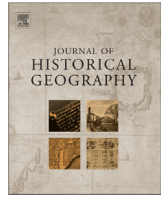


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Feature: The art of travel and exploration

## 'By cruel foes oppress'd': British naval draughtsmen in Tahiti and the South Pacific in the 1840s



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### Abstract

This paper considers little-known imagery made by mid-nineteenth century naval officers travelling in the Pacific, which has often been overlooked by art historians. In particular, it examines landscape drawings and prints made by officers travelling on a sequence of voyages through Polynesia, and argues that these need to be understood within the specific context of Anglo-French imperial rivalry in the region focused on the French annexation of Tahiti in the early 1840s. Rather than being simply a transparent set of tourist souvenirs, the views produced by the British officers were self-consciously reiterative, both of each other and also of a genre of exploration imagery deriving from James Cook's seminal Pacific voyages of 1768–1780. As such, they perpetuate and naturalize an image of the islands as tied to a positivist and teleological account of British imperial history, in which the French presence on Tahiti is presented as invasive, aberrant and despotic. Taking these drawings and prints as a case study, it concludes that the mass of similar imagery lying ignored in local and national archives needs to be reviewed as meriting serious art-historical scrutiny.

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The three voyages of James Cook between 1768 and 1780 became established from the late eighteenth century as the point zero for establishing the history of British contact with the Pacific. In the study of related visual culture over the past half-century, Cook's voyages have also become reified as producing a quintessential image of the Pacific, its cultures and geographies, despite their enormously varied span; an image which both encapsulated what was taken to be the complex and contradictory character both alluring and alienating of Pacific environments, through reference to an underlying discourse of the exotic, and also thereby determined in some way all subsequent visual representations of this vast and heterogeneous region.<sup>1</sup> They have also become identified as the *sine qua non* of 'the art of exploration', exemplifying the role of the visual arts in association with the expansion of empire and of geographical knowledge; and also as an alternative paradigm to the Grand Tour for the interaction between visual representation and travel, the Grand Tour's extra-European or long-haul counterpart.<sup>2</sup>

This is certainly not without justification. Already in Cook's day, it was noted that the cultural significance of the Grand Tour had been displaced by a wider imperial consciousness that was the result of his voyages and their extensive publication. For the Quaker poet John Scott, Cook's voyages had fundamentally altered the remit and opportunities of the contemporary landscape artist:

Now his pleas'd step a wider circuit tries,  
 ...  
 Now Indian climes he east or west explores,  
 Quits the dull factory and the sandy shores,  
 Climbs craggy hills, pervades romantic woods,  
 Or winds along the cataracts of the floods;  
 Thro' beasts and birds and insects, fruit and flow'rs,  
 In shape and colour all distinct from ours;  
 Or strays o'er isles that spicy vales unfold,  
 'Midst skies of glory and 'midst seas of gold;

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<sup>1</sup> The study of visual culture and the Pacific has been profoundly influenced by Bernard Smith's pioneering and magisterial work in this area: B. Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd Edition, New Haven and London, 1985; R. Joppien and B. Smith, *The Art of Captain Cook's Voyages*, 3 Vols., New Haven and London, 1985–1988; W. Eislser and B. Smith, *Terra Australis: The Furthest Shore*, Sydney, 1988; B. Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages*, New Haven and London, 1992. For more recent accounts, see particularly N. Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories*, Durham and London, 1997; H. Guest, *Empire, Barbarism, and Civilisation: Captain Cook, William Hodges, and the Return to the Pacific*, Cambridge and New York, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> William Hodges has become a critical figure here: in addition to Guest, *Empire, Barbarism, and Civilisation* (note 1), see G. Quilley, J. Bonehill (Eds), *William Hodges 1744–1797: The Art of Exploration*, New Haven and London, 2004.

Such skies, such seas, as HODGES' pencil drew,  
And round the rocks of Ulitea threw.<sup>3</sup>

William Hodges, the artist appointed to Cook's second voyage (1772–75), becomes for Scott the incarnation of the potential for modern landscape painting, whereby 'art' is united with 'exploration'. Similarly, Cook's voyages continue to influence and determine artistic representation down to the present day.<sup>4</sup> However, there are two principal issues that arise from this critical emphasis on the art of Cook's voyages within the wider field of art and travel. Firstly, these voyages were far from unique in providing a rich and productive engagement between the practices of art and exploratory travel, all around the globe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And secondly, within the Pacific context, they have tended to eclipse or subordinate subsequent visual representation, particularly of the nineteenth century, which exists in abundance. And while this does indeed frequently take Cook and the art of his voyages as its principal reference point, it does so not in simple, unproblematic imitation, but as part of a complex system of interdependent practices of maritime travel and visual recording.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I shall consider a range of British and French visual and verbal representations of Tahiti and the wider South Pacific arena during the period of the Franco-Tahitian War following the French annexation of the island as a protectorate in 1842. I shall focus on a group of British naval officers who travelled in the region in subsequent years between 1844 and 1849, following in each other's tracks and making records of the landscapes and topographies they encountered, as a case study to call into question some of the issues surrounding both the relationship generally of art to exploratory travel and also the representation of the Pacific in the century following Cook's death. By comparing the British views with some French equivalents, I shall also consider the ideological register of landscape drawings that have been regarded, if at all, as merely descriptive topographical records or as simple souvenirs. While Cook and the visual culture associated with his voyages can be seen as the defining reference point for these later depictions by amateur British naval artists, imbuing their reiterations with a sense of what Luciana Martins has termed 'anticipatory geography', I shall suggest that the visualizations of the landscape and environment, particularly of Tahiti, during the highly contentious period of French occupation, were engaged with very different issues from those of Cook's era, whereby the seemingly innocuous and bland topographical verisimilitude of the 1840s imagery disguised a complex and forceful agenda that was underpinned by competing imperial claims between Britain and France.<sup>6</sup>

