

James Cook

British naval officer

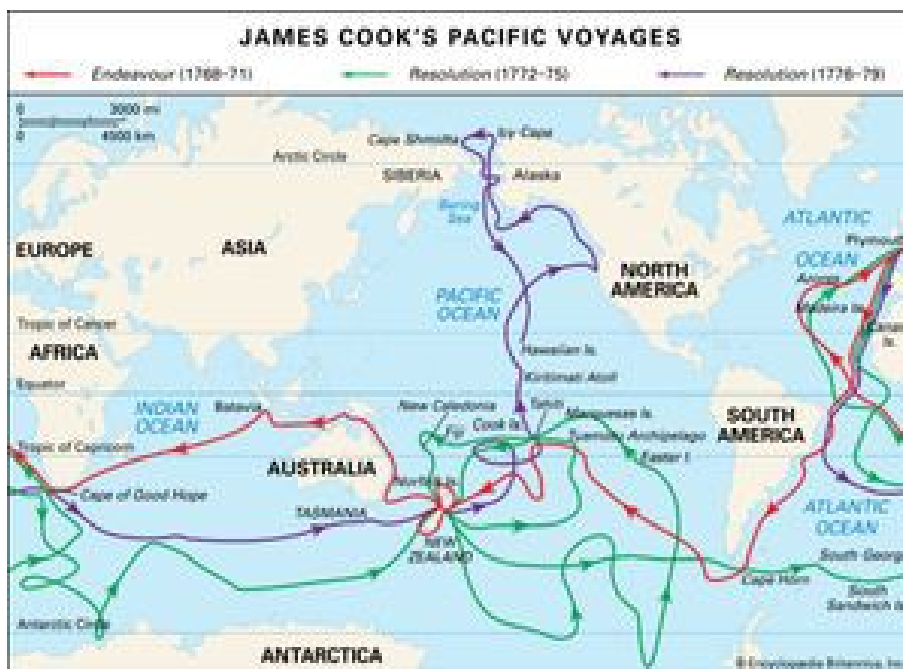
Alan John Villiers



James Cook

Born: October 27, 1728

Died: February 14, 1779 (aged 50)



Early life

James Cook was born in Marton-in-Cleveland, Yorkshire, the son (second child) of a farmhand migrant from Scotland. While Cook was still a child, his father became the foreman on a farm in a neighbouring village. Young James early showed signs of an inquiring and able mind, and his father's employer paid for his schooling in the village until he was 12 years old. His early teens were spent on the farm where his father worked, but a brief apprenticeship in a general store in a coastal village north of Whitby brought him into contact with ships and the sea.

At the age of 18, in 1746, he was apprenticed to a John Walker of Whitby, a well-known local ship-owner, and at 21 was rated able seaman in the Walker's Collier-barques. These were stout, seaworthy, slow 300-400 ton vessels mainly engaged in the North Sea trade. When the ships were laid up for refitting (done by the apprentices and crews) at Whitby during the worst months of winter, Cook lived ashore and studied mathematics by night. The Whitby barques, constantly working North Sea waters off a dangerous and ill-marked shore, offered Cook splendid practical training: the young man who learned his seamanship there had little to fear from any other sea.

Promoted to mate in 1752, Cook was offered command of a barque three years later, after eight years at sea. Advancement of this nature opened up a career that would have satisfied most working seamen, but instead Cook volunteered as able seaman in the Royal Navy, which, he was sure, would offer a more interesting career for the competent professional seaman, and greater opportunity than in the North Sea barques. Tall, of striking appearance, Cook almost immediately caught the attention of his superiors, and with excellent power of command, he was marked for rapid advancement.

After advancing to master's mate and bo'sun, both non-commissioned ranks, he was made master of HMS *Pembroke* at the age of 29. During the Seven Years War between Great Britain and France (1756–63), he saw action in the Bay of Biscay, was given command of a captured ship, and took part in the siege of Louisbourg, Île Royale (now in Nova Scotia), and in the successful amphibious assault against [Quebec](#). His charting and marking of the more difficult reaches of the St. Lawrence River contributed to the success of Major General James Wolfe's landing there. Based at Halifax during the winters, he mastered Surveying with the plane table. Between 1763 and 1768, after the war had ended, he commanded the schooner *Grenville* while surveying the coasts of Newfoundland, sailing most of the year and working on his charts at his base during the winters. In 1766 he observed an Eclipse of the Sun and sent the details to the Royal Society in London, an unusual activity for a NCO (Cook was still rated only as Master).

Voyages and discoveries



A Brass Sextant – typical of 18C

In 1768 the Royal Society, in conjunction with the Admiralty, was organizing the first scientific expedition to the Pacific, and the rather obscure 40-year-old James Cook was appointed its Commander. Hurriedly commissioned as lieutenant, he was given a homely looking but extremely sturdy Whitby coal-hauling barque renamed HMS Endeavour, then four years old, of just 368 tons and less than 98 feet long.



