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Captain James Cook and His Fight Against the Invisible: A Closer Look at the Diseases that Plagued the Voyages of Discovery

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Captain James Cook and His Fight Against the Invisible:
A Closer Look at the Diseases that Plagued the Voyages of Discovery

A Senior Paper

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By

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Abstract

Using the journals that Captain James Cook maintained throughout his three voyages into the Pacific along with the help of scholarship surrounding Cook and his encounters with disease, I have been able to dive deeper through the lens of health management to better understand the battle against the then invisible enemy of eighteenth-century sailors. I started my research in order to understand Cook's reasonings behind his ban on interactions between natives and his sailors. I wanted to know *why* he cared so much about the well-being of natives during a time period of colonization where this kind of sympathy is void. Cook's efforts to curb disease spread and infection, guided simply by what the eighteenth century had to offer, while not entirely successful, was the best he could have done. In my essay, I propose that his efforts to stop disease spread to natives and his men are reflective of his personal *interest* in maintaining proper health and well-being. With an understanding of *what* European diseases of any kind could do to the health of a person, Cook was able to curb as much as he could. Throughout my research, I've found that much of what Cook was up against was simply out of his control. Despite his best efforts, controlling carnal desires and diseases was impossible.

Introduction

On October 27, 1728, James Cook was born to laborer James Cook and Grace Pace in Yorkshire, England.¹ Introduced to the sea at sixteen, Cook's familiarity only grew over time. John and Henry Walker, Quaker shipowners in Whitby, took James in as a merchant apprentice.² Gaining experience and knowledge along England's east coast, Cook saw no path other than one set before him on the water. By 1755, he had been climbing through the United Kingdom's Merchant Navy for several years, but Cook shifted his sights onto the Royal Navy. Two years after his enrollment, in 1757, Cook gained the qualifications and rank to command his own ship in the King's fleet.³ After years of experience in the Royal Navy, Cook began what became his most important and final voyages. Spanning from 1768 to his death in 1779, James Cook and his crews took on the Pacific Ocean.⁴

Recommended by the Royal Navy, James Cook was tasked by the Royal Society, the United Kingdom's national academy of science, to observe the planet Venus' transit across the sun.⁵ The observations performed on Cook's first voyage, 1768 to 1771, were to assist astronomers in establishing the distance between the Earth and the Sun.⁶ The British government also provided Cook with secret instructions to search and claim a supposed southern continent for the King.⁷ No such continent was discovered on the journey.

¹ Deanna O'Connor, "Captain Cook: The Travels and Explorations of the Famed Captain James Cook," *British Heritage Travel* 42, Issue 1 (2021), 14.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Royal Society," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified May 27, 2022, 22:35, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Society. The Royal Society is a United Kingdom organization formed in 1660. Its goals are to promote scientific discovery and education.

⁶ James Cook, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, ed. Philip Edwards (London: Penguin, 2003), 11.

James Cook's second voyage began shortly after his return to England from his first, setting off again a year later in 1772. His new instructions were to again search for the southern continent— more specifically, he was tasked with finding Cape Circumcision.⁸ Cape Circumcision was the supposed tip of the southern continent discovered in 1739 by French captain Jean-Baptiste Charles Bouvet de Lozier. People of the eighteenth century did believe that a continent in the southern hemisphere was likely. However, their basis for believing in the existence of a southern continent was simply one of balance: since there is continental land in the northern hemisphere, the southern hemisphere must contain substantial continental land as well.⁹ Interestingly, Cook's voyages disproved the possibility of a massive continent that came up past the longitude of New Zealand. Bouvet's discovery was not of what we now know as Antarctica, but instead a small island close to the icy continent. Bouvet wrote down improper coordinates and the island was not found again until 1808.¹⁰ The second voyage provided more opportunities for scientific discovery. Multiple chronometers were brought on board both the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* to test the instruments and establish longitude.¹¹ In July of 1772, Cook embarked once more to the Pacific, now with the company of a second ship— The *Adventure*, commanded by Tobias Furneaux.¹² The results of the second voyage proved to be less than lucrative for those

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 221.

⁹ "Terra Australis," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified November 2, 2022, 17:08, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terra_Australis.

¹⁰ "Bouvet Island," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified November 3, 2022, 06:14, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bouvet_Island. James Lindsay, a British wailer, was who rediscovered the island in 1808.

¹¹ "Marine Chronometer," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified April 22, 2022, 02:33, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_chronometer. Celestial bodies and Greenwich Mean Time are utilized by chronometers in order to establish a ships position at sea; Cook, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, 219.

