

HISTORY WORKSHOP JOURNAL

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EDITORIAL

The principal theme of *History Workshop Journal* 57 is the writing and thinking of history, posed most directly in the two features – 'The Historical Imagination' and 'Braudel and Historical Time'. Both confront relationships between past and present; and both foreground the mentality of the historian – his or her philosophical approach and literary strategy. As marxism has lost its hold on the imagination of radical historians, *HWJ* has explored the philosophies and methods of history which, in the absence of older orthodoxies, inform and shape current narratives: the *Annales* tradition, psychoanalysis, discourse theory, postcolonial criticism.

'What is the mental space historians inhabit, when thinking historically?', asks Barbara Taylor. Drawing on the insights of the psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas, she suggests that it is one of solitude, of forgetting, and (in a manner reminiscent of some of Carlo Ginzburg's approaches) of archival communion with the dead. Yet if the historical imagination animates the figures and traces in the archive, then how does this imagination work? What happens in the archive, and in the writing of history? Is the reconstruction of the past – the historical narrative – the product of the interior history of the self? Or is it immanent in the historical process itself? What is the relationship between the material in the archives and the world of ideas and experience beyond? Or in the terms used by Mark Phillips, borrowing as he does from literary categories to explain the workings of historical language, how is distance created by the historian?

These are not – or not only – abstract questions. Fernand Braudel's vast study of the history of the Mediterranean was largely composed from memory, without an archive, in a prisoner-of-war camp after the defeat and occupation of France. The epidemic of shell-shock during and after the First World War led Freud to consider repetition and the death-drive – 'living in the present as if the past', in Adam Phillips's phrase describing the effects of trauma. As the First World War recedes from living memory, the anguish of the Second affects more closely the minds of historians – as Geoff Eley demonstrates in his survey of the historiography of the German Democratic Republic.

The unresolved conflict between the legacies of two twentieth-century Caribbean intellectuals, C. L. R. James and George Lamming, addressed by Bill Schwarz in his memorial lecture for Raphael Samuel, printed here, poses questions about historical consciousness immanent in both memory and the historical process itself. James was an unapologetic Hegelian marxist. (And James's account of Toussaint L'Ouverture bears an uncanny resemblance to the heroic mythology of Garibaldi which Daniel Pick excavates in the opening article. For Garibaldi universal truth was to be found in revolution, in the identity of the nation, and in the passions of the

romantic hero.) Lamming strove to understand historical consciousness in less heroic – more everyday – terms. His haunting phrase, 'We have met before', signals above all the collision of memories, and the resolute drive to forget which is embodied in the postcolonial moment.

The questions, though, remain. Where is the past located? What is it that the historical imagination seeks to retrieve? What kind of endeavour has the capacity to recover the ruins of time which characterize our epoch?

Sally Alexander
Bill Schwarz

Fascinating.

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HISTORY AT LARGE

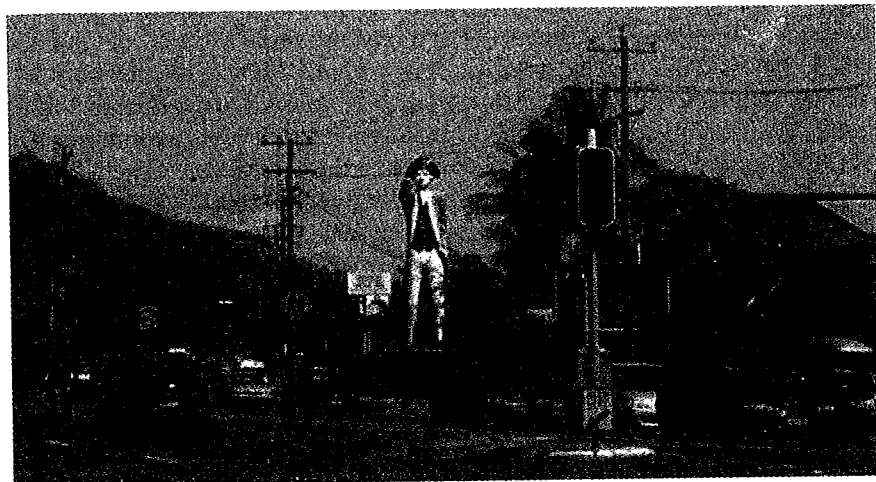


Photo: Kim McKenzie

A papier maché statue adorns the Captain Cook Backpackers Hostel in Cairns.

