

Cook-Bligh-Flinders-King: The Quadrilogy of Master Mariners

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Keywords:

SUMMARY

The mystery of The Great South Land long held the intrigue of the seafarers of history fuelling a tenacious race to discover the fact behind the speculation. Ptolemy's legendary Map of the World from the early second century after Christ always portrayed the southern hemisphere with a landmass of an estimated size to counterbalance the continents to the north.

Reality began to unfold with the Dutch voyages of the 17th century venturing boldly into the south seas with what some modern historians are postulating as existing maps, charts and journals from each of the hitherto unrecorded Chinese, Portuguese and Spanish seafarers who are more favourably credited with sailing around in the south hundreds of years before those for whom charts have actually survived for scrutiny.

The logs of the great south sea expeditions resound with the name of the greatest mariner of his time, the final discovery and ultimate settlement of the Australian continent having become synonymous with it– Captain James Cook !

Indeed it is not well known just how influential James Cook was in the later exploration and charting of Terra Australis through his initial mentorship of William Bligh's navigational and exploratory career, the latter subsequently passing these same skills onto Matthew Flinders, who, in turn, then inspired Phillip Parker King to attain master mariner status, each of the four all under the sublime patriarchal guidance or partnership of Sir Joseph Banks. The following story is both untold and inspirational, international and Australian, but at all times it is filled with amazing courage, great skill and momentous achievement, so please share this wonderful tale with me as I reveal much more than you had ever imagined about these famous and colourful characters from Australia's brief history and explore the continuum through which this quadrilogy of master mariners are interconnected to a dynasty of discovery.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When the great discoveries of the world and the amazing exploits of the legendary explorers involved in them are discussed, it often appears that the maritime field holds the greatest fascination and mystery with the majority of enthusiasts. Names like Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, Francis Drake, Vasco Da Gama and Abel Tasman have become icons of incredible sea travel and discovery, but along with these fabled figures one other is invariably included – James Cook !

Cook's historic 1770 voyage, during which he mapped the east coast of Terra Australis, has become the paradigm of 18th Century sea exploration, with impeccable navigation, thorough scientific recording of flora, fauna and geology combined with brilliant coastal and estuarine charting. Indeed, the closer settlement of the Australian continent has been pre-eminently connected to the discovery of Botany Bay, even though Captain Arthur Phillip was the man responsible for relocating the settlement of the First Fleet to Port Jackson, just a little further up the coast to the north.

Another character remembered more infamously for his major roles in the Bounty mutiny and the New South Wales Rum Rebellion was William Bligh. The lines become blurred with this over-emphasis on his notorious past rather than acknowledgement of his mastery of some exceptional sea journeys to collect breadfruit in the Pacific, as well as the longest journey by open long boat, commonly referred to as "The Launch Voyage", after being set adrift by Fletcher Christian and the other mutineers.

More closely associated with the Australian coastline are Matthew Flinders and Phillip Parker King, son of Philip Gidley King, the third Governor of New South Wales. Proving with George Bass that Van Dieman's land (later to be renamed Tasmania after Abel Tasman) was a separate island, Flinders made the first circumnavigation of the Great South Continent, while King completed the infills of finer detail not covered by Master Flinders.

Under the guiding hand of Joseph Banks, James Cook imparted his navigational brilliance onto William Bligh, who then superbly trained Matthew Flinders, who was the inspiration and medium through which Phillip Parker King procured his maritime skills and opportunities.

2. LAND SURVEYOR COOK GIVEN HIS SEA LEGS

“The charts and surveys of James Cook and his assistants were superior to all that preceded them” – Robert Baldwin

Accuracy and drafting quality in combination with cutting edge technology in navigational equipment and techniques provided James Cook with the ingredients to produce maps and charts unequalled in contemporary seamanship.

Such meticulous skill, attention to detail, high ethical values and inspirational leadership are all aspects attributable to the training and experience gained by Cook during his formative early years as a land surveyor. Under the masterful eyes of his tutor surveyors, especially Captain Simcoe, James acquired the requisite acuity in astronomy, orientation, calculation and trigonometrical surveying. For the latter his equipment comprised a Gunter's chain, log tables and azimuth compass, which were employed during the ten years he was engaged in coastal land surveys in North America, mainly along the St. Lawrence River, with Samuel Holland and De Barres. Thomas Graves, The Governor of Newfoundland, gave James a theodolite in July, 1763.

