

Intelligent analysis wrapped in adventure story

"The Wide Wide Sea: Imperial Ambition, First Contact and the Fateful Final Voyage of Captain James Cook."

Hampton Sides, Doubleday, 2024.

This splendidly researched book offers an insightful study of Captain James Cook's 1776-1779 exploratory voyage in the Pacific Ocean and his attempts to discover a Northwest Passage. The subtitle reminds the reader that Cook is no longer viewed as the heroic explorer whose fame made his "Voyage Towards the South Pole and Round the World" a publishing sensation in 1777, and whose account of his third voyage sold out in a single day four years after his death. Cook's present-day reputation is mixed, because his explorations and peerless maps encouraged British imperial ambition.

Sides' balanced narrative elucidates earlier-ignored aspects (rat infestations, venereal disease, unanticipated violence) of Cook's cross-cultural meetings with the indigenous residents of Tahiti, Hawaii, and the North American coastal regions. Often his narrative contrasts Cook's Englishness with the viewpoints of people who had inhabited his "discovered" regions for thousands of years, and he pays special attention to the artwork and astonishingly built boats that greeted Cook and his crew. The book's illustrations add to the history by contrasting portraits of Cook and his bewigged English Enlightenment contemporaries with sketches of Hawaiians done by the voyage's artist, and with paintings of the superb landscapes to which his travels took him.

At the center of the book is the puzzle of Cook himself. A Yorkshire farmer's son of modest education, he was brusque in sophisticated

Enlightenment circles and most comfortable on board the ships he commanded. Even there, he was indifferent to the spectacular scenery he encountered in his voyages, remaining chiefly interested in the science of navigation and the importance of absolute accuracy in mapmaking. Sides notes that Cook's extensive journals are almost devoid of emotional reflections: The man remains "a hard person—hard to please, hard to fool, hard to reach, hard to know."

He was uncompromisingly professional, unflappable in dangerous circumstances, and unusually concerned with the physical welfare of his men. For example, thousands of 18th century sailors died of scurvy; but such were Cook's knowledgeable precautions that not a single member of his crew suffered from the scourge during the three years his ships sailed. And yet, Cook's journals, as well as those of his officers and the voyage's artists and scientists, occasionally suggest that something was gradually going wrong with the captain. Never wont previously to use the lash to keep order, he began to have crew members cruelly punished for trivial infractions. Hitherto a careful navigator, he nearly steered his ships upon rocks because he insisted on sailing in a thick fog. And while he was well aware of the difficulties of dealing with indigenous cultures, his behavior in the Hawaiian altercation that ended in his death was, as its horrified viewers described it, inexplicable.

"The Wide Wide Sea" is a great pleasure to read, not least because its intelligent analysis is wrapped in a wonderful adventure story. Its endpapers contain maps of the voyage's path, with anchorages marked at each place the text discusses, so readers always know exactly where they are. The ships, with their noisy cargos of farm animals George III insisted on sending to the Tahitians with the return of one of their number who had spent a few years as the darling of English aristocrats, are wonderfully described. The warmth and beauty of Hawaii, which Cook stumbled upon without knowing the islands existed, contrasts wonderfully with the ice that threatened to enclose the ships north of the Bering Strait. It's a sea yarn that so engagingly presents the excitement, doldrums, and horrors of a voyage of exploration that it keeps armchair adventurers turning page after page.



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