Sailing on *The Ship*: Re-enactment and the Quest for Popular History *by Alexander Cook*

During the European summer of 2001, the BBC sent a film crew, a group of volunteers and six historians, to the South Pacific to make a documentary series about the voyages of Captain Cook. We spent six weeks retracing Cook's route up the north-east coast of Australia and through the Indonesian archipelago in a replica of Cook's vessel, the *Endeavour*. The objective, in the words of the Director, was 'to tell the story of two voyages – of Cook's and of our own'. In doing so he hoped to make a series of films that would offer insight into two worlds and into the links between them. The resulting series, *The Ship*, was screened one year later on BBC2, and modified versions have been recently shown in the USA and Australia. It met with a mixed, though largely generous, reception. This article is about the experience of participating in that project, and about some of the broader issues it raised with regard to the practice of public history.

The Ship was an ambitious enterprise for the BBC. It was intended to be an innovation – a composite genre that would serve both as a historical documentary about Cook and an observational series about a group of modern sailors thrown together in adverse circumstances. The hope was

that each would shed light on the other. The danger was that the two would pull in different directions. The Director was a visual anthropologist whose primary qualifications for the role consisted of a series about a modern British warship, filmed during the Balkan crisis, and a series about life in a women's prison. I suspect our adventure seemed a fusion of the two.

The scholars on board were a motley bunch: a maritime historian, several cultural historians and an anthropologist. All of us had interests of various kinds in Cook and in the European exploration of the Pacific. None of us had any real experience of sailing. There was also a botanist, a botanical artist, an astronomer, and a team of navigators as well as a small professional crew and a team of volunteers. The experts were there to shed light on aspects of the original voyage that fell within their area of competence. They were also there to haul ropes, hoist sails and lay anchors. The historians in particular were destined for a taste of life as an able seaman. It would be good for our scholarship, it was felt, to experience the voyage through the eyes of a Jack-Tar.

For many participants it was purely and simply the adventure of a lifetime. Some were sailing enthusiasts for whom the opportunity to travel on an eighteenth-century square-rigger was a dream come true. Others, like myself, had no experience of sailing but had developed a sentimental interest in life on the waves. All of us appreciated the chance to explore some of the most beautiful and remote parts of the world from this unique vantage point.

There were challenges as well as rewards. Some of these related to the rigours of life at sea. Academics are perhaps particularly badly adapted to a life of routine and discipline, and it was a struggle to embrace the physical demands of sailing a vessel designed at a time when labour was cheap and plentiful – especially when attempting to juggle those demands with the research and reflection necessary for us to perform our professional function. Did you know that it takes fifty people four hours of concerted labour to weigh anchor and set sail in a Georgian barque? Neither did I. The historians' office was the petty officer's cabin, a cosy space with a five-foot ceiling in which we squatted on sails to read books and write in our journals in the intervals between tacking ship. It was not without envy that we gazed at the botanists and navigators with their diagrams laid out in the great cabin above us. It gave an unusually literal meaning to the concept of 'history from below'.

The horrors of an eighteenth-century maritime diet (albeit supplemented with vitamin pills and mouldy fruit) were a trial for the whole crew. Seven teeth were broken on the ship's biscuits alone, a delightful staple of wholemeal flour and water, lovingly prepared in Australian prisons and slowly baked for three days. The main sources of nutrients were salt-beef slop and salt-pork slop, served hot at lunchtime and tepid for dinner. The sleeping arrangements consisted of forty filthy bodies tossing on the mess deck in tropical heat, sharing their quarters with an industrial wood-stove

that was used to prepare our meals. The washing arrangements were a bucket of salt water over the head at dawn, watched by the ever-wakeful eye of the camera. While the BBC indubitably had sound motives for denying us our rightful alcohol ration (eight pints of beer a day or a half pint of rum), this proved a further test of the morale and endurance of the crew. Alcohol was unquestionably the primary preventative against mutiny in the Georgian navy. It functioned as antiseptic, analgesic and entertainment. It was a much-lamented absence on our voyage. Faced with our myriad complaints, the resident maritime historian, Andrew Lambert, assured us that, contrary to popular belief, life at sea was a good option for a young man of few prospects in the eighteenth century – good diet, good shelter, a paternal institution etc. That claim alone provided much to think about.

I highlight these conditions merely to give a flavour of life on board. It is not my intention to play the ancient mariner, recounting the horrors of the voyage to anyone who will listen. For one thing, as an experience, the compensations far outweighed the hardships. Secondly, there were other, more substantial challenges involved in our project. It is these that I wish to discuss.

