



HISTORY SHAPERS

# THE STORY OF CAPTAIN COOK

JOHN LANG



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# THE STORY OF CAPTAIN COOK

*by*

JOHN LANG



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### PLEASE NOTE

In this series, you will read about historical figures who displayed courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and many other admirable traits. Their stories remind us that many people in history took bold actions and made tough choices. Yet, even those who achieved great things sometimes held ideas or pursued goals that were not beneficial to everyone. History is full of complex individuals—parts of their lives inspire us to be brave and stand up for what is right, while other parts remind us to consider the unintended consequences of our actions.

As you explore these biographies, we invite you to reflect on the qualities that enabled these figures to achieve greatness and the lessons we can learn from their mistakes. Maybe you too can become a History Shaper—someone who learns from the past and helps to make our world a better place for everyone.

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## COOK'S BIRTH AND BOYHOOD— HE GOES TO SEA

TOWARDS the close of the year 1728, when George the Second was King of England, there was born in the village of Marton, Yorkshire, a boy whose after life was full of strange adventures and of wonderful discoveries.

This, boy was named James Cook, and he grew up to be one of the most famous men that ever lived. He explored more of the world than any one before him had ever done, and he discovered many islands that are beautiful as fairyland.

Cook was the son of a Scotch farm labourer who had gone to live and work in Yorkshire. It is not worth calling a journey nowadays, to go from Roxburghshire to Yorkshire, but it was a long, weary way then. There were no railways at that time, nor for many, many, years after, The roads even were so bad that sometimes the coaches could scarcely travel, and at the best they took days to go a distance that now can be covered in a few hours.

Cook's father was very poor. Wages in those days for farm labourers were only a few shillings a week, and he could not afford to go by coach. So he must have walked,

over the hills and over the moors, 'till he came to the Cleveland district in Yorkshire, where wages, probably, were much higher than in Scotland.

Here he married, and had a large family, but most of the children died whilst they were very young. James was the second son.

In those days, boys were not troubled much with schools, nor with books. When he was quite a little child; James was set to work on the farm of a Mr. Walker, near Marton. The farmer's wife took an interest in the little boy, and perhaps taught him his letters, but he did not go to any school till later.

When eight years of age, Cook's family moved to Great Ayton, a village about five miles from Marton; where his father, had got work as "hind," or bailiff, to a Mr. Skottowe.

At Great Ayton the boy got what education was possible from the village school—at the best it cannot have been much—and for a time he helped his father in the work of the farm.

When the lad had come to his seventeenth year, he was bound apprentice to a grocer and draper, named Sanderson, in the little fishing village of Staithes.

Where the great cliffs, push out into the ocean, along that part of the Yorkshire coast which stretches north from Flamborough Head, there are many deep glens, down which rivulets make their way to the sea. In such



a glen lies Staithes, hidden away from the inland world, nestling on the shore of its little bay.

Here James Cook first heard the “call of the sea”—the call that echoes in the hearts of so many boys, and draws them away to be sailors—the call that sets boys wandering all over the world.

Staithes was full of fishermen and of sailors. Of the other people who lived there, some were shipbuilders, and nearly all made their living in some way connected with the sea. What wonder that in a little time Cook wished with all his heart that he had never been bound to a trade! He did not want to be a grocer or a draper. With his whole soul he longed to be a sailor.

Going to sea in those days was a very different thing from going to sea now. There were then no training ships where a boy might partly learn his business, where he might find out if the life of a sailor was likely to be what he had expected, and, if he did not like it, change to something else while there was yet time.

Then, he began at the very beginning, perhaps as ship's boy on a dirty collier, where he was kicked about and rope's-ended by everybody, from skipper to ordinary seaman. His food was bad, and there was not too much of it. He slept where and when he could, and probably got not much of that. He was everybody's servant; everybody might cuff him.

And, some dark winter's night, when a bitter north-east gale was blowing, and the clumsy vessel was beat-

ing up against a heavy sea, her decks every few minutes smothered under tons of ice-cold water, if the boy failed to hold on when some wave bigger than common broke on board,—well, what then? “There was no one to blame but himself,” probably they might say. No one would trouble very much over it, and in such a sea no boat could be lowered to try to save him. On shore there would be little fuss made. He was only a ship’s boy! And his father and his mother would wait long, and would weary, for him who came home never again.