¹² Cook, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, 221.

involved. No southern continent was discovered, and the *Adventure* suffered a devastating massacre during the second of two separations the expedition experienced.¹³

The third and final voyage of James Cook commenced in 1776. Instead of exploring the southern Pacific as the previous two journeys had done, Cook was charged with finding the North-West Passage.¹⁴ Assisted by Captain Clerke aboard the *Resolution*, Cook and his crew aboard the *Discovery* reached the Nootka Sound, off of Vancouver Island, by 1778.¹⁵ No North-West Passage was discovered. They continued their journey up further north into the Arctic Sea past the Bering Strait, but no passage was found there either. By November the voyage had returned to the Sandwich Islands, modern-day Hawai'i, and just three months later in January, a fight broke out between Cook's crew and the Hawai'ians which led to Cook's death.¹⁶ Clerke took command of the voyage but later the same year passed away from tuberculosis. John Gore, Clerke's second lieutenant, took over command of the *Resolution*, and Cook's second lieutenant, James King, took over command of the *Discovery*. The *Resolution* and the *Discovery* returned home to England without the guidance of its original leaders in October of 1780.¹⁷

Under the teachings and influence of Scottish doctor, James Lind, the health and cleanliness of Cook's crew and ship were given a painstaking amount of attention.¹⁸ Cook's affinity for cleanliness and attention to sailors' health was a newly emerging trait of eighteenth-

¹³ Ibid., 222. The massacre of the *Adventure*'s crew in New Zealand resulted in the ship returning home two early in 1773, leaving the *Resolution* to finish alone.

¹⁴ Ibid., 427. The North-West Passage was believed to be a sea route that connected the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans through North America.

¹⁵ Ibid., 425; 428.

¹⁶ Ibid., 430.

¹⁷ Ibid., 431.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

century naval captains. For example, nearly three decades prior to Cook's voyages, in 1740, Commodore Anson's four-year journey around the world displayed a lack of attention and understanding of health. At the time, the cure recommended by the College of Physicians for the then-common scurvy was an elixir of vitriol.¹⁹ Combined with poor diet and conditions, forty-three men passed away from scurvy within the first month of Anson's voyage.²⁰ Even after Cook's clear successes in keeping his men out of early graves, his and Lind's methods were slow to enter the mainstream. However, his success in significantly reducing death tolls during his three voyages was noticed and prompted the Royal Navy to make positive changes regarding ships and sailors' cleanliness.²¹

Cook's extensive measures to prevent disease spreading amongst his crew as well as the natives they encountered shows that while a full and complete understanding of viruses wasn't held by the natives and sailors in the eighteenth century, their harmful effects were clearly understood.²²

Methodology

First-hand accounts written during the voyages of Captain Cook are not hidden behind centuries of dust, instead, they live strong in the present— kept alive by the efforts of twentieth

¹⁹ C. Lloyd and J.L.S. Coulter, *Medicine and the Navy, 1200-1900* (Edinburgh: Livingstone. 1957), 296; "Royal College of Physicians," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified November 2, 2022, 01:54, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_College_of_Physicians. The College of Physicians is dedicated to improving medical practices.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 294. The elixir of vitriol is made up of sulfuric acid, alcohol, sugar, ginger, cinnamon, and a mixture of other species.

²¹ T.S. Angus, "Captain Cook's Hygiene," *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 3295 (December 1927): 1234. Angus notes that during his time at sea, Cook's name was synonymous with cleanliness— essentially giving Cook the label of a pioneer of hygiene.

²² David Iglar, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (June 2004): 704. Cook's surgeon's second mate upon the *Discovery* noted that Hawai'i was ravaged with venereal disease less than a year after their first visit.

and twenty-first-century scholars. Most notable is John Cawte Beaglehole, a professor from Wellington, New Zealand who was graced with the monstrous task of editing all of James Cook's journals by the Hakluyt Society in 1948.²³ Cook's journals themselves had never been published up until the twentieth century, however, accounts based on his journals were published during the times of his voyages.²⁴ Beaglehole's works officially titled *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery*, are the writings of James Cook transcribed into four books, spanning from 1768 to 1779 during his three voyages into the Pacific. Over the next two decades, Beaglehole completed four books containing nearly 4,000 pages of scholarship. The first book, originally published in 1955, covered Cook's first voyage. In 1961, Beaglehole's second book was published, chronicling Cook's second voyage. The final two books were published in 1967, covering the entirety of the third voyage. Prior to Beaglehole's efforts, only contemporary accounts based on Cook's journals were available.²⁵ Through the University of Washington's Special Collections Library in Seattle, I am able to access Beaglehole's books for my research. In 2003, Penguin Publishing Group released a barebones version of Cook's journals, containing minimal editing and footnotes. This book is extremely accessible and has been a great resource for my research.

Part of my research was looking into sexual encounters and the venereal diseases that came with those encounters on Cook's voyages. After his first voyage, Cook's journal, and others aboard the ship's journals were published, and the British public reacted poorly to the casualness of the sexual encounters described. It must be noted that while not a participant

²³ "Hakluyt Society," last modified 2022, <https://www.hakluyt.com>. The Hakluyt Society, founded in 1846, is focused on publishing primary records of voyages and other maritime related excursions.

