

# James Mario Matra: Voyager with Cook



*Australia in relation to the East Indies and the Pacific coastlines*

James Mario Matra was born James, the son of James and Elizabeth Magra, in New York in 1746. His father was a member of the prominent Corsican Matra family, which was much involved in the conflict that wracked that island in the eighteenth century. The elder James Matra went to Ireland, seemingly in the early 1730s, where he changed his name, and where he presumably acquired his medical knowledge.

In company with the fellow doctors John Brett and Thomas Rodman, James Magra migrated to New York sometime towards the end of the 1730s. At first, he “kept school”; but about 1740 he was licensed to practice medicine. According to contemporary accounts, he was a person of “austere manners and original views,” and in time he gained a very considerable reputation, becoming a doctor preferred by prominent citizens. With the income from his practice and by astute investments, Matra acquired considerable wealth. In reporting his death on April 13, 1774, the *New York Gazetteer* described him as “a gentleman of great learning and a physician of the most exalted eminence, which has been experienced by many thousands upon the American Continent.”

The Magras had three sons: Redmond, born about 1738; James; and Perkins, born a year or two after James. Redmond seems to have been an unprincipled adventurer who traded illegally with Native Americans, was cashiered from his regiment,

and served at least one period in jail. Perkins too joined the British army, in which he had a long, if not particularly distinguished, career. Between 1791 and 1804, he was consul at Tunis.

The details of the early life of James Magra the Younger are obscure. One of his friends recorded that he was educated in England, but where and when remain unknown. He first appears in history on May 1, 1761, towards the end of the Seven Years' War, when he joined the *Fowey* (24 guns and 160 men) at New York, in the capacity of captain's servant. Under the command of Captain George Tonyn, this ship escorted a convoy to England in May and June.

Magra then followed Tonyn into the *Brune* (32 guns and 220 men). For the next two years, he saw service in the English Channel, off the coasts of Spain and Portugal, and in the Mediterranean.

On the concluding of peace, Magra returned to New York, where in July 1764 he joined the *Hawke* sloop (10 guns and 80 men) as a midshipman. For the next twenty-four months, he saw mundane service off the east coast. In September 1766 he joined the *Coventry* as an able-bodied seaman (AB), sailing to Spithead at the end of 1767. After being paid off in February 1768, he went to Dublin, where he joined the *Rose*, from which he was discharged at his own request in London on July 17. One week later (July 25, 1768), Magra signed as AB on the *Endeavour*, then about to depart under the command of Lieutenant James Cook on a voyage to the Pacific Ocean. On board also were the botanists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, who were to influence significantly the course of European science; and the astronomer Charles Green, whom Cook was to assist in observing the transit of Venus due to occur on June 3, 1769, from the newly discovered island of Tahiti.



*Australia in relation to the East Indies and the Pacific coastlines*

Fig. 1. In framing his proposal for a settlement on the coast of New South Wales, Matra conceived of the world in a way that was impossible to Europeans

before Cook's voyages: with Australia in the Pacific at its center. With permission of the author.

*Endeavour* left Portsmouth on August 26, 1768. After refreshing at Rio de Janeiro, Cook took it south about Cape Horn, west into the Pacific, then northwest through the Tuamotu Archipelago to Tahiti, which he reached in mid-April. For the next twelve weeks, the Europeans familiarized themselves with the island, being greatly struck by its fertility and the inhabitants' overt sexuality. Cook and Charles Green duly observed the transit of Venus across the face of the sun; and Banks and Solander botanized enthusiastically.

On July 13, Cook took the *Endeavour* out to sea again. Pursuing his additional secret instructions, he searched for the supposed *Terra Australis Incognita* in the southern Pacific Ocean without success. He reached New Zealand at the beginning of October. For the next six months, he circumnavigated the two large islands, charting their coasts diligently. Then, deciding that the ship was too worn to withstand a winter passage east past Cape Horn, he struck northwest for the unknown eastern coast of New Holland, which he reached on April 19. Proceeding north, Cook spent a week in Botany Bay (about twelve miles to the south of the present Sydney), where Banks and Solander began to understand the uniqueness of Australian biota.

