning, thrift and wealth now were consistent with going to heaven!⁸

The eminent historian Dr. Niall Fergusson has written:

"Religions matter" ... Confucianism contributed to holding back Chinese innovation and competitiveness..."imams and mullahs snuffed out any chance of a scientific revolution in the Islamic world" ..."the Roman Catholic church acted as one of the brakes on economic development in South America." ..."Protestantism made the West not only work, but also save and read".⁹

"Protestant countries in Europe tended to grow faster than Catholic ones, so that by 1700 [Cook's century] the former had clearly overtaken the latter in terms of per capita income..."¹⁰

[In 1728, Cook is born into an independent, pugnacious and increasingly educated, Protestant England.]

⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, Biography, Henry VIII, on line

⁶ British Library accessed on line

⁷ Kass 2006 p 33

⁸ Ferguson 2011 p 259

⁹ Ferguson 2011 p 264

¹⁰ Young C, Religion and Economic Growth in Western Europe: 1500-2000 Princeton, cited in Ferguson 2011, p 263

It seems to me that religion, especially the Protestant Reformation, was one of the important factors in Cook's remarkable career.

The Third 'Factor'?

Was science a factor in Cook's remarkable career?

During the 17th century, the so called Scientific Enlightenment gathered a great head of steam, and then during the 18th century, Cook's century, its impact was felt almost everywhere in Britain. It helped improve navigation and start the industrial revolution.

From 1600 onwards we have¹¹:

- Electricity
- Logarithms
- Newspapers
- Geometry
- Mechanics
- Number Theory
- Probability Theory
- Calculus
- Wavelength and colour in light
- Micro organisms
- Gravitation and motion

And then we have Cook's century!

- Magnificent ocean-going merchant vessels known as East Indiamen
- A £20,000 prize for a chronometer [offered in 1714].
- The standard sextant used at sea
- Classification of species
- Mathematics of fluid flow and theory of gases
- Geological maps
- A chronometer which is only five seconds out.
- The first Encyclopaedia Britannica published

In 1771: the 'Factory Age' begins with the opening of Britain's first cotton mill.

Richard Arkwright adds waterpower to cotton spinning by using a water frame. He pioneers the 'dark satanic mills'. Better pay and higher living standards are brought to many.

In 1776: The first two Boulton and Watt engines are installed in the mines and mills of England's developing industrial revolution, and

Adam Smith writes The Wealth of Nations

¹¹ Ferguson 2011 p 66

Then In 1779

Captain James Cook dies at age 50

It seems to me this scientific enlightenment was indeed a factor in Cook's career. I suggest, he was both a child of it, and a maker of it.

The Fourth 'Factor'?

Why did Britain send Cook to the Pacific?

I suggest that the Portuguese, and later the Spanish, showed the rest of Europe new ways to great power and wealth, and that pursuing these opportunities became the long term national agenda for Britain, and that this was a factor behind Cook's voyages of discovery.¹²

- In 1415 Portugal, a nation of less than a million people, storms and takes the Muslim fort of Ceuta in Morocco, one of the most heavily fortified and commercially strategic strongholds in the Mediterranean.
- The Portuguese then push further and faster down the African coast and around the world than any other people in history.¹³
- And in 1498 Vasco Da Gama's [discovery of the sea route to India](#) confirms that the way is open for an age of global [imperialism](#). The Portuguese establish a long-lasting [colonial empire](#) in Asia.¹⁴
- And in 1492 Christopher Columbus had started his four voyages to the West.

[Now a fascinating sidelight:

Why was the way to India and the Spice Islands was open?

Anyone?

The Chinese had pulled out!

In 1405, a Chinese fleet of 250 ships and 25,000 men were dispatched, by the Emperor Yong Le, to India and East Africa.¹⁵

The Chinese were led by Admiral Zheng He, who glorified in the title of The Three Jewell Eunuch.

Seven expeditions were made in total with the last made in 1433.

Gentlemen, I think this Chinese withdrawal explains why we do not all speak Chinese.]

Now back to Cook: My speculation is that that Britain, looking for the wealth and power it needed to maintain its independence from invasion and foreign takeover, was quick to follow the Portuguese and Spanish examples.

Cook had secret instructions from the Lords of the Admiralty, in a sealed packet no less, to be opened only after completing the mission on Tahiti:

¹² Wikipedia online Ferdinand Magellan

¹³ Crowley 2015 p 3

¹⁴ Wikipedia online Vasco Da Gama

¹⁵ Crowley 2015 pp 1-7

He was to seek the Great Southern Land, and I quote

“Whereas the making Discoveries of Countries hitherto unknown, and the Attaining a Knowledge of distant Parts yet though formerly discovered have yet been imperfectly explored, will redound greatly to the honour of this nation as Maritime Power, as well as to the Dignity of the Crown of Great Britain, and may tend greatly to the advancement of the Trade and Navigation thereof...You are to proceed southward in order to make discovery of the Continent aforementioned...”¹⁶

Now gentlemen, I think that calls for another distribution of grog rations and another toast, from the next table.