3. JAMES COOK'S FIRST TWO VOYAGES

James Cook completed two amazing world sea voyages (and part of a third), the first lasting from 1768 to 1771 which in part consisted of the *Endeavour's* charting of the unknown part of the eastern side of Terra Australis. Nevertheless, this assignment was only peripheral to his main task which was to make one of three sets of observations from strategically positioned vantage points for the Transit of Venus, which was to take place on 3rd June, 1769. The place for Cook's astronomical observation of the transit was to be either in the Marquesa or Tongan islands in the South Pacific, for which the Royal Navy bought him the bark the *Earl of Pembroke*, renaming it *Endeavour* (or *The Endeavour Bark*). It is worth noting that Alexander Dalrymple was recommended by the Royal Society to be leader of this expedition, but he was rejected by the Admiralty because he was not one of their own bold sailors.

Joseph Banks – the botanist – was part of Cook's complement of scientific experts on this first great sea trek, obviously being influential in the naming of Botany Bay. Sydney Parkinson was the official natural history artist for the expedition, assisting Banks in this area, with the superb collection of full colour works providing the first extensive botanic record of eastern Australia.

Cook's remarkably accurate chart of New Zealand disproved the long held theory that that country was part of a continent, possibly connected to Antarctica or Australia.

Cook's journal of 1770 had a rather curious entry which read as follows:

“...last night some time in the middle watch a very extraordinary affair happened to Mr. Orton, my clerk. He having been drinking in the evening some malicious person or persons in the ship took advantage of his being drunk and cut off the clothes from his back. Not being satisfied with this they some time after went into his cabin and cut off part of both his ears as he lay asleep.”

Such an episode demonstrates the harsh nature of the crews of these vessels plying the high south seas, and what cruelty, mainly subdued on Cook's ships, could still manifest itself even under the great man's leadership and moderation. The harshness of these mammoth sea escapades was acutely demonstrated when so many of the crew (19) died before they could obtain fresh food from their stoppage in Batavia (now Jakarta) that had actually survived for the first two years. It is a most interesting point that in the copy of his journal which he sent ahead from Batavia he had called the eastern Australian coast “New Wales”, but had crossed this out in his own holograph journal to coin the name “New South Wales”

Still convinced that there must be another southern continent the British Navy planned a second voyage of world circumnavigation in the high Antarctic latitudes, over 70° South, for which Cook was appointed to take control, being promoted to Commander for the exercise. Having nearly lost the *Endeavour* on the Queensland coast at Endeavour River, Cook was firm that two ships were necessary for such a hazardous undertaking and the hierarchy agreed, so, dropping the original names of *Drake* and *Raleigh* for fear of offending the Spanish, he was provided with the *Resolution* (carrying 110 men) and the *Adventure* under Captain Tobias Furneaux. This epic and perilous journey took place from 1772 to 1775.

4. COOK TRAINS BLIGH DURING HIS LAST JOURNEY

Cook's third and fateful final voyage was between 1776 and 1780. It was an assignment that, through the efforts of Joseph Banks, the 22 year old William Bligh was instated as ship's Commander of the *Resolution*, under Cook, who had been elevated to Captain on 10th August, 1775, the day after he had been presented to King George III to receive his post captaincy. He joined a select group of pupils personally selected or approved by Cook who “under my direction could be usefully employed in constructing charts, in taking views of the coasts and headlands near which we would pass, and in drawing plans of the bays and harbours in which we should anchor.” This brilliant band of mariners also included names such as John Gore, James King, John Williamson, Thomas Edgar, George Vancouver, Richard Pickersgill, Henry Roberts, Joseph Gilbert and William Wales.

William's navy career had indeed started several years prior to this fortuitous appointment with James Cook. Shortly after the death of his mother in 1770, the fifteen (15) year old William Bligh had begun serving his apprenticeship on a small sloop, *HMS Hunter*, moving to the *Crescent* then the *Ranger*. Recognised for his exceptional ability he was appointed master of *HMS Resolution* under Cook in the March of 1776.

A little reported trait of the moderate and tolerant James Cook was his hasty temper and violent swearing rages, termed by his men to be “heivas”, which were the Southern Islanders’ dances portrayed by violent motions and stomping. Unfortunately, along with all of the great inheritances of Bligh from Cook, such as scurvy preventing diets, brilliant navigation and charting, and humane leadership, this more unseemly characteristic was also passed down.