For Australians such as myself, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to study the Cook voyages without emotional attachment. They lie at the core of our national mythology and the issues they raise have ongoing practical relevance. Cook himself tends to be either glorified or demonized. Depending on your perspective, he is a great contributor to human knowledge or an advance party for an invasion force. Disputes rage concerning Cook's personal vices and virtues as well as the extent to which the subsequent history of settlement was implicit in the moment of first contact. These disputes were not settled by our voyage. Indeed, our crew remained divided in its attitudes to the man and his legacy.

Personally, I have always felt uncomfortable with veneration of Cook. He was a brilliant navigator, a talented cartographer and a relatively humane captain by the standards of his time. He was, on occasion, an acute observer of social relations amongst the peoples he encountered. He was ambivalent about his own role in furthering European exploitation of the Pacific, and it is clearly unjust to hold him responsible for all that followed in his wake. Yet, even in Cook's time, the history of European exploration was a story of commercial ambition as much as of scientific curiosity. Those first encounters were also not exempt from the violence that would later mark the process of white settlement in the region. If Cook was not the embryo for all that came after him, he was indubitably linked to that broader process, and it is one that has had mixed blessings for the prior inhabitants of the region. For these reasons, it is a challenge to present the story of Cook's expeditions to the general public with sensitivity and justice.

We were fortunate to have on board our ship two Murri (Queensland Aboriginal) crewmembers – Bruce and Ricoh. We also met with tribal

elders in Cooktown and Pajinka. Collectively, they helped to smooth our passage with the recently reinstated traditional landowners of North Queensland. They also offered some fascinating insights into what Cook means to the original population of Australia. More generally, they gave us a small window into life as an indigenous Australian – both traditionally and today. In doing so, they helped to focus our attention on some of the broader historical implications of the Cook voyages.

As we travelled up the Australian coast, it was fascinating to compare the landscape with that described by Cook and Banks more than 230 years ago. We saw Cook's legacy in the miles of cane-fields near Cairns, where indentured workers from around the Pacific were imported to produce sugar for the white man's table. Today they are worked by impoverished farmers who struggle to make ends meet. We saw Cook's legacy in the silica mines which dot the coast. It was Joseph Banks's discerning eye, the epitome of the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, which first saw the industrial potential of these endless miles of white sand beaches. We saw Cook's legacy in the tourist resorts that continue to grow on the coral islets that so terrified the crew of the *Endeavour*, and in the towns that harbour fishing fleets and serve the pastoral industry of the interior. In all the signs of modern Australia it seemed possible to discern the impact of that one voyage.

Yet in this remote environment, it was striking how much remained unaltered from Cook's time to our own. The rainforests and mangrove swamps, the empty beaches and the myriad coral reefs seemed largely untouched by the generations of labour that had gone into building the Australian nation. Here it seemed possible to see the country almost as Cook's crew saw it. Much of the flora stands as recorded in Banks's journal. The marine and bird life that followed the boat matched that observed by the *Endeavour's* men. The distant smoke from farmers clearing land seemed strangely reminiscent of the signal fires that followed the original ship's progress north. It was an eerie experience. For perhaps the first time, I felt I understood just how strange and threatening this environment must have seemed to sailors raised in Portsmouth, Plymouth and the London docks. For all its beauty, it is no wonder that it seemed the end of the earth to those who would later use it as a refuse dump for criminals – and to the criminals themselves who would become my founding fathers.

Australia was never a wilderness, of course, or at least not for the past 60,000 years. Indeed, scholars are only just beginning to realize how profoundly the first waves of human settlement transformed the landscape. What Cook and his successors viewed as a vacant land waiting to be tamed by the hand of industry was in fact a carefully-maintained ecosystem, cleared by the use of fire and managed by controlled hunting. When we spoke with our Murri crewmen about the history of this process it was clear that many of the techniques are still relevant. Indeed, it was encouraging to see that local authorities are increasingly consulting traditional landowners

about strategies for environmental management. The use of selective burning to minimize the devastation caused by bushfires is just one trick immigrant Australians have learnt from their indigenous brethren.

A striking feature of all our contacts with the indigenous communities of the far north was their cultural and social vitality. While the problems of poverty are present there as elsewhere among the Murri and Curri population, there was impressive evidence of a dual determination to reclaim a culture that was almost lost and to build a future for themselves in modern Australia. In a strange historical twist, the carefully-compiled records of Cook's voyage were assisting them with both tasks. In Cooktown, for example, the Gogo-Yimidir people were using accounts from the 1770 voyage to demonstrate their historical presence in the region in order to reclaim land from the Crown under Native Title legislation. Similarly, vocabularies compiled by Cook's artist, Sydney Parkinson, were being used to reconstruct a local language that was nearly lost during 130 years of dispersion. It was fascinating to see the contemporary relevance of these antique documents. In a strange way, it confirmed my own interest in this history.

