



## James Cook [1728-1779]

Captain James Cook is an enigma. A complex and almost mythical figure in history. His legacy is mixed. For some, he is the great navigator, cartographer, and explorer. For many First Nations peoples across the Pacific, Cook symbolises centuries of dispossession which still resonate powerfully.

So who was he? For a man who would go on to such iconic status, James Cook came from humble beginnings. He was born in Yorkshire in 1728, the son of a farm labourer. He went to village schools. Bright and intelligent, in 1746 he was apprenticed to Captain John Walker of Whitby, sailing coal ships (colliers) in the North Sea, English Channel, Irish and Baltic Seas.

In 1755 Cook joined the British Royal Navy as a general seaman and quickly rose through the ranks.

**The Pacific Voyages** In 1768, Cook was made a lieutenant and given command of the Bark *Endeavour*. for an expedition jointly funded by the British Royal Navy and the Royal Society. On 25 August 1768, Cook set sail from Plymouth bound for Tahiti where his public instructions were to observe the Transit of Venus. Then as secretly instructed, he sailed south in search of the fabled 'Great Southern Continent'. In the event that he found the Continent, he should chart its coasts, obtain information about its people, cultivate their friendship and alliance, and annex any convenient trading posts in the King's name. The first voyage took 3 years.

He was instructed to make scientific observations and collect natural specimens, and to show every kind of civility and regard to the natives, at the same time taking care not to be surprised by them.

With their consent, he was to take possession in the name of the King of any convenient situations in any country he might discover. Cook's second and third voyages involved a fuller exploration of the Pacific and Atlantic, including the search for a north-west passage through the Pacific to the Atlantic.

Cook eventually reached the north-west passage (the Bering Strait), but it was ice-bound and he was unable to cross it. Returning through the South Pacific, he was killed in the Sandwich Islands on 14 February 1779.

**Family Man** In 1762 he had married Elizabeth Batts [1742-1835]. They were married for 17 years but lived together only about four years in total in between Captain Cook's three epic voyages of discovery. [Elizabeth bore him six children, 3 of whom died as infants.]

James' death in far away Hawaii heralded a string of tragedies for Mrs Cook. Eight months later their son Nathaniel, 15, was lost at sea when his ship went down in a hurricane. Her remaining sons, Hugh, 17 and James, 31, died within weeks of one another in December 1793 and January 1794 - Hugh of scarlet fever and James a Commander of the Royal Navy, drowned at sea. Elizabeth was a widow for 56 years, pre-deceased by her children, none of whom had children.

Cook's report of his observations along the New South Wales coastline on his first voyage formed the basis for Britain's decision to establish the colony at Botany Bay in 1788. His careful charting of the coast also formed the basis for the British Admiralty

Charts of Australian waters produced by the Hydrographic Office of the Admiralty from its establishment 20 years after Cook's voyage along the eastern coast of Australia.

*Additional material from Stephen Thompson Migration Heritage Centre, 2011, and the original NLA exhibition online <https://www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/cook-and-the-pacific>*