Cook’s historian, J.C. Beaglehole, wrote of Bligh: “Somehow or other he was well qualified in marine surveying and highly qualified in the drawing of charts – or he became so in quite a remarkably short time under Cook’s eye ... Bligh may have learnt a good deal from Cook; his graphic technique, in which he took some pride, is not dissimilar.” Along the journey he surveyed, sounded and charted Christmas and Palliser Harbours on Kerguelen Land, calling at Adventure Bay, Tasmania and Queen Charlotte Sound in New Zealand. He reports also that it was his melancholy honour to have surveyed and selected the anchorage in Hawaii, Kealakekua Bay where his great mentor was slain, having recently charted and surveyed the whole of the chain of islands called the “Sandwich Islands” by Cook.

While the *Resolution* was undergoing repairs to her damaged mainmast at Kealakekua on February 4, 1779, after shots were heard news reached the other chiefs that a young chief had been killed. Cook was attempting to kidnap the old chief Kalaniopu at the time to recover the cutter stolen by the natives the night before, but he was thwarted by two other chiefs who incited the 2,000 strong throng of natives to begin throwing stones at the party. Upon this a crowd of Hawaiians surged forward with the armed marines fighting back with bayonets and musket butts. Cook fired the first shot killing a native after which many began stabbing Cook to death when a priest had felled him with a club. Detail of this event was painted reliably by marine artist John Cleveley based on an eye witness sketch by his brother James who had been a carpenter on the *Resolution*. The young Bligh fought valiantly in the melee, but James Cook could not be saved. The remains of Cook’s body, his skull, leg, arm bones and hands, were retrieved after a truce and he was given a burial at sea on February 23.

5. BЛИGH AND THE BOUNTY

Later in his career Bligh was given the command of the *Bounty* in 1787, and although quite a humane and civil leader, similar to his mentor Cook, he was prone to unleash verbal tirades on his non-naval crew in a somewhat paranoiac fashion.

On his first breadfruit voyage he was commissioned to collect the plant from Tahiti and the Friendly Islands, near Tonga, and bring them back for transplantation in the British controlled West Indies. A combination of unpleasant incidents conspired to turn the First Mate Fletcher Christian and some of the other men against Bligh during the course of the voyage, however.

Able Seaman John Sumner was given 12 lashes for neglect of duty on April 12, 1789, while others flogged for spurious motives at Bligh’s command included Quintal, Martin, Churchill, Alexander Smith, John Williams, Muspratt and Millward. In addition to all of this the men had been forced from their quarters so that space could be made to store the breadfruit, bringing

tensions to boiling point by 27th April when Bligh accused Fletcher Christian of stealing some cocoa nuts. Questioning each officer in turn, when Mr Christian replied: “I do not know, Sir, but I hope you do not think me so mean as to be guilty of stealing yours?”, to which Bligh exhorted: “Yes, you damn’d hound, I do...God damn you, you scoundrels, you are all thieves alike, and combine with the men to rob me...” Having been subjected to enough abuse and false accusations the men decided to rid him from the boat in the famous act of mutiny. The phenomenal navigation from Tofua in the Tongan Islands to Coupang on the island of Timor in Indonesia in an open boat became the stuff of legends, having been christened “The Launch Voyage”, of 3618 miles (around 5790 km) across the open ocean. Bligh negotiated the incredible journey in just forty one (41) days with food and water rations only for five days initially. Among the nineteen who made it to Coupang on Sunday June 14, 1789 was ship’s master John Fryer.

In Timor the party was given every assistance, and after a lengthy recuperation Bligh bought a 34 foot schooner which he named HMS *Resource* using it to tow the launch to Batavia via Samarang on October 1. Of the 19 members of the launch group only 12 lived to make it back to England.

6. FLINDERS UNDER BLIGH’S MENTORSHIP

From a very young age Matthew Flinders held James Cook as an idol, and, not surprisingly, Joseph Banks once again interceded to gain him a naval commission under William Bligh on his second breadfruit expedition on the *Providence*, setting off on 2 August, 1791. Still only a lad of seventeen (17) Matthew had a bare two years of naval service, but he was acutely aware of the ogreish spectre of William Bligh which had been generated through tavern and dockside gossip. Despite his possible apprehension he had still applied for a position as midshipman aboard Bligh’s vessel, and with the encouragement and consent of his friend, Captain Thomas Pasley with whom he had previously sailed on the *Bellerophon* and the *Scipio*, he had been successful here.

Rounding the Cape of Good Hope in October 1791 they reached Tahiti in April 1792 where they stayed for three months collecting 600 breadfruit trees. Bligh wrote of the women there that they “are handsome, mild and cheerful in their manners and conversations, possessed of great sensibility; and have sufficient delicacy to make them admired and loved.” Two Tahitians, Mydiddee and Bobbo, accompanied the ships when they left on 19 July 1792. A few days after reaching England Mydiddee died, while the stowaway Bobbo had been put off in the West Indies.