²⁴ Cook, *Journals*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

himself, Cook's mentions of sexual exchanges between his men and native women were common but never graphic. As a result of the backlash, Cook became concerned with what he said in his journal and how he said it, which led to instances of coupling between his crew and natives being discussed and hidden through a language of trade and disease prevention rather than plainly stated.²⁶ This made my research into the sexual activity that occurred on Cook's voyages difficult when only using his journals alone. I was able to supplement with scholarly sources using Cook's crew's journals for more perspective, such as Anne Salmond's book, mentioned below.

I am interpreting these primary sources through the lens of health and wellness management. From each source, I am asking and searching for the responses and actions taken by Cook and his crew when dealing with diseases.

Literature Review

My evidence base is sourced from books, journal articles, and essays. My first source is Anne Salmond's book *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, which covers the entirety of Cook's voyages leading up to his eventual death. The specific chapter I use focuses on mass infection from airborne diseases. My next two sources by Lisa Vanenbossche and David Iglar are articles focusing on the sexual spread of disease in the Pacific. My fourth article by T.S. Angus was acquired through a medical journal that discusses the intense hygiene commenced on Cook's ships. My final source is an essay by Dave Smith that provides details into the types of diseases Cook encountered as well as his responses to said diseases. Scholarship surrounding Cook and disease follows a common thread. The scholarly sources mentioned above all agree that Cook held an affinity for the health of his crew. His active attempts to prevent couplings from

²⁶ Lisa Vandebossche, "Venereal Distemper: Illicit Trade and Contagious Disease in the Journals of Captain James Cook," in *Cultural Economies of the Atlantic World: Objects and Capital in the Transatlantic Imagination*, ed. Victoria Barnett-Woods (New York: Routledge, 2020), 22.

occurring during Pacific Island visits and implementing proper cleanliness on board shows Cook's attention to the wellbeing of the men who came along for his journeys.

In Anne Salmond's book *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, the chapter "The Owner of These Bones," argues that Captain Cook was active in his care for the health and wellness of his crew. While the chapter focuses on the devastation of illnesses that hit the *Endeavour* during and soon after its time in Batavia, modern-day Jakarta, Salmond highlights the actions that Cook took as well as his reactions to the rapid decline of health aboard his ship. Through this chapter, I gain a better understanding of Cook's disease comprehension out in the field. Prior to their arrival in Batavia, not a single crew member had passed away from illness,²⁷ but the malaria-infected mosquitoes and general uncleanness of the city resulted in the eventual death of more than half of Cook's crew aboard the *Endeavour*. Salmond draws special attention to the death of Tupaia, a native Tahitian who had recently recovered from a bout of scurvy and soon fell ill again after time in Batavia. In Cook's eyes, Tupaia's quick passing resulted from scurvy making him more susceptible to disease. Tupaia's untimely death, while depressing, shows Cook's understanding of the ailments of his crew. He was not aware of the process of disease contraction, but he was aware of susceptibility and was determined to improve his crew's chances.²⁸

Lisa Vandenbossche's article "Venereal Distemper: Illicit Trade and Contagious Disease in the Journals of Captain James Cook," dives deeper into the sexual aspect of relations that occurred between Cook's crew and the native women of the Pacific. Vandenbossche argues that contemporary reader's poor reactions to Cook's documentation of the sexual exchange that

²⁷ Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: The Remarkable Story of Captain Cook's Encounters in the South Seas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 161. Cook's feat was documented in the cover letter of his journal copies he sent out upon arrival in Batavia.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Beyond providing European medicines, Cook actively searched out fresh fruits and vegetables for his crew.

occurred on his first voyage led to later censorship in his next two voyage's journals. The censorship of the sexual encounters between Cook's crew and the native women prompted Cook towards focusing on venereal diseases and preventing their spread, most intensely during his third voyage.²⁹ In hindsight, for unexposed natives, Cook's efforts to cease the spread of sexual disease were not pointless. However, the relationship between the men and their Captain grew strained due to sexual restrictions— even if it was for the benefit of the native populations. Multiple floggings were given to men who pursued sex with native women against Cook's orders.³⁰ The way this article expands on Cook's awareness of the impact his crew and the diseases they carried had on uninfected natives aids my argument by showing Cook's endeavors in trying to lessen a blow to the general wellness of an entire population.

David Iglar's article "Disease Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," investigates the exchange and spread of diseases in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that resulted from contact between European and American ships and the natives of the Pacific.³¹ Iglar argues that the development of European and American maritime trade between the 1700 and 1800s led to unprotected populations in the Pacific being devastated rapidly by foreign diseases. A perfect environment for rapid disease spread in the late eighteenth century was found along the coastal regions of the Northwest in the United States. Native populations gathered frequently in large numbers, interacted with neighboring tribes, and held company within confined spaces.³² After contact with European diseases such as smallpox, native populations with no immunity from these diseases were ravaged by death and infection. Similar

²⁹ Vandenbossche, "Venereal Distemper," 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

³¹ Iglar, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," 697.