Replica of HMS Endeavour

Cook's orders were to convey gentlemen of the Royal Society and their assistants to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the Sun,

which was to occur on June 3, 1769. Afterward, he was to sail to find the Southern Continent, the so-called Terra Australis, which philosophers argued must exist to balance the landmasses of the Northern Hemisphere. The leader of the scientists was the rich and able Joseph Banks, aged 26, who was assisted by Daniel Solander, a Swedish botanist, as well as astronomers (Cook rating as one) and artists.

Cook carried an early nautical almanac and brass sextants, but no Chronometer, he calculated longitude the hard way, "Lunar Distance", which involved using the angular distance between the moon and another celestial body, and then consulting tables to derive GMT, on this first voyage.

The expedition reached Tahiti in time to observe the Transit. Afterward, striking south and southwest from Tahiti, where his predecessors had sailed west and west-northwest with the favourable trade winds, Cook found and charted all of New Zealand, a difficult job that took six months. After that, instead of turning east before the west winds for the homeward run around Cape Horn, he crossed the Tasman Sea westward and, on April 19, 1770, came upon the south-east coast of Australia. Running north along its 2,000-mile (3,200 km) eastern coast, surveying as he went, Cook successfully navigated the Great Barrier Reef, although not without grounding on a coral spur one night. The vessel was successfully refloated, and, after beaching her on the Queensland shore for repairs, she was sailed back to England via Batavia (modern Jakarta) where she took on supplies. Although the crew had been remarkably healthy until then, 30 died of fever and dysentery contracted while on land in the Dutch East Indies. None of the crew, however, died of Scurvy, that scourge of early ocean voyages which notoriously decimated the crews of ships up till Cook's time. This was because, in addition to ensuring cleanliness and ventilation in the crew's quarters, Cook insisted on a diet that included cress, sauerkraut, and a kind of orange extract. The health in which he maintained his sailors in consequence made his name a naval byword.

Back in England, he was promoted to Commander and presented to King [George III](#), and soon he began to organize another and even more ambitious voyage. The success of the expedition of Joseph Banks and his scientists (which established the useful principle of sending scientists on naval voyages) Stimulated interest not only in the discovery of new lands but in the new knowledge gained in many other scientific subjects. The wealth of scientifically collected material from the voyage of HMS Endeavour was unique. Cook was now sent out with two ships to make the first circumnavigation of and penetration into the Antarctic.



James Cook in the Pacific

Between July 1772 and July 1775 Cook made what ranks as one of the greatest sailing ship voyages, again with a small former Whitby ship, the *Resolution*, and a consort ship, the *Adventure*. He found no trace of Terra Australis, despite sailing beyond latitude 70° S in the Southern Ocean, but he successfully completed the first West–East circumnavigation in high latitudes. During the voyage he charted Tonga and Easter Island as well as New Caledonia in the Pacific and the South Sandwich Islands and South Georgia Island in the Atlantic. He showed that a real Terra Australis existed only in the landmasses of Australia, New Zealand, and whatever land might remain frozen beyond the icy rim of Antarctica. He was aided this time by having a copy of one of John Harrison's chronometers, which made determining Longitude much easier than on his first voyage, which timepiece elicited much praise from Cook in his Log. Once again, not one of his crew died of scurvy. Back in England, he was promoted to Captain, elected a fellow of the Royal Society, and awarded one of its highest honours, the gold Copley Medal, for a paper that he prepared on his work against scurvy.



The Copley Medal

(Also awarded to Charles Darwin, Benjamin Franklin, Louis Pasteur, Albert Einstein, Michael Faraday, Stephen Hawking)

There was still one secret of the Pacific to be discovered: whether there existed a Northwest Passage around Canada and Alaska or a Northeast one around [Siberia](#), between the Atlantic and Pacific. Although the passages had long been sought in vain from Europe, it was thought that a search from the North Pacific might be successful. The man to undertake the search obviously was Cook, and in July 1776 he went off again in *Resolution*, with another Whitby ship, the *Discovery*. This search was unsuccessful, for neither a Northwest nor a Northeast passage usable by sailing ships existed, and the voyage led to Cook's death. In a brief fracas with Hawaiians over the stealing of a cutter, Cook was slain on the beach at Kealakekua by the Polynesians.

Cook's voyaging left him comparatively little time for family life. Although Cook had married Elizabeth Batts in 1762, when he was 34 years old, he was at sea for more than half of their married life. The couple had six children, three of whom died in infancy. The three surviving sons, two of whom entered the navy, had all died by 1794.

Cook had set new standards of thoroughness in discovery and seamanship, in navigation and cartography (so good were his charts of the east coast of Australia that late 20C satellite mapping showed no errors of more than a few feet) and in the application of science at sea. He took great care of his men at sea, cultivated good relations with indigenous peoples both friendly and hostile, and he had peacefully changed the map of the world more than any other single man in history.

“The risk one runs in exploring a coast in these unknown and Icy Seas, is so very great, that I can be bold to say, that no man will ever venture farther than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored.”

- Captain James Cook
