

## Notes

# Eighteenth Century Perceptions of 'the Romantic', New Zealand, and Tahiti

IN TRACING the eighteenth century history of the word *romantic*, Logan Pearsall Smith wrote: 'from the general meaning of "like the old romances," [it] came to be used as a descriptive term for the scenes which they describe, old castles, mountains and forests, pastoral plains, waste and solitary places.'<sup>1</sup> And he offered illustrations in which writers found moors, forests, seas, and the Caledonian landscape 'romantic'.<sup>2</sup> Used in this sense, the word occurs in a number of the accounts of New Zealand written by men who accompanied Captain James Cook on his voyages of exploration in the 1770s. Taken together, these occurrences provide an interesting illustration of what the reasonably well-read Englishman of the 1770s considered 'romantic'.

Sydney Parkinson, whom Joseph Banks employed as a botanical draughtsman on the *Endeavour's* voyage, was the first to use the term to describe New Zealand scenery. Of the shore of Tolaga Bay, where Cook took in wood and water between 23 and 30 October 1769, Parkinson wrote: 'Most of the rocks, which are many on the sea shore, are composed of a sandy stone, through which the surf has worn several passages. One of them, in particular, was very romantic, it had the appearance of a large arch which led from the sea-side into the vallies, and through it ran a stream of water. The whole formed a very uncommon view, peculiarly striking to a curious spectator.'<sup>3</sup> He drew the scene, showing the stream in the foreground, the rock in the middle, and the sea beyond.<sup>4</sup>

Parkinson wrote of sections of the coast of the South Island, seen on 13 and 16 March 1770: 'The land appeared very romantic, having mountains piled on mountains to an amazing height; but they seemed to be uninhabited.'<sup>5</sup> And: 'On the 16th, having a breeze, we sailed along the shore of the land we had passed the day before, which appeared as wild and romantic as can be conceived. Rocks and mountains, whose tops were covered with snow, rose in view one above another from the water's edge:

<sup>1</sup> Logan Pearsall Smith, *Words and Idioms*, London, 1928, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 78-81.

<sup>3</sup> Sydney Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, London, 1773, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, Plate XX.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

and those near the shore were clothed with wood, as well as some of the valleys between the hills, whose summits reached the clouds.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Banks, too, was similarly impressed by features of the New Zealand coast. He wrote in his journal for 12 November 1769:

. . . we landed first near a small [pa] the most beautifully romantick thing I ever saw. It was built on a small rock detachd from the main and surroundd at high water, the top of this was fencd round with rails after their manner but was not large enough to contain above 5 or 6 houses; the whole appeard totally inaccessible to any animal who was not furnishd with wings, indeed it was only aproachable by one very narrow and steep path, but what made it most truly romantick was that much the largest part of it was hollowd out into an arch which penetrated quite through it and was in hight not less than 20 yards perpendicular above the water which ran through it.<sup>7</sup>

Parkinson drew this rock too, emphasizing its 'romantic' aspect.<sup>8</sup>

That a European might find sections of New Zealand peculiarly apposite to such characterization received quite striking confirmation when Cook refreshed the *Resolution* at Dusky Sound, on the southwest coast of the South Island, in April 1773. The unliterary Cook was impressed by Cascade Cove in the Sound, but he thought that description was better left to the artist William Hodges.<sup>9</sup> The more literary and German-born George Forster, naturalist on the voyage, found the 'grandeur' of the scene such 'that the powers of description fall short of the force and beauty of nature'.<sup>10</sup> He too thought that the 'force and beauty' of the scene 'could only be truly imitated by the pencil of Mr. Hodges'.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, he was able to produce a quite detailed three-page account, which read in part: 'The noise of the cascade is so loud, and so repeatedly reverberated from the echoing rocks, that it drowns almost every other sound; the birds seemed to retire from it to a little distance, where the shrill notes of thrushes, the graver pipe of wattle-birds, and the enchanting melody of various creepers resounded on all sides, and completed the beauty of this wild and romantic spot.'<sup>12</sup>

William Wales, the astronomer, showed how greatly the mid-eighteenth century imaginative background contributed to his notion of 'the romantic' when he quoted from Thomson's 'Summer' in order to describe the cascade. He wrote in his journal for 29 April 1773:

At 22<sup>h</sup> hove up the Anchor again and made Sail; and as we passed along one of Nature's most romantic Scenes presented it self to our view; for on the top of a very high mountain, and they are all very high and steep,

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Banks, *The 'Endeavour' Journal of Joseph Banks*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, 2nd ed., Sydney, 1963, I, 432.

<sup>8</sup> See *Journal*, Plate XXIV. It is significant here that the *London Magazine* should have chosen to reproduce this plate, together with Parkinson's description of the *pa* (*London Magazine*, August 1773, facing p. 369, pp. 369-70).