³² *Ibid.*, 702. Cedar longhouses where potlatches were held placed large groups into close quarters.

to Vandebossche's article, Iglar provides me with insight into Cook's motivations surrounding suspending contact with Pacific natives, sexual or not.

The article "Captain Cook's Hygiene," by T.S. Angus shines a light on Cook's methodical implementation of disease prevention. Cook's strict rules and routines aboard his ship kept his crew healthy throughout the decades worth of sea travel during his three voyages of discovery. While focusing on the past achievements of Cook, Angus also argues that Cook's efforts regarding the wellbeing of his men positively impacted maritime health in the Royal Navy as a whole.³³ During any given twenty-four-hour period aboard Cook's ship with ordinary weather, the crew was granted two separate consecutive eight-hour breaks from duty. Men were able to get more than four hours of sleep, which was usual aboard other ships of the time.³⁴ Cook also instructed his crew to maintain the cleanliness of their hammocks and clothing. More care was put into the little things during Cook's voyages, which benefited all in the long run. Angus mentions that during his time at sea, Cook's name was synonymous with cleanliness and health. One can see that Cook's impact lasted at least up until the early 20th century. Through Angus' article, I can see the long-term, semi-recent effects of Cook and his attention to cleanliness and disease control.

Finally, Dave Smith's essay "Health & Wellness on the Voyages of James Cook," addresses the specific diseases Cook and his crew encountered during their three voyages. Beyond scurvy, Smith brings special attention to infectious diseases. Smith argues that despite Cook's best efforts, his elementary understanding of disease was not enough to outright prevent illness on his ship.³⁵ Cook, already a fan of the teachings of James Lind, the author of the 1753

³³ Angus, "Captain Cook's Hygiene," 1234.

³⁴ Ibid., 1233. Crews of ships during the eighteenth century typically had four hours of work and four hours off.

book *Treatise of Scurvy*, potentially followed Lind's ship maintenance ideas. Lind suggested washing the deck in the morning, which Smith speculates was done to allow the ship to fully dry in the sun.³⁶ Lind also wished to implement better care of the crew's hammocks, proposing they be taken out to dry each morning and washed once a month. The health of Cook's men, notably before their stint in Batavia in 1770, which Cook proudly writes about prior to the devastation, is massively impressive and could be owed to the works of James Lind. Smith's essay expands on Cook's understanding of diseases and cleanliness, providing me with an ample path to where Cook had been influenced in his time serving in the Royal Navy.

Overall, scholarship discussing Cook generally agrees that his efforts to keep his men and the Pacific natives healthy were well placed and impactful, but they also agree that he was not perfect.

Analysis

Captain Cook and his focus on disease prevention is a highlight of his three voyages of discovery. From 1768 to 1779, Cook and his men traversed the Pacific, encountering many people and many diseases. Cook's personal journals mention he and his crew encountered venereal diseases, scurvy, and infectious diseases during their decade of travel. Death and infection followed Cook's voyages, be it in their wake, or on board. Diving deeper into his multiple mentions of diseases, with the help of my scholarly sources, I've found a man, equipped with what was thought to be the best the eighteenth century can offer, trying to battle human desires and bacteria that still plague the world today. Looking at Cook's efforts through a health and wellness lens, it is clear that Cook did what he could with what knowledge and morals he

³⁵ Dave Smith, "Health & Wellness on the Voyages of James Cook" (Honors Capstone, University of Minnesota, 2018), 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

had. By listening and caring about the well-being of his men and the natives they came across, Cook did less harm to the native populations he encountered—driven by his personal interests in health, than what could have been without his efforts. The populations of the islands he visited still suffered greatly as a result of sexual exchanges between crew and natives, but it could be said that their suffering was less so due to Cook’s efforts. However, any suffering at the hands of European disease is not ideal.

Landing at the port city of Batavia, modern-day Jakarta, in October of 1770 was at first a celebratory occasion. Cook and his crew of ninety-four had been at sea for two years and not one man had been lost to sickness. Cook’s use of antiscorbutics—anti-scurvy agents, attention to cleanliness, and implementation of a proper diet and rest had kept his crew alive and healthy.³⁷ Scurvy, a disease resulting from a lack of vitamin C, was a frequent and common illness that pestered maritime travel until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when its cure became widely known. At the time of Cook’s voyages, curing and preventing scurvy properly was still in its infancy. Just two decades prior, a Scottish doctor, James Lind, conducted a study aboard the HMS *Salisbury* to test the effectiveness of orange and lemon juice in curing scurvy.³⁸ His 1747 study was a success, effectively curing scurvy with the use of citrus fruits and their vitamin C. To the dismay of thousands of seamen, however, the Sick and Hurt Board, the Royal Navy’s review board overseeing medical issues in the fleet, ignored Lind’s work, and instead, still prescribed malt liquor as the default cure for scurvy.³⁹ As a result, Cook’s implementation of

³⁷ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 161.

