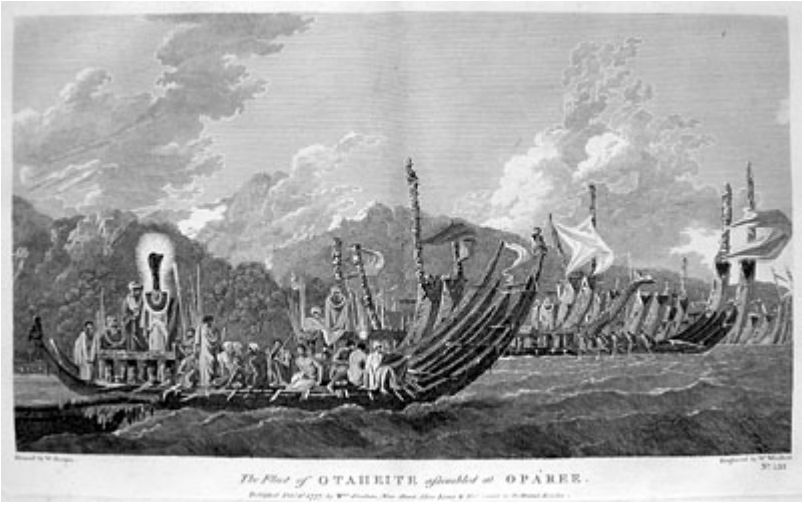
A Radical Intellectual with Captain Cook: George Forster’s world voyage



On April 26, 1774, George Forster set out in a small boat together with his father Johann Reinhold Forster, Captain James Cook, and a few other travelers from Matavai Bay, Tahiti, to the neighboring bay of Pare in order to recover some waistcoats and blankets stolen from the captain. They beheld an astonishing sight: a fleet of Tahitian warships, finely crafted double canoes “from fifty to ninety feet long” that were held together by fifteen to eighteen transverse beams. George Forster counted at least 159 of these canoes and at least 144 rowers on the largest ships plus eight men to steer them. Towhah, the “admiral” of the fleet, wore a turban and had five long tails of green and yellow feathers, interspersed with red, streaming down his back. This fleet, representing one small district on the island, was assembled for a campaign against the neighboring island of Eimeo (Moorea). It was a rare moment of opportunity for capturing a Pacific island culture in writing: Cook was leading his second circumnavigation and from his previous voyage had some knowledge of Tahitian language and politics; Tahiti still showed off its full splendor, undiminished by European weapons and disease; and George Forster and his father were observers as skilled as any Europe could have sent to comment on the encounter. This was just one small incident in a journey that took the Forsters around the world. On their return the young traveler wrote an account of the voyage that memorialized its achievements and its moral ambiguities. In the annals of travel literature few books make for more satisfying reading than this richly detailed and reflective record of their experiences on this expedition, which was one of the crowning achievements of the European Enlightenment.

George Forster’s unusual upbringing suited him for the role of witness to this new world. His father, born in a small town near Danzig in 1729, received his secondary education in Frederick the Great’s Berlin, studied theology at the University of Halle, and served as a parish minister in the small town of

Nassenhuben near Danzig, where his eldest son George (Johann George Adam) was born on November 27, 1754. The elder Forster was a restless intellectual. In March 1765 he left the ministry and went to Russia at the request of Catherine the Great to investigate the condition of the German peasants she had settled on the Volga River. In search of employment for his growing family he next went to England in 1766 and taught at Warrington Academy, a boys' school and gathering place of radical Dissenters. George Forster grew up in radical Enlightenment circles, his education largely in the hands of his father, a virtuoso at everything from languages to science.