Gentlemen, I give you A Toast (Rum & Water)

The search for discovery of new lands, for honour, for maritime power, for dignity, for trade and navigation:

Captain James Cook.

The Fifth ‘Factor’?

And now for some excitement!

What were the politics and wars of his time, and what influence did they have on Cook?

Island Britain had been at war defending herself and her seaborne trade for years before Cook was born, and it heated up quite a bit during his lifetime.

War with the Pope, War with Spain, War with France, War with the Dutch, War with the Scots, Civil War, a King beheaded. Stock Market booms and busts, Shakespeare. Great Plague, Great Fire. American Revolution.

Now to Cook’s century

In 1714, Britain is a winner in the War of Spanish Succession; against France, Spain and the Dutch.

This is a glorious victory, and I quote from Britannica¹⁷:

“Britain received the largest portion of colonial and commercial spoils and took the leading position in world trade. In international politics the settlement established a pattern for the next 20 years.

Spain gives Britain the exclusive right to supply the Spanish colonies with African slaves for the next 30 years.

France takes a decade to recover, and Spain and Holland are unable to reverse their military and economic decline.

Young James Cook was one of those fortunate inheritors of this peace and prosperity.

[Now back to 1719 when, as a former stockbroker, I could not resist these items:

- In London, it is proposed that the entire British government debt be privatised – holders of government debt would be offered shares in the South Sea Company in exchange for their debt.¹⁸

¹⁶ original copy quoted and cited by Beaglehole 1974 p 147 - 148

¹⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, 18th Century Britain and The Treaty of Utrecht on line

- Sound familiar gentlemen? Anyone here own a Telstra share???
- A year later, In 1720 Shares in the South Sea Company rise rapidly and collapse within the year, in the so-called South Sea Bubble. Many Directors sell out at the top. Huge fortunes are lost.¹⁹
- In Paris shares in John Law's Mississippi Company are up ten-fold, and by November 1720 have fallen all the way back to where they started.²⁰

In 1723 poaching becomes a capital offence²¹

In 1739 Cook is eleven,
Britain declares war on Spain.
Britain's population is around 7 million, [unchanged since 1700].²²

In 1744 Cook is sixteen.
France declares war on Britain.

In 1746 cook is eighteen
Charles Edward Stuart and his 5000 Scots are routed at Culloden, bringing the Forty-Five Rebellion to an abrupt end.
Gentlemen it seems these folk cannot resist a good fight, or a good profit:.

In 1747
Liverpool overtakes Bristol as Britain's busiest slave trading port²³

In 1755
Cook joins the Navy

In 1757 another glorious victory.
Britain takes Bengal at the Battle of Plassey.

The British East India Company army led by Colonel, later Lord Clive of India defeats - and wait for it gentlemen - the Iraqi Shiite²⁴ Nawab, Siraj ud Daulah, and his French backers. This victory, and the enormous wealth of Bengal, help establish eventual British control over all India.²⁵

In 1765
Riots erupt in American colonies after parliament levies 'stamp' taxes.

[In 1770, the so called triangular trade, controlled from Liverpool, ships millions of Africans across the Atlantic as slaves.]

[In 1773, the London brokers who meet to do business in Jonathan's coffee house decide to call themselves the Stock Exchange]

On July 4, 1776
The American Declaration of Independence is adopted

¹⁸ Richards and Robertson 2003 p 6

¹⁹ Empire and Sea Power p 1 at BBC OnLine

²⁰ Ferguson 2009 p 151

²¹ Empire and Sea Power p 1 at BBC OnLine

²² **Encyclopedia Britannica, 18th Century Britain on line**

²³ **Empire and Sea Power p 2 at BBC OnLine**

²⁴ **Wikipedia online Siraj ud-Daulah**

²⁵ **Empire and Sea Power p 2 at BBC OnLine**

In 1779 Cook dies in the Pacific.

Gentlemen, what a time Cook lived in! These great events must have been factors in Cook's remarkable career, in my opinion.

There was another significant event in 1787, eight years after Cook died,:

- The First Fleet (eleven ships carrying about 750 convicts) leaves Portsmouth for Australia. [Since 1718, Britain had transported convicts to its North American colonies. The American War of Independence ended this. Between 1787 and 1868, when transportation was abolished, over 150,000 felons were exiled to New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land and Western Australia.]²⁶

And gentlemen, one more significant event, in 1791, which had nothing at all to do with Cook, but is valued by those of us with Scottish heritage!

Scottish poet Robert Burns publishes Tam o' Shanter, in which a drunken farmer has an alarming encounter with witches.

And now gentlemen I hope you will agree it's the last table's turn for a grog ration, as it seems all their beer and wine may have run out!

**Gentlemen, I give you Captain Cook, The First Fleet and Robbie Burns!
A Toast (Rum & Water)**

Finally, we come to Cook's remarkable career. ²⁷

As teenager he is at Ayton Post Gate School in Yorkshire, on a scholarship courtesy of his father's employer; ²⁸

Cook learns seamanship in the 1750s:
From the bottom up, In the coastal coal and North Sea trades.
Offered his own command in just eleven years.