³⁸ James Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times: Medical Aspects and Consequences of Captain Cook’s Voyages* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 144.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 145. The Sick and Hurt board is the responsible group for medical service within the Royal Navy; “Sick and Hurt Commissioners,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified June 28, 2022, 17:05, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sick_and_Hurt_Commissioners.

citrus into his men's diets was insufficient as he opted to use the recommended malt.⁴⁰ There was zero vitamin C content in the malt liquor; however, to the benefit of Cook's crew, there *is* an assortment of vitamin B. Ailments caused by vitamin B deficiency, such as swelling or paralysis of the limbs, were often confused with scurvy.⁴¹ The vitamin B from the malt cured the misdiagnosed sickness and resulted in Cook's wrongful endorsement of malt as an antiscorbutic.⁴²

While supplying vitamin B did help, Cook's application of a good diet, one full of fresh fruits and vegetables, acquired when anchored, as well as rest and cleanliness assisted the most towards his early success in keeping his crew healthy. Under the recommendations of Samuel Wallis, Captain of the HMS *Dolphin*, Cook provided his men with clean and warm clothing and cycled them through three watches to lessen stress.⁴³ Captains of the Royal Navy in the early eighteenth century typically split their men up into two watches in which fifteen men would work for four hours and then rest for four, on repeat. As a result, sailors only got four hours of sleep at a time. A regular watch aboard a Royal Navy vessel consisted of performing duties to keep the ship running, such as cleaning or managing the sails.⁴⁴ Cook's use of three watches split

⁴⁰ In Watt's *Captain James Cook and His Times: Medical Aspects and Consequences of Captain Cook's Voyages*, the mentioned recommended amount of Vitamin C is 10mg a day, however, this book was released in the late 70s. In 2022, the recommended amount for an adult male is 90mg a day, and 75mg for women; Luke Maxfield and Jonathon S. Crane, "Vitamin C Deficiency," National Library of Medicine, last modified October 12, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK493187/> [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov]; Brett J Stubbs, "Captain Cook's Beer: The Antiscorbutic use of Malt and Beer in Late 18th Century Sea Voyages," in *Asia Pacific Journal Clinical Nutrition* 12, no. 2 (2003), 130. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12810402/>.

⁴¹ Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times*, 147. Weak and sore limbs are common symptoms of scurvy.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 146. The HMS *Dolphin* (1751-1777), was a ship a part of the Royal Navy that circumnavigated the world twice; "HMS *Dolphin* (1751)," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified July 8, 2022, 06:35, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Dolphin_\(1751\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Dolphin_(1751)).

⁴⁴ "Life at Sea in the Age of Sail," Royal Museums Greenwich, last modified 2022, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/life-sea-age-sail>.

his men into groups of ten and allowed them to get eight consecutive hours of sleep.⁴⁵ Being clean and well-rested significantly reduced the amount of vitamin C the crew used.

Sadly, no amount of rest or clean clothes could protect Cook's crew from the disease-infested canals of Batavia. On the 15th of October, Cook states he "had not one man upon the Sick list, Lieut Hicks, Mr Green and Tupia were the only People that had any complaints Occasion'd by a long continuance at sea [sic]."⁴⁶ Without being able to stop and gather fresh fruits and vegetables, scurvy was extremely likely to surface. In fact, the Tupaia and Green were suffering from the effects of scurvy while Hicks had consumption.⁴⁷ James Watt, the author of "Medical Aspects and Consequences of Captain Cook's Voyages," mentions that while Cook claimed that none of his men were on the sick list prior to their arrival to Batavia, Green, Tupaia, and Hicks were sick enough to have been on it. The most notable of these three men was Tupaia. Tupaia was a native of Tahiti who joined the *Endeavour* in 1769 to assist in communication with the natives the crew came across during the following months.⁴⁸ In May of 1770, symptoms of scurvy began to show in Tupaia and continued until the *Endeavour's* arrival in Batavia. Cook specifically writes that Tupaia's want of a "Vegetable diat[sic]" led to his troubles at sea— which was scurvy.⁴⁹ Fresh fruits and vegetables relieved Tupaia of scurvy, allowing him to venture out into the city. However, after weeks of exposure to Batavia, he fell ill once more. Placed in a tent along the banks of the city, Tupaia refused all European treatments for his fever, and his life

⁴⁵ Angus, "Captain Cook's Hygiene," 1233.