<sup>9</sup> See James Cook, *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery: Vol. II*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, Cambridge, 1961, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> George Forster, *A Voyage round the World*, London, 1777, I, 148.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

Smooth to the shelving brink a copious flood  
 Roll'd fair, and placid; where collected all,  
 In one impetuous torrent, down the Steep  
 It thundering shot, and shook the country round.  
 At first, an azure sheet, it rushed broad;  
 Then whitening by degrees, as prone it fell,  
 And from the loud resounding Rocks below  
 Dash'd in a cloud of foam, it sent aloft  
 A hoary mist, in which Sol's lucid beams,  
 Refracted, form'd a tripple coloured bow.  
 Nor could the torture'd wave find here repose:  
 But raging still amidst the shaggy Rocks,  
 Now flashing o'er the scatter'd fragments, now  
 Aslant the hollow channel darting swift;  
 'Till falling oft from gradual slope to slope,  
 With wild infracted Course, and lessening roar,  
 It gained a safer bed.<sup>13</sup>

William Hodges produced three impressive paintings of scenes in Dusky Sound. One, 'View in Cascade Cove, Dusky Sound', which hangs in the National Maritime Museum, shows the cascade spilling into the Cove, with dark woods opposite, and high mountains beyond. Another, 'A View in Dusky Bay, New Zealand',<sup>14</sup> shows a scene quite reminiscent of those of the English Lake District — cloud-hung mountains and a mist-shrouded waterway bathed in sunset's golden glow, with a solitary Maori standing pensively in the foreground. The third, 'Waterfall in Dusky Bay, New Zealand' (Pl. 68), a quite splendid painting, shows the cascade against mountains and a dark sky, with a Maori family in the left foreground. This last scene is the epitome of a 'deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover', and it might well have been painted as an illustration to one of Ossian's poems.

These explorers, then, saw as 'romantic' scenes of wild, untamed, and solitary nature. In doing so, they responded to scenes for which their imaginative upbringing had prepared them, and their use of the term allows us to perceive certain distinctions in their responses to landscape. First, while 'romantic' occurs several times in these explorers' descriptions of New Zealand, it does not occur in their descriptions of Tierra del Fuego or New Holland, so far as I have noted.<sup>15</sup> This means that they distinguished between different sorts of 'hard' primitivism, rather than that they found all hard primitivism 'romantic', for the descriptions of Dusky Sound present hard primitivism, as do Hodges's paintings. If they found aspects of New Zealand's hard primitivism 'romantic', though, why did they not find aspects of New Holland's hard primitivism 'romantic'? The landscapes

<sup>13</sup> Reprinted in Cook, pp. 782-3. Cf. Thomson's 'Summer', II, 590-606, which Wales remembered quite well, though not perfectly.

<sup>14</sup> For convenience, I refer to the reproductions of these paintings in Anthony Murray-Oliver, comp., *Captain Cook's Artists in the Pacific 1769-1779*, Christchurch, 1969. The reproduction of this painting is Plate 67. The plate numbers of the reproductions of other paintings discussed appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Though Cook on his second voyage wrote of the icebergs' 'very curious and romantick Views' (Cook, p. 98). Wales and Forster, of course, did not see New Holland.

of each country possessed many of the characteristics which Logan Pearsall Smith finds the word evoking in the mid-eighteenth century — wild nature, mountains and moors, 'the *Woods*, the *Rivers*, or *Sea-shores*'.<sup>16</sup> As well, each possessed inhabitants who could be seen having a certain 'nobility'.<sup>17</sup> The explanation must of course be that aspects of New Zealand scenery approximated more closely than did aspects of Australian scenery to mid-eighteenth century notions of 'the romantic'. The lack of an Australian equivalent to the New Zealand Alps constitutes an immediately striking difference, and an extended analysis would doubtless reveal others.

Second, these explorers clearly distinguished between the New Zealand and Tahitian landscapes. Banks, for example, wrote of the country about Matavai Bay: 'we walked for 4 or 5 miles under groves of Cocoa nut and bread fruit trees loaded with a profusion of fruit and giving the most gratefull shade I have ever experienced, under these were the habitations of the people most of them without walls: in short the scene we saw was the truest picture of an arcadia of which we were going to be kings that the imagination can form.'<sup>18</sup> Just as Banks did not describe Tahiti as 'romantic', so too did he not describe New Zealand as 'arcadian'. To Banks, New Zealand was wilder, more savage, than Tahiti.

Hodges's paintings show a similar discrimination between the Dusky Sound and Society Island landscapes. In such paintings as 'A View of Part of Owharra' (Pl. 70), 'A View of Part of the Island of Ulietea' (Pl. 71), 'A View taken in Oaitepcha Bay' (Pl. 75), and 'A View of Otaheite' (Pl. 78), soft blues and greens predominate. In the first- and second-mentioned, canoes move on placid bays; in the third, a maiden bathes serenely in a pool, while others dry themselves; and in the last-mentioned, the European ships lie calmly at anchor, and a woman and her young child rest on one of the Tahitian canoes. There are houses, and a peace, which comes partly as a result of the sense of enduring human habitation which Hodges has established, informs the paintings. In the paintings of Dusky Sound, on the other hand, there is a greater emphasis on browns and heavy greens, and rocks are prominent.<sup>19</sup> The Maoris are more primitive and savage than the Tahitians, there are no houses, and one has a sense of a human habitation that is much more precarious than that of Tahiti. Whereas the Society Island paintings present arcadian scenes, the Dusky Sound paintings present ossianic scenes, waste and solitary places.