Above all, as we spoke with the tribal elders of the far North, I was amazed by the conciliatory attitude of a population who have suffered enormously and continue to suffer. There was little interest in the vilification of Cook, and a surprising interest in the skills and technology that made possible his feats of seamanship. Our ship was a constant source of delight and people were eager to hear our theatrical tales of deprivation and despair. For most of those we met, as for me, our presence in that remote part of the country seemed a small opportunity for reconciliation – a chance to come to terms with our shared history and, in doing so, to move on.

As we sailed onwards, past New Guinea and into Indonesia, we were given a greater taste of the excitement and anxiety Cook's men must have experienced as they explored an alien world. Stopping at Savu, a small island off the coast of Timor, we encountered a society almost completely unaffected by tourist development. The consequences of globalization could be seen here and there, primarily in the presence of Toyota vans and in an increasingly-specialized agricultural production that had led to dependence on basic foodstuffs imported from Timor. While the latter may be the result of a natural increase in the division of labour, it is probably also a result of an eighteenth-century campaign for crop specialization in the East Indies, promoted cynically by the Dutch to promote dependence on the colonial administration. Despite these important changes, Savu remained surprisingly traditional in its culture and outlook – especially given its proximity to major tourist developments in Bali and Lombok. There was one European living on the island, just as there had been when Cook landed there in 1770. Once again it was a German missionary, and once again he acted as an intermediary between our crew and the local populace. The people were surprised and excited to see us, very

welcoming, and very interested in trade. For our part, we were equally delighted to set foot on land after more than three weeks at sea. When Cook had passed this way 200 years before, he had attempted to avoid landing at Savu in anxiety to rush onwards to Batavia and to avoid unnecessary entanglement with the Dutch. For him, as for us, however, the temptation to gather fresh provisions was too great, and pressure from the crew prevented the Captain from pursuing his first instincts. Joseph Banks recorded in lascivious detail the variety and flavour of tropical fruits to be procured on the island, and our botanist and one of the historians launched a campaign to reproduce this catalogue of delights for the BBC. We passed two days at Savu, sending parties ashore to explore, to trade and, above all, to eat. The last substantial influx of non-Indonesian visitors, it seems, was the crew of a replica of *H.M.S. Bounty* (another neo-Georgian tall ship) that had visited the island several years previously. One wonders how the locals imagine Europeans spend their time . . .

There has been a boom in recent years in a form of television documentary known as 're-enactment history'. The genre is typified by productions such as *World War 2 House*, *Frontier House*, *Iron-Age Fort* etc. These productions, have, on the whole, been an impressive popular success. Their premise is that the exposure of modern volunteers to a now-extinct manner of life will allow both the participants and the audience to gain a better understanding of what life was 'really like' for ordinary people during the period in question. Now it is clear that, at a certain level, this premise suffers deep epistemological flaws. Even assuming that one was able to recreate precisely the conditions of material life in, for example, classical Sparta, there is no way that one can possibly adopt the mental world of the Spartan citizen or the helot (the latter being a more likely goal given the sadistic undertones permeating the conception of many of these programmes). While there is indubitable fascination, and indeed instruction, available from watching the modern laboratory rats squirming under the microscope, the danger is that we end up misrepresenting the past by implying that it is so easy to recapture. As the Australian historian Greg Denning has put it: 're-enactments tend to hallucinate a past as merely the present in funny dress'.¹ We were fortunately spared the humiliation of sailor's breeches and powdered wigs, yet it did feel at times that there was something unreal in the experience, and there was an occasional risk of reducing the historical investigation to a facile exercise in inter-temporal comparison: they liked salt pork/ we like hamburgers; they shot natives/ we shared welcome ceremonies . . .

All of the historians who participated in the project had reservations about this. Any pretence to an isolation experiment was further undermined by the fact that we were in a mobile laboratory passing through a world that would not give us space. Not only were we meeting with outsiders and exploring the modern world we voyaged through, people were smuggling contraband sweets on board and generally puncturing any genuine attempts at authenticity.