When Johann Reinhold was invited in mid-1772 to join Cook's second voyage of discovery as its official naturalist, he accepted with the understanding that George would serve as his assistant. George was not yet eighteen when the *Resolution*, the flagship including the Forsters, and its companion ship the *Adventure* departed on July 13, 1772. An intellectual prodigy in his own right, he was imbued with Enlightenment ideas of humanity's universal dignity and brotherhood. His intellectual powers were fully equal to the challenges of helping his father gather plant specimens and linguistic vocabularies. The emotional stress of the voyage was another matter. Johann Reinhold was a notoriously peevish man who was soon disliked by the sailors and even wore out the patience of the phlegmatic Cook, leaving George in the difficult role of onlooker and mediator. The sailors seriously shook George's faith in human decency: their swearing, readiness to fire on natives, disrespect for his and his father's work, and sexual excesses in places like Tahiti and New Zealand disturbed him as much as anything he observed among Pacific islanders. He was appalled to watch them insist on getting drunk on Christmas Day, 1773, while the ship was weaving its way through Antarctic ice floes, any one of which could have destroyed the ship: "As long as they had brandy left, they would persist to keep Christmas 'like Christians,' though the elements had conspired together for their destruction." But he also sympathized with them as the victims of physical hardship and harsh command who for all their roughness were "brave, sincere, and true to each other."

Fig. 1. "The Fleet of Otaheite Assembled at Oparee." Plate 61, painted by W. Hodges and engraved by W. Woolett in Plates for Cook's 2nd Voyage, 1772-75, by James Cook (London, 1780). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The expedition was supposed to sail as far as it could toward the South Pole, but Cook also had broad license to revisit known lands and seek out new ones in the South Pacific. George Forster was able to visit Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia, Easter Island, the Marquesas Islands, the Tongan Islands, and Vanuatu, to give only an incomplete list of the voyage stops. He argued in the introduction to his voyage account that a mere chronicle was meaningless; a narrative worthy of the name had to use its observations to test general principles. George made good on this proposition by looking for the natural

goodness of man wherever he went; he was surprised again and again by the diversity of “natural” societies. The expedition visited Polynesian peoples from New Zealand to Easter Island, across a vast stretch of the Pacific, who shared a common culture and spoke related languages, yet had differing political institutions that George was particularly keen to fathom.

Tahiti appeared at first to be an egalitarian society, a place of plentiful food and mutual respect, but on happening on an obese man of rank who was being stuffed with food by his servants and did not take the trouble to extend the usual Tahitian hospitality, George became aware that it was in fact highly hierarchical. Spinning out his philosophical reflections, he imagined a Tahitian historical cycle that went from rude simplicity and equality to aristocratic decadence ending in revolution. Marquesan Islanders, he remarked on the *Resolution*’s stay in mid-April 1774, could not compare with Tahitians for material possessions but kept closer to their original equality: “The great sources of Taheitian affluence and luxury, their profusion of food, and their vast variety and quantity of cloth, do not exist in the Marquesas: but the inhabitants have a competence; they are all equal among themselves; they are active, very healthy, and beautifully made; there is nothing which can make them unhappy, by debarring them the means of obeying nature’s voice.” Perhaps “nature’s voice” referred to the extravagant erotic culture of the Marquesas, but more likely the rather puritanical George had in mind a political point: his contrast of Tahitian luxury and Marquesan simplicity was a barely disguised attack on decadent aristocrats at home. To explain the differences between Tahitians and Marquesans he used materialist explanations that belittled privilege and preserved his belief in human goodness.


Fig. 2. “Man of New Zealand.” Plate 55, drawn by W. Hodges and engraved by Michel in Plates for Cook’s 2nd Voyage, 1772-75. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The voyage was a glorious success, and the Forsters did their work well, gathering materials for George’s narrative and for his father’s *Observations Made During A Voyage Round the World* (1778), which according to Richard Grove became an important model of natural history for scientists and colonial administrators. On their return to England in 1775, they should have been able to look forward to honor and material security. Instead Johann Reinhold quarreled with the voyage’s patron, the earl of Sandwich, until he was debarred from writing the official voyage account. The prohibition did not extend to George, however, who wrote away month after month in the hope that his account (probably written in collaboration with his father) would appear before Cook’s and rescue the family from financial ruin. *A Voyage Round the World*, first published in English in 1777, came to 675 pages of narrative in the complete edition of George Forster’s works. Robert L. Kahn, the volume editor, lists a German translation that appeared the next year and French, Russian, Swedish,

and Spanish excerpts that appeared soon after. It turned out not to be the moneymaker that father and son counted on (for one thing it lacked pictures, whereas Cook's rival volume had lavish, at times strange and beautiful engravings) but it did make them celebrities to educated Germans. George was awarded an academic job in Kassel in 1778, accepted a professorship in natural history at the University of Vilna in 1784, and finally took up a post as librarian to the elector of Mainz in 1788. He impressed rulers and intellectuals alike: Joseph II of Austria allowed George to dedicate a book to him; Catherine the Great of Russia offered him a professorship in St. Petersburg; the young Alexander von Humboldt made his journeyman voyage, so to speak, on a Rhineland tour with him. He broke with his tyrannical father and began an unhappy marriage to Therese Heyne, daughter of a powerful professor whose influence eased his career.