⁴⁶ James Cook, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, ed. Philip Edwards (London: Penguin, 2003), 182. Cook's spelling is incorrect here. Tupaia is the correct spelling of the third man's name.

⁴⁷ Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times*, 139.

⁴⁸ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 95. Tupaia was the high priest of his island.

⁴⁹ Cook, *Journals*, 189-190.

ended bitterly while he longed for his home country.⁵⁰ Cook wrote that Batavia's "unwholesome" air led to the demise of Tupaia and many of his men soon after.⁵¹ He assumed that Tupaia's death had been a result of his previous bout of scurvy. His assumptions seem to be correct. The cause of scurvy— a lack of vitamin C, results in a weakened immune system, thus making Tupaia more susceptible to any diseases floating around in Batavia.⁵² While not knowing what diseases hid within the canals, Cook was entirely aware of the sickness that came soon after their arrival as well as the probability of infection due to interacting with the city.

Dysentery and malaria continued to plague the crew after their departure from Batavia. By December, forty men were on the sick list and many more were ill.⁵³ Conditions only continued to worsen. Joseph Banks, the *Endeavour's* naturalist, and Cook both suspected that the water they carried aboard was the blame. On the first of January 1771, Banks wrote in his personal journal of the discovery of mosquitoes in their water storage.⁵⁴ Later, on January 24th, Cook writes that the sickness that his crew was suffering from could be attributed to the water they had collected at Prince's Island, modern-day Panaitan.⁵⁵ Since Banks' discovery was prior to the *Endeavour's* arrival on Prince's Island, it's likely the mosquitoes he found were from Batavia, while the water collected from Prince's Island was already infested prior to collection. Taking steps to rid the ship of unwanted mosquitoes, Cook ordered lime to be put into the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁵¹ Ibid., 163. Beyond a simple fever, Cook's men suffered from dysentery, typhoid, malaria and tuberculosis while in Batavia.

⁵² Ibid., 189-190.

⁵³ Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times*, 139.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁵ Cook, *Journals*, 192; "Panaitan," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified September 7, 2022, 19:47, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panaitan>. The island of Panaitan is located just off the western coast of Bandung. Batavia, now known as Jakarta, is a northwestern city of Bandung.

Endeavour's water casks in order to purify the water.⁵⁶ There is no follow-up written about the condition of the ship's water after lime had been introduced, so it is unclear if Cook was successful with the purification. The death count of the crew aboard the *Endeavour*, however, continued to rise. By the time the *Endeavour* returned home to England, forty-one of the original ninety-eight men had died.⁵⁷ Most of the deaths that occurred on this voyage happened during and following the arrival to Batavia. Malaria and dysentery had taken thirty-one lives in total. Cook does not write about his feelings regarding the deaths of his men, but it should be noted that the *Endeavour* did not celebrate Christmas that year due to poor health on board.⁵⁸

Cook not only focused on the health and well-being of his own crew, but of the many Pacific natives he came across during his three voyages. Beyond typhoid and tuberculosis, venereal diseases proved to be the most difficult to control. It was no secret that sexual relations between the sailor and indigenous women occurred. Not exclusive to Cook's voyages, in the eighteenth-century Pacific, sex and women's bodies had been transformed into commodities—objects of trade when interactions between Europeans and natives occurred.⁵⁹ The crew of the *Dolphin*, a ship under the command of the previously mentioned Samuel Wallis, were extremely enthusiastic to participate in sexual commerce with the native women. The crew stole spike nails straight from the ship itself in order to trade them for sex.⁶⁰ Their exchanges were not free from physical consequences, however, as the women who slept with the *Dolphin*'s crew contracted lymphogranuloma venereum, a particular form of Chlamydia, and it's likely they contracted

⁵⁶ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁷ Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times*, 140.

⁵⁸ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 163.

⁵⁹ Vandenbossche, "Venereal Distemper," 20.

⁶⁰ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 49. Sadly, the age of these women were likely 10 to 11 years old. They were offered in trade by their male kinsmen.

gonorrhoea as well.⁶¹ Within the culture of eighteenth-century sailors, venereal diseases were not reported as often as they occurred. It's likely that embarrassment kept sailors from speaking up, but the cost of treatment also deterred those in need of aid.⁶² Syphilis was the most common sexual disease among sailors. Known at the time as "the pox," syphilis was cured by ointments containing mercury.⁶³ Beyond the treatment being wildly unpopular and painful, sailors had to pay out of their own pockets to receive care since mercury supplies were limited.⁶⁴ As a result, treatment for syphilis that failed so many sailors often occurred *after* the early stages of the disease had passed, making it much more difficult to cure.⁶⁵

Of course, Cook's worried about the spread of venereal diseases, and that worry was not misplaced. The *Endeavour's* 1770 visit to the Queen Charlotte Sound, now known as Tōtaranui, introduced venereal diseases to the Maori.⁶⁶ Upon Cook's return to the island in February of 1777, they were met by infected Maori who quickly offered trade items to the Europeans, among the items were women. Cook did not always outright detest sexual exchange between his men and native women, but he did strongly advise against it. Cook writes that he only allowed his men to participate in sexual barter because he could do nothing to prevent it.⁶⁷ Venereal disease

⁶¹ Ibid., 49. Lymphogranuloma venereum's symptoms range from blisters on the infected's genititalia to swollen and tender lymph nodes within the pelvic area; "Lymphogranuloma Venereum (LGV)," Cleveland Clinic, last modified February 4, 2022, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/22465-lymphogranuloma-venereum-lgv> [my.clevelandclinic.org].