After the ship had run upon a coral reef, Cook spent some weeks repairing it (at the present Cooktown, in Far North Queensland). On August 23, 1770, he took possession for Britain of all the coast, which he named New South Wales. Passing west through Torres Strait, he reached Batavia at the beginning of October, where many of his crew sickened and died. Crossing the Indian Ocean and going up the Atlantic Ocean, the *Endeavour* reached England again in mid-July 1771.

The records of the voyage are mostly silent about Matra. Years later, in the aftermath of the *Bounty* mutiny, he claimed that at Tahiti he had both dissuaded some of the crew from a similar rebellion, and hatched such a scheme himself: "Something like what Bligh's People did, was designed by most of the People of the *Endeavour* . . . They were for remaining—which in truth prevented 2 or 3 gentlemen from doing so. When the Scheme was discovered, the only successful Argument against it was the Pox—the disease being there, their getting it certain & dying rotten most probable, was what I insisted on, & it turned the Scale, otherwise Cook with the two superior Messes, must have found his way home, had the Ship been spared. Had the Men not formed such a Scheme, I was ringleader among a few who had prepared for remaining." However, Matra was prone to self-aggrandizement, and we have only his word that these plots were laid.

The only moment when Matra figures in Cook's journal concerns a strange happening off the eastern coast of New South Wales. Cook recorded for May 23, 1770:

Last Night some time in the Middle watch a very extraordinary affair happend to Mr Orton my Clerk, he having been drinking in the Evening, some Malicious person or persons in the Ship took the advantage of his being drunk and cut off all the cloaths from off his back, not being satisfied with this they some time after went into his Cabbin and cut off a part of both his Ears as he lay asleep in his bed. The person whome he suspected to have done this was Mr Magra one of the Midshipmen, but this did not appear to me upon inquirey. However as I know'd Magra had once or twice before this in their drunken frolicks cut of his Cloaths and had been heard to say (as I was told) that if it was not for the Law he would Murder him, these things consider'd induc'd me to think that Magra was not altogether innocent. I therefore, for the present dismiss'd him the quarter deck and sussed him for doing any duty in the Ship, he being one of those gentlemen, frequently found on board Kings Ships, that can very well be spared, or to speake more planer good for nothing.

Cook was unable to discover who the true culprit was, however, and on June 14, not finding Magra "guilty of the crimes laid to his Charge," returned him to duty.

Historians have long suspected Magra as being the author of the first extended account of the *Endeavour's* voyage, published anonymously at the end of September 1771 in contravention of the Admiralty's ban. With more information now available about the New Yorker, it is safe to conclude that this was so.

*A Journal of a Voyage round the World* shows that the author had developed interests in languages and non-European cultures and in medical and scientific matters, and was able to write both fluently and vividly. The narrative was clearly put together hastily, and its coverage of the voyage is uneven. (For example, it offers very little details of the ship's progress north from Botany Bay to the near-fatal accident on the reef, or for the rest of the voyage.) However, it is one of the very few accounts to show any animus towards Cook; and it also offers some information not present in the more substantial records—of a quarrel between officers at Tahiti; of encounters with the Australian Aborigines; and of a dangerous moment off the coast of New Zealand:

The next morning we made sail, but the tide soon after carried us rapidly towards a cluster of rocks, projecting from an island at a small distance, and the wind failing, our situation became justly alarming. At this time one of the principal officers proposed endeavouring to cross the tide, and gain a passage between two islands; and this gentleman's station made his proposal, though impracticable, of so much importance at this critical season, that the captain, who was about to give orders of a different kind, became irresolute; and during the dispute which this contrariety of opinion occasioned, we were carried so near the rocks that our preservation appeared almost impossible.

On his return to England, Magra passed his examination for lieutenant, but he saw no further service in the Royal Navy. Rather, in 1772 he commenced what was to become his mature career as a minor diplomat when he took up the post of

British consul in the Canary Islands. At the end of 1775, he petitioned to revert to the family's Corsican name, saying that he was "the Son of the late James Mario Matra, who afterwards assumed the name of Magra, and . . . the Heir to certain Estates of the Family of Matra."