Despite all this, it was difficult for me not to feel that I *did* gain greater insight into life for Cook and his men through the experience. As we pored through the journals, they *did* seem more vivid in this recreated space. I certainly believe that I have a greater understanding of several aspects of the Cook voyages as a result of the voyage. My feeling for the mechanics of life on a tall ship, and of the division of labour and power that results, was revolutionized during those six weeks. Keeping a regular journal encouraged reflection on the objectives and psychology of travel narration. Together these permitted me a much more sensitive reading of the historical record than I had previously managed. I relished the encounter with the landscape described at such length by Cook and Banks. The changes and the continuities proved equally fertile in this regard, encouraging meditation on the long-term achievements of the voyage – both positive and negative. It is doubtless a conceit for historians to believe they can, as R. G. Collingwood suggested, enter the mind of historical figures and 're-enact past experience' to recapture a world that is lost.² At the same time, the writing of history does involve, at least at some level, the attempt to reconstruct the *mentalités* of the past – to enter as an ethnographer into a different cultural milieu. Perhaps an understanding of the physical spaces in which history has been made can assist with the interpretation of its written remains.

The experience of retracing Cook's route in this replica vessel definitely gave all the participants a heightened awareness of the strangeness of both the past and the present. Indeed, in some ways it was the present that was thrown into sharpest relief. The extreme isolation of the voyage and the lack of communication with the outside world gave us an acute consciousness of our everyday dependence upon modern communication. Our voyage coincided with the terrorist attacks upon the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. We were informed of these. We had Americans on board, some from New York, so it would have been irresponsible not to tell us. Yet after the initial announcement, our information was limited to the barest essentials. While the rest of the world was saturated with news and images in the subsequent weeks, we were largely left to work with rumour and speculation about the world to which we would return. When we finally reached our destination, four weeks after the attacks, we were probably amongst the last people on the planet to see the video footage. It was a deeply discomfiting experience. When I read over my journal from those weeks, I remember just how much anxiety was generated amongst the whole crew. More than a few doubts were expressed about the utility of continuing to mess about at sea while the world was in such an uncertain state. But we continued, and all of us, I think, in the end were glad that we had.

Few participants in the voyage would question its value as a personal experience. Even the most sceptical of the accompanying historians would acknowledge its potential value as a stimulus for informed historical

research, if its limitations are kept in mind. Yet how did the programme work as public history? To my mind it had a mixed success. There can be no doubt that the programme attracted a proportion of its audience because of the 'docussoap' element. In so far as this helps to introduce history to new social groups, this can only be a good thing. As an observational film, *The Ship* also offered an interesting depiction of the ongoing human relationship with history – a relationship capable of producing the most irrational action (what could be more irrational than wantonly subjecting yourself to such conditions for six weeks in the name of research?), and the most pugnacious determination.

At times, however, the historical component of the programme risked being derailed by the 'human interest' story. The camera has a natural love for melodrama that tended to displace the depiction of daily life or the narration of history in favour of emotional highpoints such as the physical collapse of crew-members or the events of 11 September. While these events did offer interesting opportunities for reflection on the issues of the Cook voyages – from diet to empire to globalization – there was a danger that such reflection might become forced or fatuous if it was handled carelessly. The final programme was also accompanied by a body of soft-focus re-enactment footage that tended to blur the line between past and present, between history and imagination, to a much greater extent than the simple act of retracing Cook's path could ever achieve.

The final result, to my mind, was interesting but problematic. In paying such attention to the contemporary relevance of Cook's legacy, and to the politics and psychology of historical investigation, *The Ship* touched on novel territory in television history. In mobilizing such resources to the task of historical narration it demonstrated the BBC's commitment to developing ambitious and innovative programming aimed at new audiences in a sector that can easily become overly dependent on familiar talking heads and on established methods and markets. The series also did a sound job of presenting the complexities of Cook's achievement and legacy without resorting to the modes of eulogy or exposé. As a model for future projects, however, the framework and objectives of *The Ship* would benefit from refinement. In particular, the nature of the hermeneutic relationship between past and present – the extent to which each is to be mobilized to inform the other – must be more clearly conceptualized.

In the end, *The Ship* seemed to be as much a story about our engagement with history as it was a story about history itself. It was a series about the way in which history continues to inspire us and to nag at us, and the way it continues to shape our lives. To appropriate one of the maritime metaphors that saturated my thoughts during the project, it presented the study of history as a voyage of exploration. It is rarely easy and it is often uncomfortable, but it can leave us richer for the endeavour.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Thanks are due to the BBC for permission to adapt some of the text for this article from a piece I wrote for the internet site dedicated to 'The Ship'. Further information can be obtained at www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/theship

1 Greg Denning, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 4-5.

2 See R. G. Collingwood's 1946 'Epilegomena' to *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 282-3.