But if a boy lived to grow up, and to become first an “ordinary seaman,” and later an “able seaman,” even then his life was a poor one.

The food of sailors in those days, even in the King’s Navy, was very bad. Salty, terribly salty, beef (called “junk”) morning, noon, and night, and not always very much of it. Beef so salty and hard, that even when it was boiled for hours it was as tough as wood, and almost as dry.

The effect of such food, especially if the voyage were a long one, was that sailors fell ill, and many died, of a complaint called scurvy. It was a loathsome disease, and the teeth of men who got it often dropped out. Once it broke out on board ship, nothing could stop it but getting the crew to where they might have fresh vegetables and fresh meat.

The water, too, on board ship was generally bad. It was carried in casks, and the casks were not always very

clean, nor were people then very particular about where the water came from. Probably in no long time it had a most evil smell. But the sailors had to drink it; there was nothing else to be got.

For bread they ate biscuit, as hard as stone, and generally full of weevils—a kind of beetle.

The ships were swarming with cockroaches and with rats. Truly a sailor's "lot was not a happy one."

Those, too, were the days of what was called the "press-gang." When in port (and sometimes even when at sea) a merchant sailor always ran the risk of being taken by the press-gang, and forced against his will to serve on board any King's ship that might happen to be short of men.

The press-gang was formed of some of the crew of a ship of the Royal Navy, led by an officer. These men were sent on shore at night to search the public-houses, and all men found there, whether sailors or landsmen, were at once taken prisoners and carried on board the King's ship. Often there were bloody fights before the merchant sailors could be taken; but the man-o'-war's men generally had the best of it. And the law was on their side; the pressed man was wise to make the best of it. The more cheerfully he turned to, and did his work on board, the less likely he was to be flogged.

The "cat o' nine tails" was at work on some ships almost from morning to night. For the smallest fault, perhaps for no fault at all, a brutal captain might order

a man to be savagely flogged. "Five dozen" was no great punishment in those bad old days.

But in spite of all, boys ran away to sea. It was in their blood; they could not step on shore.

And James Cook could not stop on shore. Before he had been a year at Staithes he made up his mind that nothing should keep him from being a sailor.

About this time it chanced that he had words with his master. A girl had come into the shop to buy some article, and she had paid for it with a very bright new coin,—what was then called a "South Sea shilling." Cook was so struck by its beauty; that he wanted to have this shilling for himself and he took it, putting into the till in its place a shilling of his own.

But it happened that his master had also noticed this bright coin, and when he found that Cook had got it, he was very angry, almost as angry as if the boy had stolen it.

There was a great dispute. Cook thought that he had done no wrong, because he had put in the till another shilling in place of the new one. His master was so angry that he went to Cook's father about it. The end was that James was taken away from Mr. Sanderson's shop, and apprenticed at Whitby to a Mr. John Walker, a ship-owner. He did not—as has often been supposed—run away to sea. And so began his life as a sailor.

The first vessel in which he sailed was a little collier, named the *Freelove*; the next, the *Three Brothers*, a ship of about 600 tons. On board of the *Three Brothers* he would

learn a great deal of his profession, for he helped to rig her, and to fit her out.

From the beginning all went well with James Cook. He was a born seaman.

When his apprenticeship was out, he served as “able seaman” on the *Friendship*, another vessel belonging to Mr. Walker, and of her he soon rose to be mate.

But during all the time of his apprenticeship, and afterwards, whenever he was stopping ashore at Whitby, he constantly read books and studied navigation, never losing a chance of teaching himself anything that might push him on in his profession.

For nine years Cook sailed in these Whitby ships, sometimes going as far as Norway, or to Holland; but for the most part he traded up and down the coast, to and from London.

And then, when he was twenty-seven, there came a change.

## COOK BECOMES A MAN- O'-WAR'S MAN

War had broken out between England and France. Cook's ship was then lying in the Thames, and the crew heard that the pressgang was out, taking men from every merchant vessel in port, and sweeping the public-houses and the riverside streets of every man on whom they could lay hands, to complete the crews of the King's ships.

