

## The Wide Wide Sea

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*The Wide Wide Sea: Imperial Ambition, First Contact and the Fateful Final Voyage of Captain James Cook* by Hampton Sides. New York: Doubleday, 2024.

After reading Hampton Sides' *The Wide Wide Sea*, I can state with confidence that Captain Cook should be recognized as one of history's greatest navigators and explorers. I can also state with confidence that many people in the world, especially in Polynesia and the broader Pacific region, would vehemently disagree with that statement. Indeed Captain Cook may be the most vilified of all the famous (or infamous) names now associated with the centuries-long, global wave of European (and later American) expansionism. In his opening "Author's Notes," Sides directly addresses the controversy surrounding all three of Cook's voyages, especially the last one, when he was killed in Hawai'i. Cook himself was neither a conqueror nor a colonizer, but rather an explorer-scientist-cartographer steeped in the philosophies and paradigms of the Enlightenment. For over 200 years after his death in 1779 he was celebrated, even venerated for what he had accomplished. However, as Sides reminds us, what follows exploration and map-making is almost always conquest. And "in Cook's long wake, came the occupiers, the guns, the pathogens, the alcohol, the problem of money, the whalers, the furriers, the seal hunters, the plantation owners, the missionaries" (xv). What also follows is the rejection and erasure of indigenous voices and perspectives, the inevitable one-sided control of portrayal and representation.

At one level then *The Wide Wide Sea* is a very useful, entertaining narrative history of Cook's world, Cook's life, and the three-year voyage of his HMS *Resolution* and its consort ship the HMS *Discovery*. At another level though, Sides focuses on that third voyage to provide a necessary, compelling case study of the origins of "the

systematic dismantling of traditional island cultures,” what Alan Morehead has called “the fatal impact [. . .] that fateful moment when a social capsule is broken into.” This leaves contemporary Western readers in particular with much to ponder, to critique: “Eurocentrism, patriarchy, entitlement, toxic masculinity, cultural appropriation, the role of invasive species in destroying island biodiversity” (Sides *xvi*). In fact, Sides ultimately shows how human beings can be the most invasive species of all. Yet there still remains the remarkable achievement of Cook’s voyages – the skill, the fortitude, the courage it took to do what he did when he did it.

Sides’ title is taken from Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and he begins with an excerpt from that poem: “Alone, alone, all, all alone/Alone on a wide wide sea/ And never a saint took pity on/My soul in agony.” But he prefaces his “Prologue: And Louder Grew the Shouting” with an ancient Hawaiian chant that begins “Your bodies, O Lono, are in the heavens.” This alternating pattern of the Western and the Indigenous that Sides employs throughout *The Wide Wide Sea* serves to reinforce the inerlocking duality of cultures and experiences he is emphasizing. The Prologue itself, based on indigenous oral accounts collected by Hawaiian historian Samuel Kamakau, is written from the point of view of the inhabitants of Kaua’i, where the *Resolution* and *Discovery* first made landfall in Hawai’i in January 1778. Were Cook and his crew initially viewed as gods? Was Cook himself viewed as Lono? These and other questions have been fiercely argued, and Sides returns to them on numerous occasions. It seems safe to say though, that in his words, the people gathered on the shore “sensed something ominous was happening, that their island world was about to change forever” (4). Two small ships, with a big impact.

In terms of readability, it can be helpful to look initially at the “architecture” of a given text, its design and structure. *The Wide Wide Sea* is well-organized, with full-length maps on the inside of the front and back covers, as well as a comprehensive bibliography. “Book One The First Navigator of Europe” begins in January 1776, six months after his return from his second voyage, his second circumnavigation of the

globe, a journey that had lasted 1100 days. At the time there was a prevailing belief among European scientists in the existence of a Terra Australis Incognita, a southern supercontinent, much larger than Australia, which balanced out the known land masses of the Northern Hemisphere. Without such a continent many of those scientists claimed the world would be top-heavy and wobble off into space. Cook's mission had been to find it, and to explore and chart the Southern Ocean, the high southern latitudes, which had not yet been done. Reaching a latitude of 71 degrees South, he became the first captain to cross the Antarctic Circle, though some theories suggest that the Maori may have sailed that far south in the distant past. Cook never saw Antarctica itself, but he got within one hundred miles and correctly concluded that it had to be ice-bound. However, his main contribution on this voyage was his detailed map-making and what Sides calls "negative discovery [. . .] finding nothing where something was widely presumed to be" (8). Given his penchant for exactitude, his insistence on accuracy, Cook was adept at disproving false hypotheses.