The return journey went across the Pacific, with a perilous passing through the treacherous Torres Strait, over the Indian Ocean, around the Cape again and north west to Jamaica in the Caribbean Sea. Along the way Flinders had absorbed all the experiences of battles with Papuan headhunters, water rationing, the use of antiscorbutics to ward off scurvy, and the superb navigational and astronomical skills of his master. Even though he excelled at his tasks with Bligh the captain virtually snubbed his efforts when he bunched Matt in the official log

with “the young gentlemen” aboard his ship in a grudgingly anonymous acknowledgment of his contribution.

Matthew’s only taste of naval warfare came with Pasley, again on the *Bellerophon*, in the battle against the French Fleet known as “The Glorious First of June” in 1794.

7. FLINDERS SAILS AROUND VAN DIEMAN’S LAND WITH BASS

Keen to continue his quest for adventure and discovery Matthew signed up as master’s mate on board the *Reliance* which was to be fitted out along with the *Supply* to transport the next NSW Governor, Captain John Hunter, to his new post. Leaving Plymouth on 15 February 1795 they took the long route around Cape Horn, finally docking in Sydney Town on September 7 that same year. During the journey Matt made friends with the surgeon George Bass, who would later accompany him on many sea explorations in the new land. Samuel, Matt’s younger brother, also travelled on this trip as a twelve (12) year old volunteer and would later take part in some sea explorations with the pair.

Bass had brought out a small eight feet long boat, which was subsequently replaced by another of similar proportions, both called *Tom Thumb*, in which they charted much of the New South Wales coast north and south of Sydney. Together they proved Van Dieman’s Land to be separate from the mainland in a vessel known as the *Norfolk* in 1798. This vessel was the first to be made in the colony and was built by the convicts of the island after which she was named.

Apart from various coastal exploration in his own right, with Flinders they ultimately sailed more than 18,000 kilometres of the Australian coast, but when he set sail in 1803 with a cargo for trading in South America Bass was never seen again.

8. AUSTRALIA CIRCUMNAVIGATED - FLINDERS INCARCERATED

Between 1801 and 1803 Flinders led the *Investigator* in her circumnavigation of Australia, while the Frenchman, Nicolas Baudin, was also exploring the Australian coastline for his emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in his rig *Le Geographe*. Each commander could scarcely believe their eyes when they had the uncanny coincidence of meeting up with each in April 1802 along the southern coast of South Australia at a place later to be named Encounter Bay in commemoration of this remarkable incident. But for Flinders influence South Australia could have borne the name Bonaparte Land, while St. Vincent Gulf was to be Josephine Gulf ! During this epic voyage Matt called into Batavia for supplies after his charting of the west coast, so all three of the great men, Cook, Bligh and Flinders made visits to Indonesia for some purpose of their legendary journeys.

On 19th August, 1803 he left Australia on board the *Porpoise* bound for England, but it and the *Cater* were wrecked on Wreck Reef near Hervey Bay in Queensland. Subsequently he took command of a 29 ton schooner the *Cumberland*, and headed off again in October that year.

Flinders was unaware that war had again broken out with France, and when he moored in Mauritius he was immediately arrested by the Governor Charles Decaen, mainly because his passport was for the *Investigator* instead of the vessel he was actually upon. It was to be another 7 years before he was allowed to leave this island country, setting foot on English soil on 24 October 1810 at Spithead. Unfortunately, by this time his health was in a wretched state, and only four years after returning to his beloved Ann and homeland, at the tender age of 40, he lay dying as the final printing of his journal of exploration of Terra Australis, with the accompanying atlas, arrived at his home, passing away before he was even able to peruse the final product on 19 July 1814.

9. PHILLIP PARKER KING INSPIRED BY FLINDERS

Phillip Parker King, when he was only four (4) years old, was greatly influenced by the visit of Matthew Flinders to Norfolk Island, where his father Philip Gidley King (later to be the third governor of the Colony of New South Wales) was superintendent. His great ambition was “to find his own islands.”

Soon after Flinders returned to England in 1810 after his imprisonment in Mauritius he once again met up with Phillip Parker King, and in an effort to advance the young man’s naval career, Matt took him to the house of his great friend and patriarch, Sir Joseph Banks, where he was also able to meet the Hydrographer of the Navy, Captain Thomas Hurd.