Most of the men hid, for they did not want to serve in the Navy.

Cook too, at first hid himself; for even being mate of a collier might not save him from being "pressed."

But soon he tired of that. It seemed to him it would be much better to enter the Navy as a volunteer.

So he went to Wapping, and as an "A.B." (or able seaman) joined the *Eagle*, a 60-gun ship.

Thus began James Cook's great career in the Navy.

From the first his officers could not fail to see that here was no ordinary man. Even without the help of the letters of recommendation written to Captain Palliser of the *Eagle* by Mr. Walker, Cook's former employer, and by other friends, he would at once have made his mark.

Now began to come in the benefit of his book-reading and studying. And the years that he had passed in the hard life on the Whitby ships in the stormy North Sea were not wasted. For there he had learned every possible point of seamanship. There was nothing on the war-ship, except gunnery, that he needed to be taught. Even as a boy he had been self-reliant, and inclined to hold his own opinion, and, the time during which he had been mate of a collier had added to his confidence in himself. Such a man could not be kept down.

When Cook had been but two years in the Navy, he was made master's mate. With this rank he served on board the *Pembroke*, at the taking of Louisburg, in the Island of Cape Breton. This was when we were fighting the French in Canada in 1758.

The following year he was appointed master of the *Grampus*, but later he was transferred to the *Garland*; and, as it was found that she had already sailed, he was finally appointed to the *Mercury*.

You must understand that the "master" of a ship was not the captain. He was not even a commissioned officer, though the post was not unlike what in the Navy a few years ago was called "navigating lieutenant."

Long ago, three hundred or four hundred years' ago, the captain of a fighting ship was generally a soldier, one who probably knew nothing of sailing, and very little about the sea. He commanded the fighting men, and directed them when the ship was engaged with an enemy. Under

him, there had to be a skilled seaman, whose duty it was to sail the vessel from port to port, and to give orders to the, sailors. This man was called the "master," and the, name was still in use in the Navy thirty or forty years ago.

The post of "master" was an important one, and the pay (as pay then went), was better than that of a lieutenant, but a man who became master seldom rose any higher. He had to be a good seaman, skilled in every part of his profession; but generally he was a man without money and without friends to help him on. Often he grew grey in the service, and ended his days without rising higher in rank.

But Cook was not one of those who cease to rise.

On the *Mercury* he sailed for Canada, where his ship joined the fleet which was then helping our troops under the great General Wolfe in the siege of Quebec.

Quebec is a fine city on the river St. Lawrence, and in those days it, and most of Canada, belonged to France.

The entrenched camp of the French troops was at a place near Quebec called Montmorency. To make it possible for our ships to fire into the French camp, soundings of the depth of the river up to that point had to be taken, so that the ships might not get into shallow water and run aground.

To take these soundings was very difficult and very dangerous. Captain Palliser of the *Eagle* advised the Admiral to send Cook on the duty.

It was not possible to carry it out in daylight, because



the French would certainly shoot anybody whom they saw attempting it, so Cook did it all by night. As soon as it was dark enough, he used to start with a few men in one of the ship's boats, with muffled oars, so as to make no noise. Till daylight he would be busy sounding with a lead tied to a line, and noting down in his pocketbook the depths of the different places in the channel, so that he might afterwards draw a chart of the river.

For some nights all went well. But soon the French began to suspect that something was going on, and they set a trap for Cook.

Some tribes of Red Indians, very brave, but very cruel and bloodthirsty men, were fighting against us. The French collected a large number of these men in their birch-bark canoes at that part of the river where they expected Cook and his boat to be in the early morning.

Just at dawn, when the mist was curling up off the water, and the great trees on the banks were beginning to stand out in the dim light like huge black ghosts, the Indians in their canoes stole quietly out and surrounded Cook's boat before he knew that they were near him. Then, with fearful yells, shouting their war-whoops and paddling furiously, they dashed at him.