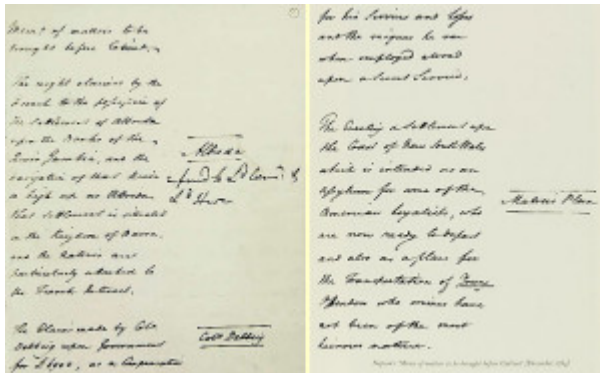


Fig. 2. "Memo. of matters to be brought before Cabinet," 1784. This agenda for a meeting of Pitt's cabinet, prepared by Evan Nepean, the undersecretary of the Home Department, reveals that ministers understood the idea of placing a convict colony on the coast of New South Wales to be Matra's. Dixon Library, State Library of New South Wales (DL ref. MSQ 522, pp. 1, 2 CY Reel 3993 frame 0010).

Seeking to rescue something of his father's wealth from the throes of the revolution, Matra returned to New York in 1777, but this attempt failed, and thereafter the family's fate was that common to large numbers of American loyalists, of displacement, impoverishment, and a desperate struggle to make another way in life. Between 1778 and 1780, he served as secretary to the British embassy in Constantinople, during which he pursued an interest in old coins and manuscripts, and commenced a decades-long correspondence with Sir Joseph Banks about geographical and cultural matters.

In 1783, Matra proposed that loyalists be used to colonize New South Wales. In 1785, together with Banks, he appeared before the parliamentary committee inquiring into the idea of using convicts to do so. By then, Matra was one of the very few Europeans alive who had actually seen the region; and his views were clearly influential, for when in August 1786 the ministers of William Pitt the Younger's first administration decided to send convicts to New South Wales, they knew they were adopting "Matra's Plan."

Matra hoped to be appointed governor of the new colony, but was passed over. Banks then obtained for him the consulship at Tangier. From 1787, Matra lived there or (in times of plague in Africa) at Gibraltar. During the long war with France, his principal task was to see that the Rock received regular supplies of food, without which British squadrons would not have been able to operate in the Mediterranean or off the southern coasts of Spain and Portugal. Just before his victory at Trafalgar, for example, Nelson asked Matra for all his "influence and exertion, that the Fleet may receive in every Port, Bullocks,

Sheep, Poultry and every refreshment, and that they must be permitted to be embarked alive." Because of his good success at this work, his political masters in England considered Matra too valuable a servant to lose, so that he never saw again either New York or England. The letters in which he described Morocco give a very vivid picture of the country before the European colonization of North Africa.

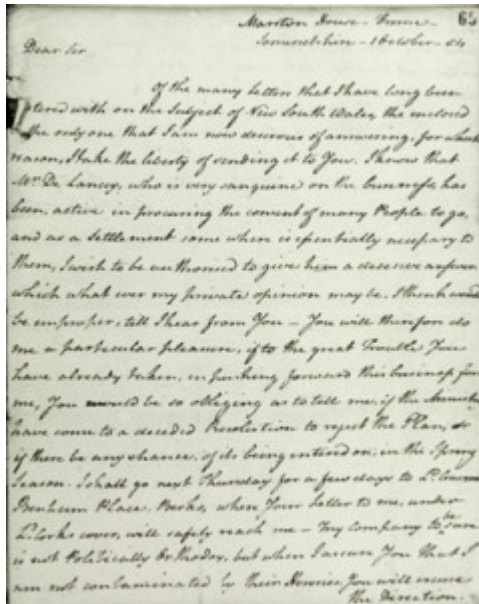


Fig. 3. Matra's letter to Sir Joseph Banks of July 28, 1783. As this letter indicates, Matra was not the only person in the early 1780s to contemplate what advantages Britain might gain from James Cook's voyages. However, he was the one to give his ideas some coherence, and to make a formal proposal to the British government. By permission of the British Library; British Library shelfmark or manuscript number: Add.33977.f.206.

