



Introduction Captain Cook after 250 Years: Re-exploring the Voyages of James Cook (avril 2020)

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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

Ladan NIAYESH

Drawing on Elias Canetti's classic *Crowds and Power*^[1], Claire Jowitt notes how much the figure of the captain ruling the seas has provided a "powerful collective vision and symbol" of English self-identity over the past few centuries. Such has been the case at least since the time of the great Elizabethan explorers and privateers like Martin Frobisher, Francis Drake, or Thomas Cavendish^[2]. But captain among captains to the point of being more commonly referred to by that title than by his first name, James Cook stands out as possibly the most enduring embodiment of that national, imperial, and colonial stereotype of seaborne heroic manhood. "Bestriding the European map of the Pacific like a colossus" in the words of Nigel Rigby^[3], Cook the master navigator holds a controversial position in the history of the making of that map. On the one hand, his name glorifies British exploits in a golden age of scientific discovery, artistic achievement, and imperial expansion, but on the other hand, he also stands for a potent symbol of the territorial dispossessions and colonial ideology that followed in the wake of his voyages of exploration.

Revisiting Cook and his protean legacy 250 years after the first of his three Pacific voyages therefore implies primarily to pause and reflect on a complex British imperial past which has resulted in a challenging present. It also implies to reassess our very practices of remembering and rewriting narratives of what the eighteenth century viewed as "Enlightenment", a memorial operation which is about "making a present of the past" or "performing" it in the anthrohistorical sense given to that term by Greg Denning^[4]. Considering Cook's legacy from the vantage point of continental Europe allows this special issue of the journal *Astrolabe* and the Paris conference which was its starting point to approach it in a more dispassionate way perhaps than other initiatives around the globe over the past few months, which diversely honoured or denounced the explorer's epoch-making cross-cultural encounters. Yet even in viewing Cook from our supposedly more objective outsiders' angle, we too need as inheritors to the legacy of Bougainville or La Pérouse to remember how the story of the English and British challenge to the rival imperial powers of France or Spain was to some extent, in the sobering words of William Frame and Laura Walker, "a squabble among thieves over lands belonging to non-European peoples".^[5]

Choosing to face the complexity and diversity of approaches to Cook in our time rather than compromising over them, we have taken stock of the expertise of scholars from different geographical and methodological horizons, inviting them to engage in cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary conversations in each of the four sections of this volume. The first section, entitled "Explorers and Conquerors", recontextualises Cook in his own time by looking at rival protagonists such as Joseph Banks in Anna Agnarsdóttir's contribution, concealed agendas such as the quest for the Northwest Passage in Pierre-François Peirano's article, and the explorer's early American followers studied by Dane Morrison. The second section, on "Transmissions and Translations" focuses on the diverse fortunes of Cook's journals, which had a journey of their own, from Hawkesworth's alterations to the manuscript of the first voyage analysed by Jean-Stéphane Massiani, to the uses of the journals as log-books in Odile Gannier's essay, and the repurposed early French translation of Démeunier critically reviewed by Antoine Eche. The third section, devoted to "Artistic Representations and Heritage", bridges the temporal gap between Cook's time and our own, with a transhistorical approach to the culture of knowledge and artistic dissemination surrounding Cook-related artefacts. Here, recent examples of museum exhibitions around Cook commemorations are critically evaluated by John Mullen, while John McAleer adopts a diachronic approach to evolving practices of display around landmark Cook collections. Giving the topic a visual edge, Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding considers the "re-imaging" in our time of the colonial and scientific testimonies left by artists who embarked on each of Cook's three journeys. The fourth and final section, "James Cook Revisited", blows the postcolonial whistle in both Sandhya Patel's and Ben Ferguson's presentations of biographical debates on Cook in our time, from white New Zealander J. C. Beaglohole's quasi-hagiographic stance in the early 1970's to Sri Lankan Gananath Obeyesekere's openly postcolonial take and Barry Lopez's firing the first shots of what Cook can mean for the twenty-first century.

In our journey with and along the legacy of Captain Cook, we are particularly grateful to the Hakluyt Society, under whose aegis Beaglehole published the first comprehensive, critical edition of the journals between 1955 and 1967. Engaging with our times' changing practices of commemoration around a controversial figure and a complex history, the Society has shown in its support to our project its readiness to ever encourage and endorse new critical approaches to both the methods and the results of the

discovery voyages which it publishes.

Notes

1. ^ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart, New York and London, Continuum, 1962, p. 171-172.
2. ^ Claire Jowitt, "The Hero and the Sea", XVII-XVIII, 74, 2017, <http://journals.openedition.org/1718/888> (last accessed 17 April 2020).
3. ^ Nigel Rigby, "'Men of Captain Cook': Pacific Voyages 1785-1803", in *Captain Cook and the Pacific: Art, Exploration and Empire*, ed. John McAleer and Nigel Rigby, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 169.
4. ^ Greg Denning, *Performances*, Carlton South, University of Melbourne Press, 1996, p. xiv.
5. ^ William Frame and Laura Walker (eds.), *James Cook: The Voyages*, Montreal, McGill and Queen's University Press, 2018, p. 12.

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Référence électronique

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