But Cook never lost his head nor got flurried. There was no possibility of fighting the Indians; they were far too many. So Cook ordered his men to "give way." The boat's crew, bent to their oars, and with straining muscles pulled for dear life. Before the Indians could close on her,

the boat slipped through between two of the canoes, and drove hard for the shore. It was a narrow shave. So close to them were the yelling Indians that as Cook and his men tumbled over the bows on to the land, the red men, brandishing their tomahawks and with scalping knives ready, jumped into the stern-sheets of the boat, which they took away with them in triumph. Cook had steered for the shore near to the English Hospital guard, and the Indians did not dare to follow him on the land.

His notes of the soundings of the river were saved, and the chart Cook afterwards drew was so good that it was said that even by daylight the whole thing could not have been better done.

So pleased was the Admiral that after this he employed Cook constantly in making charts of the river below Quebec, where it was dangerous for ships. That work Cook always did splendidly and without mistake.

After this, in 1759, he joined the *Northumberland* man-of-war, and during a winter in Halifax he used all his spare time in reading Euclid, and in studying everything that he thought could help him to get on.

In 1762 he went back to England, and in December of that year he married Miss Elizabeth Batts. But he was not left long at home with his wife. In the following year he was sent out to Newfoundland, where he had already before passed some time; and though he returned to England in the winter, it was only for a stay of a very few months.

In 1764 he was again appointed Marine Surveyor of Newfoundland and Labrador, and he made for the Admiralty charts of all the coast, and explored the country inland where before no white man had ever been.

For several years he was employed in this kind of work, each year adding to the name he was making for himself.

## COOK IS RAISED TO THE RANK OF LIEUTENANT—HE BEGINS HIS FIRST VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD

**I**n 1768 there came for James Cook another great step upwards. For some years before this date the British Government had been sending out ships to explore the then almost unknown South Seas. The *Dolphin* and the *Tamar*, under Commodore Byron and Captain Mouatt, left England in 1764 and returned in 1766, having sailed round the world, and discovered several islands. Then the *Dolphin*, and the *Swallow*, under Captain Wallis and Captain Carteret, were sent out.

Before these two last-named ships could return, the King decided to send yet another vessel to the South Seas, this time for the purpose of watching what is called the Transit of the bright star Venus across the face of the sun. Astronomers in England knew that this transit would take place in the month of June 1769, and they thought that the best place from which to see it would be one of the islands that had lately been found in those seas.

Now, the Royal Society wanted to send out in this

ship some of their men who knew a great deal about the stars, and they desired that one of these scientific men, a Mr. Dalrymple, should command the ship during the expedition.

But Sir Edward Hawke, who was then at the head of the Admiralty, said that Mr. Dalrymple was not a sailor, and did not belong to the Navy, and that none but a naval man could command a King's ship. Mr. Dalrymple refused to go unless he was made captain.

The Admiralty looked about for the naval officer who would be the best suited to lead such an expedition, and they decided that no one could do better than Mr. James Cook.

Accordingly, in 1768 he was promoted to be lieutenant, and was appointed to the command of the expedition.

So came the second great step in Cook's life.

Not only was he made leader of the expedition, but he was allowed to choose his vessel. He chose a Whitby ship, the *Earl Pembroke*, which was bought by the Admiralty and taken to Deptford to be fitted out. There she was re-christened the *Endeavour*.

Before sailing she was armed with twenty-two guns, and had a crew of eighty-four seamen and marines. When the scientific members of the expedition and their servants came on board, she carried in all ninety-five persons.

She was a Vessel of only 370 tons. A tiny craft she seems to us of the present day, who know better the huge steamships of 10,000 or 12,000 tons. But, small

as she might be, she was a giant compared with some of the ships with which Drake sailed two hundred years before, or with those of Cavendish in 1586. Of the three ships commanded by Cavendish, the biggest was of no more than 120 tons; the smallest but of 40 tons. In such cockle-shells men in those days braved the hungry seas and raging weather of that most stormy part of all the world, Cape Horn.

Before the *Endeavour* sailed on her voyage, Captain Wallis, in the *Dolphin*, came home, bringing news of the discovery of Otaheite, one of a group to which Cook afterwards gave the name of the Society Islands. Captain Wallis judged that Otaheite was the spot from which to view the Transit of Venus, and Cook was ordered to make his way to that island.

He left the Thames on 30th July 1768, and dropped down Channel to Plymouth Sound, which he reached in a fortnight. There the *Endeavour* lay waiting for a fair wind till Friday, 26th August, when the real voyage began.