Born in 1728, Cook had almost no formal schooling. As a teenager, he moved to Whitby, in northern England, "a tight hamlet of shipbuilders, whalers, and fishermen hunkered by the cold North Sea" (Sides 12). Beginning as an apprentice in the merchant marine on small collier ships carrying coal and timber, at age 27 he was about to be promoted to commander of his own vessel when he suddenly quit and joined the Royal Navy. Starting all over again as an ordinary seaman, he quickly rose through the ranks. His largely self-taught skills and talents as a surveyor, an astronomer, a mathematician and a cartographer proved invaluable during the French and Indian war of 1756-1763. He charted the St. Lawrence River from its mouth in the Atlantic Ocean all the way to Quebec City, where the final battle of that war was fought, ending in a British victory that gave them all of Canada. After receiving the title of king's surveyor, over several summers Cook produced a map of Newfoundland, an island with an extensive, geographically complicated shoreline. According to Sides, "comparing it against modern satellite images of Newfoundland, one can see that his chart was a cartographic

masterpiece of almost chilling precision” (13). By the late 1860s it was clear to the British Admiralty that Cook had much to offer. His first voyage to the Pacific would be his reward. On that voyage, on the HMS *Endeavor*, he sailed first to Tahiti to observe and study the “transit of Venus,” a rare astronomical occurrence that was of great interest in Europe. He then explored a wide expanse of the South Pacific, including the east coast of Australia, and both North and South Island of New Zealand, adding over 5000 miles of previously unknown shoreline to existing maps of the Pacific.

Referring to Cook as “a kind of proto-anthropologist and ethnographer,” Sides claims that in these voyages Cook had a much different mindset than other European explorers of the time. While undoubtedly believing in European technological superiority, his “descriptions of Indigenous peoples were tolerant and often quite sympathetic.” Most unusually Cook “never attempted to convert Native people to Christianity and rarely moralized on the supposed shortcomings of their customs and beliefs. In his writings, he was neutral, objective, and agnostic” (14). There had been some violence, but his encounters with indigenous people had been surprisingly peaceful. He also knew, of course, that he was “doing the work of empire,” playing a not insignificant role in advancing England’s global strategic interests in competition with other European nations. Sides believes though that on a personal level Cook’s interest “was more inquisitive than acquisitive, more empirical than imperial.” He also believes that Cook was much more motivated by “moments of pure discovery, moments when he felt called upon to study, measure, and document something entirely new” (15).

However, that was not always the Cook of the third voyage.

Ironically, Cook was not initially meant to command that voyage. At 46, fairly old for an English naval officer, and now famous throughout Europe, he had been officially retired to an honorary assignment as a captain of the Greenwich Naval Hospital. But Cook was typically restless on land, even with two children and a pregnant wife. Eventually, one of the most powerful men in England, John Montagu, the Fourth Earl of Sandwich (hence Hawai’i originally “renamed” the Sandwich Islands) persuaded him to