P.P. King in his early career sailed upon the *Diana*, the *Hibernia*, the *Centaur*, the *Cumberland*, the *Thistle* and the *Adamant*. The captain of the last vessel Nathaniel Buckle said of King that he “appears to have taken particular pains to qualify himself as a draughtsman, and I am of the opinion he has every requisite for rendering himself useful in that branch of his profession.”

With most of His Majesty’s Ships returned from battles with France, Captain Hurd seized the opportunity to put forward a proposal to expand the Hydrographic Department of the Royal Navy in a project to ambitiously chart all unknown areas of the Empire. Such a proposition had much favour with another of Banks’ powerful friends, Henry, the Third Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and Colonies since 1812 and one of the most powerful men in the Empire. Consequently, on January 7, 1817, the Royal Naval Surveying Service was established.

Included within the plan was a special assignment for King to complete the work of Flinders in surveying the Australian coast, under the joint control of the Admiralty and the Colonial Office, which really meant more administrative work to supply journals and reports to both organisations. However he was not even provided with a ship to perform his work. Proceeding to Sydney in the merchant ship *Dick* he was instructed to find some suitable vessel there and man her as well as he could with the resources of the convict pool. Hurd did give him some surveying instruments and two assistants, 20 year old Frederick Bedwell and John Septimus Roe at the age of nineteen.

According to Marsden Hordern in his excellent book *King of the Australian Coast* the “main object of the expedition, Croker (the First Secretary of the Admiralty) told him, was the exploration of the coasts of New South Wales from the western entrance of the Gulf of Carpentaria to North West Cape, with particular attention to those parts of the coast which Baudin’s expedition had not seen, or had viewed from too great a distance to chart effectively. All openings were to be minutely examined in search of rivers which might open up the heart of ‘this great continent’.” He was further commissioned to clearly mark all discoveries with England’s claims to sovereignty, gather information about the climate, natural features, fauna, flora, fish, insects and reptiles, with specific note of useful timber, study the inhabitants and document their food, commerce and precious metals, stones and minerals. As accoutrements to his equipment Hurd provided him with a copy of Flinders’ *Voyage To Terra Australis*, Peron’s journal of the Baudin Australian explorations, Freycinet’s *Atlas* and the large chart of the Indian and Pacific Oceans prepared by Arrowsmith, and shortly before leaving he also sent a Dipping Needle, Hydrometer and Book describing the accompanying Micrometer Glass.

10. KING ARRIVES IN SYDNEY

After 199 days at sea since they had left Gravesend King and his crew finally arrived in Sydney on 3 September 1817 to be welcomed by the Governor Lachlan Macquarie to the colony. Disappointingly, in the country at the time there were only two ships available for King’s assignment, the *Elizabeth Henrietta* and the *Lady Nelson*, neither of which were suitable for the task. Fortunately some four weeks later a newer boat, the *Mermaid*, docked in Sydney Harbour after sailing from India. Successful negotiations ensued and finally the captain Christensen accepted the 2,000 pounds offered to purchase her for King.

The northern and north-western coastlines were charted through four voyages from 1817 to 1822, during which King gave names to Port Essington and Buccaneer’s Archipelago (for Dampier), charted Melville Island with a circumnavigation to prove its separation, and surveyed the west coast from Rottneest Island to Cygnet Bay in King Sound as well as the entrance to Macquarie Harbour in Tasmania. This infill charting to complete the work of Cook and Flinders along the Australian coast was all carried out in the *Mermaid*, assisted by John Septimus Roe, later to be the first Surveyor-General of Western Australia.

11. CONCLUSION

Australia’s final discoveries, settlement, naming and accurate coastline charting are owed in major proportion to Cook, Bligh, Flinders and P. P. King, with many of their charts and maps as precise as any that modern technology could produce.

Cook was rigorously tutored by his senior surveyors on land before embarking on his naval career, using this firm foundation of mentorship to pass on his vast knowledge and skill to Bligh who similarly indoctrinated Flinders. As each pupil absorbed everything that was offered to them they each in turn became masters in their own right.

Skill, leadership, ethics, scientific thoroughness, accuracy, astute management, courage, impeccable negotiating ability and the embracing of revolutionary new technology and techniques are the common threads which tied these four great mariners together. Each of these remarkable individuals were models of all these qualities – the hallmarks of the modern Surveying Profession – something of which all we surveyors can be truly proud.

DEDICATION

It would my pleasure to dedicate this story of courage, discovery and precision to our Indonesian neighbours and all the surveyors here as a true sign of the cooperation and professional respect which is a distinguishing feature of the Surveying Profession worldwide.

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