When he arrived at Tahiti in 1848 on board HMS *Calypso* Lieutenant Conway Shipley encountered a landscape that was in one sense a memorialization of Captain Cook – a *lieu de mémoire* – but was also vastly and controversially changed since Cook's era. Most important was the impact of the recent French takeover of the island since the enforced establishment of Tahiti as a French

protectorate by Admiral Abel Dupetit-Thouars in 1842, and the consequent conflict between the French military and the Tahitian resistance, which had persisted until late 1846, when the final Tahitian strong hold in the valley of Fautaua was taken by the French with the help of a Rapa islander.<sup>7</sup>

Shipley was also an enthusiastic amateur artist, clearly with aspirations to be more than just 'amateur', for he made water-colour drawings of the various places visited during the voyage, which on his return to England he worked up as lithographs and published, with an extensive letterpress, as *Sketches in the Pacific* in 1851.<sup>8</sup> Tahiti was thus one of many ports of call during an extensive itinerary, though evidently the most important, for reasons which I shall go on to discuss. First, however, I want to consider Shipley's itinerary and its implications in more detail. For, he was, of course, by no means the first British naval officer to make the same journey, nor to make a detailed record of it. Indeed, his drawings can hardly be termed an 'art of exploration', since there is nothing properly exploratory about them. Instead, Shipley was one of several British naval officers who travelled on Admiralty voyages through the South Pacific over successive years following the French annexation of the Marquesas Islands and Tahiti, and who committed their observations to paper in one form or another. So he followed in the footsteps of Lieutenant Frederick Walpole, of HMS *Collingwood*, who was stationed in the Pacific between 1844 and 1848, and published his account of those years in 1849; Captain Henry Byam Martin, who made the same voyage in 1846–7 and kept a private sketchbook and journal; and preceded by a year the voyage of Captain Edward Gennys Fanshawe, of HMS *Daphne*, who similarly kept an extensive journal and sketchbook to record each aspect of his travels.<sup>9</sup> In this sense theirs was not an 'anticipatory geography' solely in the sense characteristically associated with tourism and travel writing of this period. Rather, the reiterative aspect of their accounts can be understood to derive, in part at least, from naval practices of surveying, charting and other forms of highly routinized and disciplined recording (for example, in ships' logs or in coastal profiling); it was also determined by the context of the Admiralty requirements of the voyages. They each followed the same route and for essentially the same reasons: to monitor French colonial expansion in the region in successive years. Fanshawe, for example, was clear about the diplomatic purpose of his mission, and its function as continuing the work undertaken by his predecessors:

The French, I understand, wanted to clutch the Society Islands also [in addition to Tahiti and the Marquesas], but Lord Palmerston got them to enter into a joint guarantee of their independence. This was conveyed to them by the *Calypso* last year, and the object of my going to those islands is to advise the several chiefs (for each is a separate state) to preserve it.<sup>10</sup>

Yet it is also important to note that their records are not purely naval accounts, that is, they were not produced for the Admiralty

<sup>3</sup> J. Scott, An essay on painting. To a young artist, in: *The Poetical Works of John Scott*, London, 1786, 284.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, M. Adams and N. Thomas, *Cook's Sites: Revisiting History*, Dunedin, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> I discuss this in relation to the theory of 're-enactment', in a forthcoming essay, Re-enacting Cook's voyages: mid-nineteenth-century views of Tahiti, in: J. Lamb, N. Rigby (Eds), *The Sea and Re-Enactment*, Basingstoke, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> L. Martins, A bay to be dreamed of: British visions of Rio de Janeiro, *Portuguese Studies* 22 (1996) 19–38.

<sup>7</sup> A perceptive and well-informed summary of the conflict is given in M.K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific*, Oxford and New York, 2005, 93–102. For a detailed account see Colin Newbury, Resistance and collaboration in French Polynesia: the Tahitian War: 1844–1847, *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 82 (1973) 5–27.

<sup>8</sup> C. Shipley, *Sketches in the Pacific: The South Sea Islands. Drawn from Nature and on Stone by C. Shipley*, London, 1851.

<sup>9</sup> F. Walpole, *Four Years in the Pacific: In Her Majesty's Ship 'Collingwood', from 1844 to 1848*, London, 1849; The Polynesian Journal of Captain Henry Byam Martin: Illustrated with Water Colors, Wash Drawings and Decorative Pen and Ink Sketches from the Originals by Captain Martin, Salem, Mass., c.1981; A.E.J. Fanshawe, *Admiral Edward Gennys Fanshawe G. C. B.: A Record: Notes Journals Letters*, London, printed for private circulation, 1904.

<sup>10</sup> Fanshawe, *Admiral Edward Gennys Fanshawe G. C. B.* (note 9), 182, citing a letter from Fanshawe to his wife of 4 August 1849.

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