⁶² Christopher Lloyd, Jack L.S. Coulter, and John J Keevil, *Medicine and the Navy, 1200-1900*, (E&S: Livingstone, 1961), 357.

⁶³ A.M. Sefton, "The Great Pox that was Syphilis," *Journal of Applied Microbiology*, 91, no. 4 (July 2008) <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2672.2001.01494.x>, 594.

⁶⁴ Lloyd, *Medicine and the Navy*, 357.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 313.

⁶⁷ Cook, *Journals*, 452.

spread wasn't even the only reason why Cook wished for sexual trade to cease. One instance during the second voyage in Tahiti, an officer of the *Resolution* retired to his cabin with a native girl and completely abandoned his duties. As a result, the *Resolution* crashed into a reef, causing utter chaos on deck and risking the life of Cook's ship.⁶⁸ To Cook, it was clear that sex caused more harm than good.

With an uncomfortable air surrounding venereal diseases, Cook's crew often resorted to sneaking out to participate in coitus against the orders and wishes of their Captain. Those caught were punished. John Harrison, a marine aboard Cook's third voyage snuck away from the ship in order to have sex with the women ashore. To Cook's disappointment, Harrison was later found with two native women.⁶⁹ He was returned to the ship, placed in irons, and received twenty-four lashes as a punishment. This is not the only incident of Cook's crew suffering from lashes as a punishment for their sexual promiscuity. Years prior, in 1773, men aboard the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* were found ashore with natives and were dealt with the same way Harrison was.⁷⁰

Throughout Cook's three voyages, he never recorded a *personal* sexual encounter with natives. In his journals, he denounces the women offered to him multiple times. On the island of Tongatapu in 1773, Cook and Captain Furneaux were both presented with a woman to retire with and both of the men declined.⁷¹ On the island of Tonga, in 1774, Cook is ridiculed by a native woman for his refusal of sex. In Cook's own words she is written to have sneered in his face and denounced his manhood, stating (through Cook's interpretation) "what sort of man are you thus

⁶⁸ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 193.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁷⁰ Cook, *Journals*, 287.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 307. Tongatapu is an island within the Polynesian archipelago. Cook writes that the woman offered to him and Furneaux was not ugly or old.

to refuse the embraces of so fine a young Woman.”⁷² He states right after that he “had come to a Resolution not to suffer a Woman to come on board the Ship on any pretence[sic].”⁷³ Cook held no desire to bring a woman aboard his ship nor break his own orders. Cook’s reputation among native women was soured due to his refusal of sex. They even went as far as to call him an old, good-for-nothing man. The native women were respectful of Cook but much preferred the younger officers, like Joseph Banks, who were much more open to participating in sexual trade.⁷⁴ Overall, being at sea and not participating in *any* sexual exchange is quite the feat as it was an entirely normal activity for sailors. Cook was leading by example, simply following his own orders in hopes that his crew would as well.

Not all natives Cook and his crew came across were as “promiscuous,” or open to the utilization of sex for trade as the natives of Tahiti and New Zealand were. On Cook’s third journey, in late March of 1778, the *Resolution* and *Discovery* entered the Nootka Sound off Vancouver Island.⁷⁵ In the journals of the crew, Nootka women, to the dismay of the sailors, were much more modest than the women of the Polynesian Islands they had grown all too familiar with.⁷⁶ The Nootka claimed that prostitution was not a usual aspect of their culture, especially the prostitution of kin.⁷⁷ The relations that did eventually end up occurring were with slave girls, likely captured from other tribes during wars. Interestingly, accounts of sexual exchange

⁷² Cook *Journals*, 370.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, 199.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 538.