take command, though it does not appear that Cook needed much persuasion. The remainder of Book One discusses the preparations for the voyage (which as it turned out were poorly handled, Cook being distracted by the necessity of writing his account of his second voyage), as well as its two-fold mission. First of all, he was to take back to Tahiti the first Polynesian to ever set foot in England. Mai, a Polynesian who had come back to England in July 1774 with the return of Cook's first voyage, is an oft-forgotten figure of some historical importance. Rightfully so, his story has a prominent place in *The Wide Wide Sea*, almost as prominent as Cook's, although Sides is careful to remind readers that the one point of view he cannot provide is Mai's own, since it is simply unavailable. Sponsored by the famous naturalist Joseph Banks, who had sailed on Cook's second voyage, Mai continued a long tradition of English upper-class society's fascination with "human pets" (Pocahontas, brought to England from Virginia in 1616, is another example). But what Sides successfully shows is that Mai had a good deal of agency, with an agenda of his own, namely, revenge on the Bora Boreans who had murdered his family. Along with Mai, by order of King George III, Cook was also to transport a whole host of English farm animals, over 50 in all, turning his ship into a veritable Noah's ark. The idea, which Cook heartily disapproved of, was to introduce English agriculture to Tahiti specifically and Polynesia in general.

Once Mai and the animal cargo were safely and productively established somewhere on Tahiti, Cook would then turn to the second objective of the voyage. He was to sail to New Albion (the Pacific coast of North America) above then Spanish-owned California. His mission was to find and navigate the elusive Northwest Passage, the presumed shortcut through the North American continent that had been the Holy Grail of European exploration for nearly three centuries. For England it had become an obsession, for reasons of commerce, geopolitics, and national pride. All previous attempts to locate the passage, which had cost considerable amounts of money and countless lives, had been made from the Atlantic Ocean. But they had failed miserably in the high latitudes of eastern Canada, finding only, as Sides puts it, "dead ends, tangled

landscapes, fantasies and false leads” (43). Cook would be the first to approach the problem from the west, from the Pacific Ocean. Conventional wisdom was that salt water could not freeze, and “the ice of the high north [. . .] was solely the product of frigid rivers and streams emptying into the sea” (45). If that were true, the Arctic Ocean should be relatively ice-free. Cook could reach the Atlantic and return to England by sailing over the top of the world. An interesting theory, to say the least. But what was also interesting about Cook’s instructions from the Admiralty was that they did not mention Hawai’i at all, since no European knew it existed.

*The Wide Wide Sea* proceeds chronologically, focusing on the various stages and events of Cook’s final voyage. The cumulative effect is to put the reader right onboard the *Resolution*, sailing with Cook, his officers (including a young William Bligh of mutiny on the *Bounty* fame) and his crew. “Book Two The Weight of My Resentment” follows Cook south from Plymouth, England, to Tenerife in the Canary Islands, to Cape Verdes, where Cook made an uncharacteristic mistake and almost wrecked his ship on the rocks lining the entrance to the harbor. Sides nicely juxtaposes the rigors and dangers of the voyage with the beauty and wonder of the African coast. In addition, he illustrates how these ships were always “chasing the wind,” not hugging the coastline but sailing west almost to Brazil before cutting back diagonally to Table Rock and Capetown, South Africa, marking the fifth time in his career that Cook had crossed the equator. Reprovisioning and refitting before facing the tumultuous Cape of Good Hope, Cook spent several months in Capetown, owned and operated by the Dutch United East India Company. Sides relates an instructive anecdote about a side trip some of his officers took to Stellenbosch, a small Dutch community nearby. They were all fascinated by the farmhouses, the orchards, the vineyards, the natural surroundings, the hospitality of the settlers. However, Sides comments that they seem to have missed something: “These gracious farms and tiny villages had been built by chattel labor [. . .] The Cape Colony, so rich and fecund and trim, was a product of more than a century of

bondage and toil” (86). The *Resolution* and the *Discovery* left Capetown on November 30, 1776. England would hear nothing more from them for over three years.