The first place at which the ship called was the beautiful island of Madeira. There, when the anchor was being let go, the master's mate, Mr. Weir, was carried overboard by it, and was drowned. Seamen are very superstitious, and probably most of the crew thought that this mishap had come because their ship had sailed from England on a Friday. That is a day which is believed by sailors to be a very unlucky one.

From Madeira the *Endeavour*, on 18th September,

steered for South America, making for Rio de Janeiro, one of the most beautiful harbours in the world, where she arrived on 13th November.

Fifty-six days is a very long time to take to sail between Madeira and Rio, but ships in those days were very slow.

At first, when starting to sail south from Madeira, there is beautiful weather. Fleecy white clouds float in a sky of sapphire blue, and a wind from the north-east blows steadily. Day follows day, and there is never need to touch a rope nor to trim a sail. Day after day the blue sea sparkles and leaps in the sunlight, crisp, little waves breaking white at the ship's bows. Flying-fish in coveys flash out of the water, and skim away to leeward. The ship bowls steadily along, with a gentle swing that soothes to sleep. At night there is no sound but the lap and swish of the water, and on deck the muffled footfall of the officer of the watch.

But soon this glorious weather ends. When the ship is yet some degrees to the north of the equator, the wind drops. There is a dead calm. The vessel rolls heavily to one side, then, with a sudden jerk, rolls back to the other, every timber and bulkhead creaking and groaning. Hour after hour the useless sails flap with the noise almost of thunder. Now there is no longer any comfort on board. The sun scorches down on the decks till the pitch melts in the seams between the planks; in the cabins the heat is almost too great to let men breathe. A slight puff of wind

may come, but before the yards can be braced round and the sails trimmed, it dies away.

Then, maybe, the sky grows inky black; thunder roars with ear-splitting crash, and rain deluges down till the decks swim inches deep.

Some morning, too, very early, over the lonely, heaving, oily-looking sea, perhaps there are seen great water-spouts rearing their heads to the threatening clouds. Around the vessel they stalk, almost as if they were live things that might rush on the ship to overwhelm her.

Ships have lain for weeks in such weather, rolling day and night till their yard-arms almost dip in the sea on either side, never a breeze coming to cheer the hearts of the crew, and to take them out of “the doldrums.”

And so it must have been with the *Endeavour*. But at last she drifts into a light air that gives her steerage way. Gradually the breeze freshens from the south-east, till once more she bowls along in fine weather, and Rio is reached.

During the passage from Madeira, the naturalists on board the *Endeavour* discovered new species of sea-birds, and they also found out what causes the sea sometimes to shine and flash during the darkest nights. At times, in the tropics, the appearance is so brilliant that a vessel almost seems to be sailing through an ocean of sparkling jewels. Far astern, the wake left by the ship stretches out like a shining ribbon, and the waves that break against the bows fall back in a foam of fire. Till this voyage, it was



not known that this luminous appearance is caused by the presence in the sea of myriads of very small animals, each of which gives out a whitish light.

At Rio, Cook expected to be treated with the same kindness that he had received from the Portuguese at Madeira. But the Brazilian Viceroy was not a very clever man. He could not understand the reason of the *Endeavour* coming to Rio, and he did not believe that sensible people would go so far as Cook said they were going, merely to look at a star. He thought that they must be spies of some kind, and he refused to let anybody from the *Endeavour* go ashore. Even Cook himself was not allowed to land without a Brazilian officer being constantly at his elbow to watch what he did. Cook protested, but it did no good. The Viceroy was too stupid and narrow-minded.

At last, after lying at Rio till 5th December, the *Endeavour* again sailed, after Cook had received a letter from the Viceroy wishing him a good voyage. But she got no farther than the mouth of the bay, for there, Fort Santa Cruz fired into her. The Viceroy had not sent orders that she might leave!

There she was kept for two days, a guard-boat rowing continually round her, till the necessary order came. At last she was allowed to leave her anchorage, and to sail away along the coast on her course to the south. To reach Otaheite (or, as it is now called, Tahiti.), it is necessary to get round Cape Horn, the most southerly point of South America. To get to the west side of this famous cape,