⁷⁶ Robin Fisher, “Cook and the Nootka,” In *Captain James Cook and His Times*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 94.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 95.

happening during this visit were mostly comprised of the crew on board the *Discovery*, headed by Captain Clerke.⁷⁸

The trade of sexual diseases between sailors and natives was not always a one-way street. The natives of the Pacific had their own diseases as well. Unknown in the eighteenth century, a disease now known as yaws infected the populations of the Society Islands, an archipelago in French Polynesia.⁷⁹ Yaw's symptoms are similar to syphilis, so the disease might have been misinterpreted during Cook's visit. Precautions were taken whenever the crew encountered infectious natives on their journeys. In 1774, Cook wrote of the Tonga people plagued with a "Scrofulous disease."⁸⁰ Cook surmised it was some sort of leprous disease, ailing the infected with ulcers and the loss of their noses. Cook's crew was not clear of sickness themselves, so communication between the Tonga people and his men took extra effort to result in a successful prevention of illness.⁸¹

Cook's attention to the well-being of his crew and the natives of the Pacific is undeniable. Through implementing a different watch system on board and a proper diet, to trying his best to prevent disease communication, Cook wanted no part in causing casualties. Despite the violent punishments that commenced through Cook's orders, his motivations were earnest. On his second voyage, the discovery of a supposed southernmost continent was the goal. As a result, Cook and his men experienced poor weather conditions. Snow, ice, and wind attacked the

⁷⁸ Ibid. Clerke was not as uptight as Cook was regarding coupling between his crew and the natives.

⁷⁹ Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times*, 132; "Yaws," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified October 21, 2022, 20:27, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yaws>. Yaws is a disease commonly found in tropical climates that attacks the skin, bones and joints.

⁸⁰ Cook, *Journals*, 373. Scrofulous means to have a run-down, contaminated appearance.

⁸¹ Ibid. Cook writes that his endeavors were a success. An exchange of disease did not occur between his sailors and the natives.

Resolution, killing some of the livestock on board and giving several of his men chilblains.⁸²

After four months of dealing with less-than-optimal conditions, Cook gave up the search for a southernmost continent and set his sights back on the warmth of the Pacific Islands. He addresses the reader after documenting his decision, stating his choice was made for the wellbeing of his men.⁸³ Cook was not driven by an incessant need to discover new land for his home country, the comfort and health of his men seems to have overtaken desires of discovery.⁸⁴ Two years later, in 1775, Cook again took into consideration the state of his men when he worried that scurvy would begin to take hold of the ship while they had no provisions to cure it. Cook felt it would be cruel to continue on and respectively set his course back home after nearly five years at sea.⁸⁵

While his attention to his crew was maintained throughout his three voyages, Cook's temperament began to change after illness took him in the winter of 1773. His health declined significantly as a result, and he became lean and was plagued with vomiting.⁸⁶ His condition worsened, even more, and the next year, he developed gastrointestinal issues, severe constipation, and hiccups so violent he almost died.⁸⁷ Nothing seemed to help Cook's situation, and to aggravate his state, he developed neurological problems.⁸⁸ Cook was no longer the man he was when his journey began. Within his journal documenting his third voyage, violent outbursts

⁸² Ibid., 258. Newborn pigs were killed by the cold. A chilblain is the painful inflammation of small blood vessels on the hands and feet.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Salmond, *Cannibal Dog*. 161. In 1771, right after the *Endeavour's* arrival into Batavia, Cook proudly writes in a letter to the Admiralty in London about his achievements in keeping his crew healthy and clean. He states, "I have the satisfaction to say that I have not lost one man by sickness during the whole Voyage."

⁸⁵ Ibid., 415.

⁸⁶ Watt, *Captain James Cook and His Times*, 154.

⁸⁷ Ibid. The hiccups were evidence of an intestinal obstruction.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 155.

became more common.⁸⁹ Be it his own men or the natives his crew interacted with, Cook had lost control of his own temperament. The punishments on board were harsher than they had been before. The allowances of sailors, which he had never threatened before, began to be reduced as a disciplinary measure. Cook went so far as to order twelve lashes to be given to a man whose offense was doubtful.⁹⁰ Cook's health was less than optimal, and his already slim grasp on controlling the interactions his men and the natives had was slipping. He was unable to control his personal well-being which as a result led to his methods of control growing increasingly violent as he still clung to the idea of keeping everyone healthy.

Not only was Cook's behavior crumbling with his own men, but his interactions with natives were becoming riskier as well. Usually, Cook was cautious regarding native's feelings, but during the second voyage Cook is written to have brushed shoulders with the natives— a highly taboo act.⁹¹ Cook's rapport with his crew suffered as a result of his now erratic behavior, losing control of their actions.⁹² A man who based much of his orders around control and the curbing of inappropriate interactions between sailor and native had lost what he barely maintained.

Conclusion

Looking back at the well-placed efforts to fight the spread of all sorts of diseases that James Cook made during his three voyages is certainly admirable. It is clear that his personal interests in the health of others— in this case his crew and the Pacific natives, allowed him to achieve the best results he could get. Provided with the willingness to prevent disease spread, a

⁸⁹ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 152.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 154.

crew full of humans with natural desires, and misguided treatments, Cook did what he could. Wanting to cease the massive death tolls that plagued maritime voyages of the eighteenth-century on top of native casualties is all too understandable— even if he was not privy to the modern medicine and methods we have today.

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