After Forster's return to Germany his views of non-European peoples became more detached from his travel experiences. By 1787, when he finished writing his essay on "Cook the Discoverer," he had shifted from a warm defense of his former hosts and (as he imagined the relationship) friends on Pacific islands, whose spontaneous goodness and civility often surpassed that of Europeans, to a belief in the superiority of European ideals and institutions. Cook figures in this essay as the hero who combines courage and intelligence to bring enlightenment to the farthest reaches of the earth. Although well received at the time, it loses the tension between general principle and historical particularity of his travel narrative; instead a dogmatic application of principle prevails. A radicalization of his politics took place too, although this may have been a sudden conversion experience under the impact of revolutionary events. Forster was a respectable man of learning when the troops of the French Revolution spilled over into the Rhineland and occupied the territory of the elector of Mainz. By late 1792 he was an active revolutionary serving in France's provisional government; on March 25, 1793, he left for Paris as a deputy of the revolutionary government. He was alone, disowned by his wife, his father, and most German intellectuals. Disheartened by the Terror, he died of a lung ailment in the French capital on January 10, 1794.

Little remained of his reputation. While never forgotten, he represented a cosmopolitan, revolutionary Germany that was already becoming an embarrassment to his contemporaries. The rulers of the German states were horrified by the regicide and democratic revolution emanating from Paris, and after 1800 many German intellectuals, too, reacted to the revolutionary politics of their time by turning in a conservative, nationalist direction. In particular German literature and German history took shape in nineteenth-century universities as conservative disciplines that were unreceptive to a world traveler and political radical. George Forster's revolutionary end made him appealing in the German Democratic Republic, where a critical edition of his works appeared; but only in recent years has there been a renewed appreciation of his significance as a global traveler and writer.

Further Reading:

For George Forster's biography, Michael E. Hoare, *The Tactless Philosopher: Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-98)* (Melbourne, 1976) is the best starting point; it offers a vivid portrait of George Forster's life as well as his father's. Alfred Dove, "Georg Forster," in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, 7 (1877; Berlin, 1968): 172-81, is a sympathetic factual account; Ulrich Enzensberger, *Georg Forster: Ein Leben in Scherben* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), contains a mosaic of sources and commentary that evoke this haunted, tragic life. For Forster's voyage account, readers can turn to two outstanding editions. *A Voyage Round the World*, vol. 1 of Georg Forster, *Werke*, ed. Gerhard Steiner, (1777; Berlin, 1968), includes generous quotes from letters and reviews as well as a "History of the Work." George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Oliver Berghof, assist. Jennifer Newell, 2 vols. (Honolulu, 2002), includes commentary that sets it in the context of recent Pacific scholarship. Forster's account can be compared with Cook's observations in the richly informative edition, *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure*, vol. 2 of *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery*, ed. J.C. Beaglehole, Hakluyt Society, extra series, 35 (Cambridge, 1961). Forster's essay, "Cook der Entdecker," is reprinted in his *Werke*, 5: *Kleine Schriften zur Völker- und Länderkunde*, ed. by Horst Fiedler, Klaus-Georg Popp, Annerose Schneider, and Christian Suckow (Berlin, 1985). For the ambivalent reception of George Forster's work, see Helmut Peitsch, "Round-trips from the Inside to the Outside: The Changing Places of Georg Forster's Travelogues in the German Literary Canon from 1797 to 1989," *Carleton Germanic Papers* (Ottawa, Canada), 24 (1986): 17-35. Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge, 1995), sets the Forsters in the wider context of European scientific and administrative analysis of overseas colonies.

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