Cook was now sailing in the “Roaring Forties,” where the warmer water of the Indian Ocean merges with the much colder water coming up from the Antarctic, where “the winds whip their way around the planet without landmasses to impede or divert their force.” With those winds routinely reaching more than 100 miles per hour and 60-foot waves not uncommon, Cook sailed, or rather crawled, through what was and still is “some of the most tempestuous seas on earth” (Sides 88). After spending Christmas on the desolate Kerguelen Island (now Grande Terre), Cook continued to struggle eastward, passing to the south of Australia and making for Tasmania. Here Cook met the Palawa, the Aboriginal people of Tasmania. Sides notes that “this was probably the first time these particular people had encountered Europeans, or for that matter, any other race [since they] had been separated from the mainland of Australia for at least 10,000 years” (100). Sides then writes a lengthy, illuminating account of this First Contact event, including the Palawans terrified response to English firearms and Cook’s misguided decision to introduce pigs into the native ecosystem. Although this was one of the few places the expedition did not spread sexually transmitted diseases, those and other European diseases would come soon enough. It is believed the last Aboriginal Tasmanian died in 1876, meaning the Palawans were extinct within one hundred years of Cook’s arrival.

Sides uses his narrative of Cook’s third voyage in *The Wide Wide Sea* to present a variety of insightful anthropological, zoological and geographical information as well. The concluding pages of Book Two are a good example. Even though behind schedule, he sailed to New Zealand in February 1777 to investigate what was referred to as “the incident at Grass Cove,” reports of which had shocked and scandalized England in the summer of 1774. Ten English sailors from the HMS *Adventure*, Cook’s consort-ship on his second voyage, had been killed by the native Maori then dismembered and cannibalized. Cook wanted to find out who was ultimately responsible. When all the

evidence he gathered indicated that the English sailors had escalated a fairly minor disagreement into a fatal confrontation Cook declared he was satisfied and pursued the matter no further. But Sides also uses this account of Cook's actions to offer an extended explication of Maori creation/origin myths, Maori culture and civilization, New Zealand's geological formation, as well as the varied and often unique animal species of the islands, especially its birds. He effectively foregrounds Cook's third voyage against a rich contextual background, which in turn allows him to maintain a more balanced, nuanced approach, avoiding a strictly Euro-centric point of view.

Beginning with Cook's return to Tahiti in August 1777, "Book Three Faraway Heaven," summarizes the main thematic discussions that Sides develops throughout *The Wide Wide Sea*. Another name for Tahiti at the time was Aphrodite's Island and Cook's crew (many of his officers as well, though never Cook himself) viewed the island as a sexual paradise. Here the numerous sexual exchanges appeared to be largely transactional, with red feathers honoring the Tahitian deity Oro the most in demand. But of course, where there was sex there was inevitably gonorrhea and syphilis, "the French pox," diseases introduced by European explorers and traders, a deadly pattern repeated throughout the Pacific islands. Here too the peculiarity of Mai's hybrid appearance is most obvious, Sides describing how he cantered his English horse on the beach in front of the Tahitians, "wearing his medieval helmet and plate armor in the full heat of the tropics, fir[ing] his pistol over their heads to clear the way [as] the crowds dispersed in terror" (144). Following his instructions, Cook would eventually resettle Mai in Tahiti, but now neither Polynesian nor English, for Sides his journey can be seen as "an allegory of colonialism and its unintended consequences, doom[ing] him to a jumbled, deracinated existence" (191). He would die in 1780, collateral damage from the Age of Exploration. The larger issue Sides raises is the cultural impact of the Age of Exploration on the indigenous people, how it changed their diet, for instance (which pre-Contact was quite healthy), and notions of ownership and private property. It would



be hard to conclude that these changes were beneficial. But it is also hard to imagine how these islands could have remained “undiscovered” forever.