George Forster, too, discriminated between the New Zealand and Tahitian landscapes. At one point in his description of Tahiti, he wrote of now having time for reflection. The result, he said,

was a conviction, that this island is indeed one of the happiest spots on the globe. The rocks of New Zealand appeared at first in a favourable light to our eyes, long tired with the constant view of sea, and ice, and sky; but time served to undeceive us, and gave us daily cause of dislike, till we formed a just conception of that rude chaotic country. But O-Taheitee, which had presented a pleasing prospect at a distance, and displayed its

<sup>16</sup> *Words and Idioms*, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Banks, II, 11-13, and Cook, *Journals*, 1955, I, 399.

<sup>18</sup> Banks, I, 252.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., in this regard, too, 'A View of a Rock of Basalt in the Island of New Zealand' (Pl. 66).

beauty as we approached, became more enchanting to us at every excursion which we made on its plains.<sup>20</sup>

It is therefore of great interest that Forster should have used 'romantic' of Tahiti. He wrote of one excursion:

. . . we entered, with a few guides, a chasm between two hills. There we found several wild plants which were new to us, and saw a number of little swallows flying over a fine brook, which rolled impetuously along. We walked up along its banks to a perpendicular rock, fringed with various tufted shrubberies, from whence it fell in a crystalline column, and was collected at the bottom into a smooth limpid pond, surrounded with many species of odoriferous flowers. This spot, where we had a prospect of the plain below us, and of the sea beyond it, was one of the most beautiful I had ever seen, and could not fail of bringing to remembrance the most fanciful descriptions of poets, which it eclipsed in beauty. In the shade of trees, whose branches hung over the water, we enjoyed a pleasant gale, which softened the heat of the day, and amidst the solemn uniform noise of the waterfall, which was but seldom interrupted by the whistling of birds, we sat down to describe our new acquisitions before they withered. Our Tahitian companions seeing us employed, likewise rested among the bushes, viewing us attentively and in profound silence. We could have been well pleased to have passed the whole day in this retirement; however, after finishing our notes, and feasting our eyes once more with the romantic scenery, we returned to the plain.<sup>21</sup>

The scene which Forster described here corresponds closely in its details to that which he described in Dusky Sound. In each, there are chasms, rocks, a stream and a cascade, flowers, surrounding trees, and the ocean in view. Given this similarity of detail, one can see why, if he found the one 'romantic', he might also have found the other 'romantic'. Yet there are differences between the scenes too. Forster calls the New Zealand one a 'wild and romantic spot', the stream there runs foaming, and its fall is violent.<sup>22</sup> In the Tahitian scene, the stream falls into a 'smooth limpid pool', and the flowers are more luxuriant than their New Zealand counterparts. It is significant that Forster does not call this second scene 'wild'. Rather, he emphasizes its tranquillity. Given these differences, and given the distinction Forster made between Tahiti, with its scenes epitomizing those which poets have sought to describe, and New Zealand, the 'rude chaotic' country, we must consider, I think, that Forster saw the Tahitian scene as qualitatively different from the New Zealand one. In his and the other explorers' descriptions, and in Hodges's paintings, Tahiti is not a wild, uncultivated, solitary, or 'unhumanized' landscape such as Smith sees 'romantic' evoking in its mid-eighteenth century scene, or as Dusky Sound. The Tahitians cultivated the land, their habitation was permanent, and their culture was a developed one.

When Forster used 'romantic' of the Tahitian scene, then, he did so in a sense different from that in which he and his fellow explorers used it of the Dusky Sound, and other New Zealand scenes. The world's sense was

<sup>20</sup> Forster, I, 312.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 288-89.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 147.

changing in the 1770s, as the English imagination began to take its Romantic form.<sup>23</sup> Younger and more literary than his fellow observers, and Germanic, George Forster may have been aware of its changing sense before he sailed from England. What seems more likely, though, is that his experience of Tahiti, that island of dreams, led him to an altered concept of 'the romantic'. But however this may have been, the change in meaning between Forster's first and second usages reflects the great imaginative change of the age.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, 'The Progress of Romantic Ideas', *London Magazine*, (March 1773), 125-6; and *Words and Idioms*, pp. 83-87.

<sup>24</sup> In writing this note, I have been concerned to read what is relevant in Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850*, Oxford, 1960. The transformation of European vision as a consequence of Pacific experience is of course Bernard Smith's great subject, but he does not deal with this use of 'romantic' at any length.