Matra died in Tangier on March 29, 1806. For much of his life, he had aspired to play a significant role on the great stage of the world, but he had neither the talents nor the influence to do so. In some of his more self-aware, if melodramatically expressed moments, he realized how futile it was for a "solitary fugitive" to hope "to regulate the Globe." Nonetheless, he was involved in some momentous historical events. He enjoyed a long friendship with Banks; he dealt with St. Vincent, Nelson, and Collingwood; he circumnavigated the globe with Cook; and he was instrumental in the beginning of modern Australia.

In proposing the colonization of New South Wales, Matra offered grand perspectives, beginning: "I am going to offer an Object, to the consideration of our Government, which may in time, atone for the loss of our American Colonies." After briefly describing Cook's exploration of the coast, he asserted that "the Climate, & Soil, are so happily adapted to produce every various, & valuable Production of Europe, & of both the Indias, that with good management, & a few settlers, in 20 or 30 Years they might cause a Revolution,

in the whole system of European Commerce, & secure to England a monopoly of some part of it, & a very large share in the whole.”

He continued that the region might produce spices, sugar cane, tea, coffee, silk, cotton, indigo, and tobacco. There was the New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*), the benefits of which might be considerable; and New Zealand timber might be shipped home “for the use of the King’s yards.” The country might afford an “Asylum to those unfortunate American Loyalists, to whom Great Britain is bound by every tie of honour and gratitude, to protect & support.” Settlement might lead to the development of the China trade, of the fur trade between northwestern America and Asia, and of the British trade in wool, by opening markets in Japan and Korea. As well, it would enable Britain to exercise the right it had recently obtained, to “a free Navigation in the Molucca Seas”; and it might have a distinct strategic significance.

In making these points, Matra in effect constructed a map of the world that had not been possible before Cook’s voyages:

The place which New South Wales holds on our Globe, might give it a very commanding Influence in the policy of Europe. If a Colony from Britain, was established in that large Tract of Country, & if we were at War with Holland or Spain, we might very powerfully annoy either State from our new Settlement. We might with a safe, & expeditious Voyage, make Naval Incursions on Java, & the other Dutch Settlements, & we might with equal facility, invade the Coasts of Spanish America, & intercept the Manilla Ships, laden with the Treasures of the West. This check which New South Wales would be in time of War, on both those Powers, makes it a very important Object, when we view it in the Chart of the World, with a Political Eye.

This mental map is evidence of how, even then, the European exploration of the Pacific Ocean was giving rise to a global consciousness.

When James Boswell was leaving Corsica in 1765, General Paoli said to him, “Tell them what you have seen here. They will be curious to ask you. A man come from Corsica will be like a man come from the Antipodes.” James Matra’s life was a most curious one, during which his horizons extended from Europe and the Americas to Africa and the southern Pacific Ocean; and he helped bring the great ocean and its islands and peoples to European consciousness.

## Further Reading:

J. C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery, I: The Voyage of the Endeavour, 1768-1771* (Cambridge, 1968).  
[Anonymous], *A Journal of a Voyage round the World, in His Majesty’s Ship Endeavour, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771* (London, 1771); Alan Frost, *The Precarious Life of James Mario Matra: Voyager with Cook, American Loyalist, Servant of Empire* (Melbourne, 1995).

This article originally appeared in issue 5.2 (January, 2005).

---

Alan Frost is professor of history at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His works include *Arthur Phillip, 1738-1814: His Voyaging* (Melbourne, 1987); *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings* (Melbourne, 1994); *East Coast Country: A North Queensland Dreaming* (Melbourne, 1996); *The Voyage of the Endeavour* (Sydney, 1998); and *The Global Reach of Empire: Britain's Maritime Expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, 1764-1811* (Melbourne, 2003).