

## COOK'S LAST VOYAGE

### A Fruitless Search for the Fabled Northwest Passage

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When James Cook sailed *Endeavour* to the Pacific in 1768 there were still a number of outstanding questions left to answer about this vast uncharted ocean. Was there a large land in the south; was New Zealand part of it? What was the coastline of eastern Australia like? Few vessels had ventured into the Arctic Circle, and the Antarctic was an unknown. A northwest passage connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic was still thought possible.

It was later, on his third and last voyage, 1776-80, that Cook finally visited the west coast of North America and sailed into the Arctic Circle in search of this hoped-for northwest passage. Since the 16th century many men had searched for it, spurred on by the tales of Juan de Fuca, a Greek pilot who in 1592 claimed to have found a route from the west coast to the Atlantic.

Cook left England early in July 1776 with orders to sail via South Africa into the Pacific and then to proceed to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), New Zealand and Tahiti to arrive on the coast of New Albion (North America) near 45° north latitude, just below Juan de Fuca's supposed strait. He was then to take his ships up the coast to 65° north, carefully searching and exploring any possible bays, rivers and inlets for a way across America.

Nearly two years after leaving England, *Resolution* and *Discovery* sighted the coast of what is now the state of Washington. Second lieutenant James King wrote,

*This part of the Continent of America has not so far as we know, ever before been seen; for there is no certain accounts of any Navigators being so high as 44 degree of Latitude excepting Sr Francis Drake and Vizcaino; both these Navigators landed on the Continent in 38° of Lat, both were stopt from proceeding farther to the North than 44, from the rigour of the Climate.*

Those on board were now to experience such weather themselves. Cook had time to name Cape Foulweather before the ships were blown off the coast for the next three weeks.

Beating north, Cook named prominent landmarks when they appeared—Cape Perpetua, Cape Gregory, Cape Flattery—and described the land as fertile, of moderately equal height, and well covered with trees. At 48° north latitude, where geographers had placed the Strait of Juan de Fuca, due to bad weather Cook missed the channel separating Vancouver Island from the mainland and continued up the coast, naming Point Breakers, Woody Point and Hope Bay. At last, on March 29, both ships ran into the safety of Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island. As they were looking for the best location to drop anchor,

*a great many Canoes filled with the Natives were about the Ships all day, and a trade commenced betwixt us and them, which was carried on with the Strictest honisty on boath sides. Their articles were the Skins*

*of various animals, such as Bears, Wolves, Foxes, Deer, Raccoons, Polecats, Martins and in particular the Sea Beaver, the same as is found on the coast of Kamtchatka. Cloathing made of these skins and another sort made, either of the Bark of a tree or some plant like hemp; Weapons, such as Bows and Arrows, Spears etc Fish hooks and Instruments of various kinds, pieces of carved work and even human sculs and hands, and a variety of little articles too tedious to mention. For these things they took in exchange, Knives, chissels, pieces of iron and Tin, Nails, Buttons, or any kind of metal. Beads they were not fond of and cloth of all kinds they rejected.*

A brisk and friendly trade was soon under way.

Glad to be on land again, the crewmen were eager to explore, bargain for sexual favors, and gather fresh foods; they were also busy repairing the ships. The armourer and his crew set up forges on shore to make and mend the ironwork, and the cooks and their mates set up the portable ovens to bake fresh bread. The astronomy tents were erected and delicate equipment cleaned and checked, while work parties collected wood and searched for fresh water to refill the large water casks in the hold of each ship. The crew fished with lines and cast seines, shot birds for the pot and set up a brisk trade in furs with the natives. Few would have left Nootka Sound without a fur pelt among his goods, for otter skins in China were worth between £20 and £30 each—a considerable amount to an able seaman whose salary was just over £15 a year.

Both ships needed repairs, especially *Resolution*. Just four weeks out of Plymouth Cook had discovered,

*The Ship exceedingly leaky in all her upper works, the hot and dry weather we had just past through had opened her Seams, which had been badly Caulked at first, so wide that they admitted the rain Water through as it fell and there was hardly a Man that could lie dry in his bed; the officers in the gunroom were all driven out of their cabbins by the Water that came thro' the sides.*

This was due to the incompetent work carried out during her refit in England, which left *Resolution* plagued with problems for the rest of the voyage.

Nootka Sound, with its plethora of easily available timber, provided the ideal spot for repairs. David Samwell, the surgeon's mate aboard *Resolution*, wrote in his journal,

*We now found the Head of our mizen mast so much damaged that the mast was judged not to be trustworthy & was so much decayed as not to admit of being repaired without shortening it too much, upon which it became necessary to have a new Mast, & luckily this Country produces plenty of Fir to supply us not only with a Mizen Mast but with a Mainmast did we stand in need of one.*

Besides engaging his crew in repair work and the gathering of water and wood, Cook sent the ships' boats out regularly to look for evidence of a northwest passage and to chart Nootka Sound. The men enjoyed rowing 30 miles or more a day, and a young midshipman named James Trevenen put his thoughts to verse:

