

Captain James Cook: A Biography. By Richard Hough. Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1994. 398 pp. NZ price: \$54.95. ISBN 0-340-58598-6.

UNBELIEVABLY 25 years have now passed since the beginning of that frenetic, hectic decade of activities that we graced with the name of 'The Cook Bicentennial', a decade of re-enactments, scholarship, conferences and popular writings in the Pacific Basin and elsewhere in the far-flung spheres of Cook's influence as one of the great navigators of all time. Arguably more artefacts, documents, images, specimens, drawings, sketches and other images, together with reinterpretations, misinterpretations and new editions have been salvaged and preserved and published about this man and his associates' work than of any other single figure or epoch in Pacific history. Undeniably Cook has endured and been enshrined as one of the Pacific's and also New Zealand's major icons. He is thus to us more than just (to quote Richard Hough's observation taken from a contemporary obituary) 'an everlasting honour to his country [England]': he stands as part of the myth and the reality of what we became.

As a number of writers, both popular and serious, in recent years have dared to hint or show, Cook is really to be remembered less positively or glowingly by colonists and the peoples of the land alike if the truth is told. Australian writers on Cook have moved more aggressively than we to demythologize Cook or distance themselves from his idolization in their collective search for other more plausible, suitable founding heroes. I feel sure that for the very reasons that New Zealand has tended to be a leader in Cook studies and scholarship we may also contribute ultimately to a balanced demythologizing process. In so far as we have a right surely to expect that any modern book on Cook should take account of the now widely differing views and opinions on his reception, however revisionist, we must conclude that this book does not: it tends rather to enshrine the icon further.

Richard Hough's book is readable and workmanlike, but it adds little to our essential and by now rather vast perceptions and knowledge of Cook. After John Beaglehole's aptly titled *The Life of Captain James Cook* (1974) and that same author's monumental six volumes of Cook's and Joseph Banks's journals is a 370-page biography of Cook that tells us essentially nothing new, attempts nothing interpretive, really warranted?

Admittedly Hough is no stranger to British maritime history of the Pacific, having authored several books on Cook and other themes, including two on the so-called 'murder' of Cook on the third voyage in Hawaii. Hough is also a biographer of some eminence on recent British subjects and as such betrays a keen eye for characterization. He tells a good yarn, more folksy and racy than the measured, expansive and often digressive Beaglehole, enlivening the essential Cook story by seeking out the words, actions and foibles of the wags and more endearing tars amongst Cook's several crews over a decade in the Pacific. Even contemporaries, presaging later writers, would begin in the long apotheosis of this undoubtedly competent explorer, and idolize, immortalize and ultimately mythologize about Cook. There is, therefore, a temptation for any biographer to present this subject as one who could do little or no mortal wrong. Mercifully Hough largely avoids this, presenting the man as a leader of humanity, caution and steel, the quintessential Yorkshireman, from the first two voyages, who by and during the fatal third, had grown impatient, careless and weary because, as we now know, of his seriously declining physical and perhaps mental health.

For newcomers to the Cook story it is a good account, typographically and structurally well presented. Hough's sources are essentially Beaglehole's. A close scrutiny of the 'Source References' — there being presented no bibliography in the conventional form

— shows that Hough either has not listed or rather — as I suspect from a detailed reading of text and sources — not consulted as thoroughly or as widely as he might have done amongst the rich and complex literature which now comprises 'Cook scholarship'.

Hough's is essentially a conservative rather than an interpretive or revisionist presentation of Cook's life and achievements. His grasp of the impact or significance of Cook's landings throughout the Pacific alone does not impress. After all whose 'culture' was being discovered, raped or preserved? He consistently mis-spells the names of two main characters in the story, sometimes offers long since discarded or worn-out interpretations of characters and events and is not always comfortable with Pacific place names and usage.

Since 1788 every couple of decades, on average, a book or significant biographical essay has appeared on Cook. No biographer of standing can neglect the prior writings on his subject. Is Cook such an icon of history that only the Antipodean can attempt to interpret him satisfactorily? Beaglehole will always remain the yardstick against which standard conventional biographies will be measured. We await with some anticipation the revisionist (perhaps demythologizing) antidote that puts Cook into the undoubtedly important place he has in Pacific and, thus, New Zealand history.

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Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment: Useful knowledge and polite culture. By John Gascoigne. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994. 324 pp. Price: \$A49.95. ISBN 0-521-45077-2.

VIEWED FROM one perspective Joseph Banks had all those characteristics typical of the English landed class. Following a period at Eton and as a gentleman commoner at Oxford, he went on his own equivalent of the Grand Tour before taking up the life of the 'wealthy unemployed'. With substantial revenues from estates in Lincolnshire, Kent and Derbyshire, he maintained a central London house as well as one at Heston on the outskirts of the city. In the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, in common with many of his class, he sought to increase the revenues from his estates by a programme of steady improvement, including drainage, enclosure and some of the new forms of crop rotation. He was very much the pillar of county society, accepting the obligations as well as the authority, which that conveyed.

Socially and politically Banks was a conservative, sharing some of the rural gentry's suspicion of central government politicians. Although pressed on occasion, he never entered Parliament, nor accepted positions which would make him beholden to government, believing that this would compromise his scientific activities. However he embraced all the social and political perquisites of power, presiding over local county society, becoming closely involved in its administration and militia and deploying considerable reserves of patronage.

In common with many other landed gentry he was a Tory in social and political terms. He was a strong supporter of the monarchy and the established church, largely for reasons of social order. By the 1790s he was a Tory in the Pitt mould (although he never had much