His first objective, Mai’s relocation, completed, Cook sailed to the Pacific Northwest, recrossing the equator back into the Northern Hemisphere. He thought he had 5000 miles of empty ocean in front of him, so it came as a surprise when he found Christmas Island (now Kiritimati), the largest atoll in the world, another example of Cook’s uncanny ability to come across islands that no one knew existed. It came as an even bigger surprise when in January 1778 he found Hawai’i, specifically Kaua’i. A few scholars disagree, but the general consensus is that Cook was the first European to set foot in the Hawaiian Islands. In these pages, Sides provides a very good geological and geographical overview of Hawai’i. He also points out that although they were 2800 miles from Tahiti “not only were the languages similar, but Cook would soon see other similarities in dress, facial features, canoe design, and customs.” He had accidentally arrived at the apex of the Polynesian Triangle, proof that “in ancient times the Polynesians must have been expert long-distance voyagers, pioneers of the high seas, far more adept and ambitious than he had first realized” (202). A man who was quite familiar with long-distance voyages, Cook developed a great respect for what the Polynesians had achieved. In addition to their maritime skill, he soon came to admire their engineering, their agriculture, their art, and indeed their entire civilization. These were clearly not a “primitive” people. How those people viewed the first Europeans they had ever seen is a matter of considerable debate. At this point, they did appear to view Cook as at least some kind of high-ranking chief and treated him accordingly. Aside from the perennial problem of “theft” (a strictly European legal concept), iron in particular, the relationship was relatively conflict-free. Perhaps most importantly, like almost all the indigenous people and cultures on Cook’s voyage they assisted him in restocking and repairing his two ships, something they may have regretted later.

Cook was fascinated by Kaua’i but could not stay there long. He knew that his window-of-opportunity for exploring the North Pacific coastline was restricted to late

spring and summer. “Book Four New Albion” covers this leg of the voyage, starting with Cook’s 2500 mile sail to Oregon, arriving there in March 1778. *The Wide Wide Sea* consistently shows both the worst of Cook and the best of Cook, and it is difficult not to admire the seamanship (and leadership) Cook displayed throughout these months. Weathering some of the roughest seas and most violent storms of the entire journey, he turned north after sighting Oregon, passing the mouth of the Columbia River, then Puget Sound in present-day Washington state, finally making landfall at Nootka Sound, Vancouver Island. Since none of this territory had been charted before, it was simply an empty space on Cook’s maps. The descriptions here of the great Northwest Forest, which once stretched all the way across Canada and the northern United States, are excellent, and Sides captures well the sense of wonder that Cook and his men felt. But Sides does not neglect the ecological and cultural destruction that would occur in the wake of Cook’s voyage. For example, highly coveted sea otters, later known as “soft gold,” were abundant in Nootka Sound, and would be hunted to virtual extinction in just a few decades after his visit. As Sides says, that fur trade would “cause enormous dislocations among the Mowachaht and other tribes living [there] – for the Europeans brought the deadly triad of alcohol, guns, and disease” (245). History is paradox, none more so than Cook’s.

By May 1778, Cook was back at sea, heading north by northwest to southeast Alaska, to Kayak Island, passing the 18,000-foot Mt. St. Elias, into Prince William Sound, which Cook believed might be the long searched-for Northwest Passage. Again, Sides’ descriptions of the incredible diversity and beauty of these environments are well done. Realizing eventually that much to his disappointment he had not discovered the Passage, Cook had to sail south by southwest, opposite of where he wanted to go, until he somehow found his way through the Aleutian Islands at Unaga Island into the Bering Sea. He then undertook one of the supreme cartographical achievements of the Age of Exploration, accurately mapping the western coast of Alaska up to Cape Prince of Wales, the extreme western edge of the North American continent, making possible the first

correct measurement of the entire width of North America. By this point Cook was beginning to understand how huge Alaska actually was, thus how unlikely a Northwest Passage was. But after a sudden decision to cross the Bering Strait to Kamchatka Island in Russia, he recrossed the Strait and continued north up the Alaskan coast, leaving the Pacific and sailing into the Arctic Ocean. On the rooftop of the world now, Cook had entered “a vast space where no European [. . .] had ever been. [He] had become history’s uncontested master of the Pacific. He had ventured farther to its south than any known navigator before him, and now he had crossed that great ocean’s northernmost limits into unknown waters,” the first captain (and the *Resolution* the first ship), to traverse both the Arctic and Antarctic Circles (Sides 277). For a brief moment, he and his men were convinced that success was at hand.