*No! rather I'll think on that happier season,  
When turned into thy Boat's crew without rhyme or reason,  
But proud of that office we went a marooning,  
And pulling against tide, or before the wind spooning;  
Sometimes a shooting, and sometimes surveying,  
With pleasure still watching, with pleasure obeying  
Through gulf, creek and inlet our jolly boat forcing,  
As if the old Devil himself had been coursing....*

After four weeks, with refitting and victualling completed, they left Nootka Sound on April 26. Storms again drove both vessels out of sight of the coast until Cape Edgecumbe, and on May 12 they sailed into a large inlet which Cook named Prince William Sound. Here they explored for a week and then pushed north, visiting and charting Cook River and Cook Inlet. The weather now closed in for three weeks, and in appalling conditions they followed the Alaska coast and the Aleutian Islands, in constant danger of shipwreck. During heavy fog on Thursday, June 25, the ships nearly grounded on the northern point of Unalaska Island. Cook wrote,

*The Weather was so thick that we could not see a hundred yards before us, but as the wind was now very moderate I ventured to run. At half past 4 we were alarmed at hearing the Sound of breakers on our larboard bow; on heaving the lead found 28 fathom of water and the next cast 25; I immediately brought the ship to with her head to the Northward and anchored in this last depth over a bottom of Coarse Sand, and called to the Discovery who was close by us to anchor also.*

Samwell takes up the story:

*About 1/2 after five it clearing up we saw with Terror and Surprize the imminent Danger we had so narrowly escaped, we found ourselves in a Bay at the distance of about a Mile from the Shore, off the middle of which we saw two Rocks which we had passed so near in the Fog, going at the same time before the Wind at the rate of 3 Knots an Hour.... That we should have come so well off considering the Danger we had run was astonishing to every one.*

Charles Clerke, commander of *Discovery*, noted more cryptically, "Very nice pilotage, considering our perfect Ignorance of our situation." A week later, naming Cape Prince of Wales at the most westerly known point of America, Cook sailed through Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean.

Early in the afternoon of August 17 at 70 degrees north latitude they saw the Arctic ice pack for the first time, and Cook noted, "The sight of a large field of ice left us in no longer doubt about the cause of the brightness of the Horizon we had observed." As they sailed along the ice field, the situation again became critical. The ships were in shoaled water on a lee shore and the wind was driving them onto the ice pack. Frustrated, but with no other alternative, Cook took the ships back into the open sea and spent the next four days beating back.

The freezing weather took its toll on ships and men, and Cook ordered heavy fearnought trousers and jackets to be issued to the crew as protection against the cold. Reliant as they now were on salted provisions, the ice pack provided much-needed fresh food in the form of hundreds of "sea horses" (walrus). Although some of the crew who had already sailed with the whaling ships to Greenland said that these were inedible, sea lions were killed for food whenever possible, "and there were few on board who did not prefer it to salt meat. The fat at first is as sweet as Marrow but in a few days it grows rancid unless it is salted, then it will keep good much longer, the lean is coarse, black and rather a strong taste, the heart nearly as well tasted as that of a bullock." Every part of the sea lion was used. They ate the flesh, melted the fat to burn in the lamps, used the hide in the rigging, and during leisure hours decorated the tusks and teeth with scenes. Nothing was wasted.

For the next two months the ships tacked back and forth across the Arctic between the American and Asian coasts, looking for a way through the ice pack without success. Cook continued naming—Icy Cape, Burney's Island (now Kolyuchin Island), Cape Darby, Point Denbigh, Pinnacles Island—and he paid his respects to explorer Vitus Bering, whose charts he

was using: "In justice to Behrings Memory, I must say he has deleneated this Coast very well and fixed the latitude and longitude of the points better than could be expected from the Methods he had to go by." Great praise from the master chart maker himself.

With winter fast approaching and having had no success at finding a northwest passage, Cook left the ice pack on September 16 and anchored at Samgoonoodha, Unalaska, 17 days later. Repairing, watering and wooding continued as usual. One day an Indian named Derramoushk brought a note with a highly seasoned salmon pie, a present from some Russian fur traders. Cook sent John Ledyard, his American corporal of marines, with a present of a few bottles of rum, wine and porter, and three Russian furriers returned to visit. During their dinner in the warmth of the great cabin, they shared their local knowledge and charts of the area with Cook and his officers.

On October 26, with winter closing in, Cook decided it was time to leave the Arctic and return to the Sandwich Islands, which he had briefly visited for the first time on his way to America. It was there that he was killed on February 14, 1779, at Kealakekua Bay, Hawaii.

During his 11 years of sailing the Pacific, James Cook pushed all the known limits—reaching farther north into the Arctic and farther south into the Antarctic than had anyone before. He undertook three long sea voyages, charting and navigating with great accuracy, assisted by the latest equipment and the first chronometers on the second and third voyages. He was the first explorer to stay for any length of time on the islands he mapped for Britain—living with and studying the people, their agriculture, language, customs and way of life. The care and concern he showed for all people, including his crews, was outstanding until ill health and exhaustion ran his temper short on his last voyage. James Cook's Pacific voyages have rightly earned him the reputation as one of Britain's greatest explorers and navigators.

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