In 1755 he Joins the Navy, to
'take his future fortune'. ²⁹

In 1757 a 29 year old Cook is, and I quote;
'...given authority to take command as Master any of his Majesty's ships...' ³⁰

²⁶ Empire and Sea Power p 6 at BBC Online

²⁷ ADB Online, 1966: Fortune, ADB Online: Ferguson, 2011, p66: History World 2012: Beaglehole 1974 pp various

²⁸ Beaglehole 1973 p 5

²⁹ Beaglehole 1973 p 15-17

³⁰ Beaglehole 1973 p 25

Four months later;

- He is Master of the 1250 ton HMS Pembroke; with 64 guns.
- Crosses the Atlantic to Nova Scotia in record time.
- Loses 29 men to scurvy, a lesson he does not forget.
- Learns new military surveying techniques and the 'plane table'
- Helps the "Conqueror of Canada", General Wolfe, storm Quebec.
- Is commended to The Admiralty Board in London for his charts and sailing instructions which help the fleet to sail up the St Lawrence, and his successful actions in HMS Pembroke.³¹
- Quebec is perhaps a defining event for Cook's future?

In 1762

- He marries Elizabeth Batts, 13 years his younger, at St Margaret's, Barking, Essex.
- He is at sea more than half of their married life.
- They have six children. Three die young. Three surviving sons die by 1794. None marry, so no direct descendants.³²

Between 1763 and 1767:

Cook surveys and maps the southern and western sides of Newfoundland.

- The larger charts, called 'exact trigonometrical surveys' are ten feet long on an inch to a mile scale. Others were a mere six feet by three.³³

[On 6 August 1764, Cook... 'unfortunately had a Large Powder Horn blown up and burst in his hand which shattered it in a terrible manner...' ³⁴. His right hand is gashed between thumb and forefinger and this leaves a scar to his wrist. The scar is used some 15 years later to identify his dismembered remains.]

Between 1768 and 1769, Cook makes his three great expeditions to the Pacific Ocean³⁵:
He is 40 years old at the start, and 50 at the end.

These voyages were well covered by my predecessors, so I will provide only a quick summary:

The First Voyage of Discovery in HMS Endeavour, 1768 - 71

- Tahiti for the transit of Venus.
- Charts New Zealand,
- Discovers and charts the east coast of Australia,
- Lands in and names Botany Bay, and New South Wales,
- New Guinea and Java.
- Two years and 11 months
- 30,000 miles
- 5,000 miles of coastline charted.³⁶

³¹ Beaglehole 1973 p 33 onwards and Captaincook.org website timeline

³² Encyclopedia Britannica James Cook online

³³ Beaglehole 1973 p 95

³⁴ Beaglehole 1973 p 80

³⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, James Cook, on line

The Second Voyage in HMS Resolution; 1772 – 75. Cook is 44 at the start

- He sails further south than any other captain. [The Antarctic Circle is not crossed again for nearly half a century.]
- He is the first man ever to circumnavigate the world in both directions.
- 3 years & 18 days
- He is received by King George III. ³⁷
- 1775:
- He publishes his famous discovery of a preventive cure against scurvy.
- He is a celebrated scientist as well as a naval hero.

The Third Voyage in Resolution; 1776 – 79

- Hawaii, Oregon, British Colombia , Anchorage Bay in Alaska,
- Stopped by ice in the Bering Straits, returns South.

On 14 February 1779, James Cook is speared to death, and respectfully³⁸ dismembered by the Hawaiians who killed him.

That gentlemen concludes my own special assessment of Cook's remarkable career.

Now gentlemen, Please all stand and join me in a final toast:

I give you

- Son of a day labourer,
- Scholarship boy,
- Naval officer,
- Navigator,
- World explorer,
- Scientist,
- And, perhaps above all,
- Leader of Men

³⁶ Captaincook.org website timeline

³⁷ Captaincook.org website timeline

³⁸ Denning 1994 p 169

Captain James Cook

Appendix

Deaths, Health and Discipline of British Naval Seamen in the Central Pacific 1764 - 1795³⁹

15 ships including HMS Endeavor and HMS Resolution

Deaths, Health and Discipline of British Naval Seamen in the Central Pacific 1764 - 1795[1]			
	All 15 Ships	HMS Endeavour	HMS Resolution
Total Crew	1556	116	125
Died	9%	27%	9%
Drowned	4%	3%	
Deserted	5%	3%	2%
Punished	13%	13%	26%
Repeat Punishment	8%	7%	11%
VD	28%	34%	57%

Ratings of British Naval Seamen in the Central Pacific 1764 - 1795			
	All 15 Ships		
Marines	151	10%	
Seamen	874	56%	
Petty Officers	353	23%	
Warrant Officers	129	8%	
Commissioned Officers	48	3%	one in 32
Total	1,555	100%	
Total All Officers	530	34%	one in three

³⁹ Denning 1994 p 382 - 384

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