But it was not to be. Sides writes that suddenly “without warning, without even a few stray bergs to act as emissaries, a rampart of ice appeared ahead. Ice as far as the eye could see, crunching and groaning, reacting to the pressures of current and wind” (278). It was apparent to Cook that conventional wisdom had been wrong, salt water could freeze. Yet he was determined to press forward in the hopes of finding an end to the icepack or a way around it or through it. On August 18 he got as far as Icy Cape, at a latitude of just over 70 degrees North. With the ice slowly trapping him in the shallow water near the shoreline, with the temperature dropping precipitously, he was still somehow able to extricate his two ships. Sailing blindly in a thick fog, there were times the only way he could “guess the location of the ice was by listening intently for the braying of unseen herds of walrus that were hauled up on the shelves, resting in great masses.” Putting it mildly, Sides calls this “a strange and nerve-racking way to navigate” (280). Three days later, they escaped to relative safety. Cook then sailed west for several weeks an astonishing 400 miles along the edge of the icepack, still trying to find a way through. However, upon sighting Cape Schmidt on the desolate Arctic Coast of the Russian Far East, Cook knew there was nothing more he could do. He could have begun the long journey home, to report his second great “negative discovery” – that the

Northwest Passage did not exist. Instead he chose to remain in the Pacific, to winter in Hawai'i, and return to the Arctic earlier in the following summer to search one more time.

The culminating, aptly titled “Book Five Apotheosis” focuses on the events leading up to Cook’s death. After a 2500 mile journey from the Arctic, he had initially reached Maui, but circled the island rather than landing, setting up a “maritime market” in an attempt to cordon off the two cultures, trying to protect the Mauians from STDs in the process. He had come to understand how harmful (and one-sided) the intercultural relationship was becoming, but after six weeks cruising the need for repairs to his ships was unavoidable. Having spotted the magnificent Big Island of Hawai'i in the distance, in January 1779 he sailed into Kealahakua Bay – the Pathway of the Gods, “the seat of royal authority on Hawai'i, the residence of the god-kings” (Sides 289). At the height of the Makahiki religious festival, at first all was fine. However, overstaying their welcome, the mood gradually changed, tensions increased, so in February Cook gave the order to sail. Sides adroitly summarizes the Hawaiian mindset, “*Thank you for coming, but thank you for leaving, too*” (his italics, 318). But history is capricious, too, and on February 8 a storm struck, disastrously snapping off the *Resolution*’s foremast, forcing Cook back to Kealahakua two days later. No longer festive, the atmosphere was ominous now. When a cutter, one of his critical smaller boats, was stolen, Cook flew into a rage. Against the advice of his officers, he came up with an ill-conceived plan to kidnap the Hawaiian high chief and hold him hostage until the boat was returned. Using both English accounts as well as indigenous oral histories, Sides gives a detailed, riveting description of surely one of the more dramatic moments of the Age of Exploration – the killing of Captain James Cook on February 14, 1779, on a beach 6000 nautical miles from England. He had just turned 50 years old.

*The Wide Wide Sea* is history not hagiography. Four other British Marines and at least 20 Hawaiians died on that day along with Cook. What was ignored in Europe but has not been forgotten in Hawai'i was the subsequent massacre at a nearby village,

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where “British soldiers went on a rampage,” the Hawaiians experiencing for the first time “the full homicidal power of musketry, cannon fire, and steel bayonets” (Sides 340). With the *Resolution* finally repaired, the expedition sailed for England, arriving in London on January 11, 1780, after a voyage lasting 1548 days. Sides though does not end his journey, or the reader’s, there in London in 1780. Having visited the site while writing *The Wide Wide Sea*, in the last three paragraphs of Book Five he returns to the present-day, to the obelisk memorializing Cook that the British erected in 1874 on the spot where he was killed. Clearly, contested ground, protesters had written on the monument in blood-red paint “YOU ARE ON NATIVE LAND” (his emphasis, 350). He then circles back to his opening Prologue and concludes with an evocative “Epilogue: Lona’s Tears.” Hampton Sides has written a book I would recommend to any reader. He reminds us that the key is not to erase the past, but to learn from it, to do better than what was done before.