

Captain Cook: History's Intrepid Explorer [B2]

Questo audace navigatore ed esploratore, proveniente da un'umile famiglia, condusse tre leggendari viaggi oceanici che cambiarono le mappe del mondo e la conoscenza che l'Europa occidentale aveva del pianeta e dei suoi abitanti.

James Cook was an 18th-century British explorer, cartographer and navigator who mapped the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia on three famous voyages between 1768 and 1779, radically changing western perceptions of world geography. He determined the [boundaries](#) of the habitable world and opened up new lands to European [trade](#) and colonisation. Cook was born on 27 October 1728, in a small village in Yorkshire. His father was a farm worker. Cook joined the merchant navy as a teenager and then the Royal Navy in 1755. He served in North America in the Seven Years' War, where he learnt [to survey](#) and [chart](#) coastal waters with great precision.

TERRA INCOGNITA

Cook's mapping fame reached the Admiralty, the government department that administered the Royal Navy, and The Royal Society, Britain's national academy of sciences, at exactly the moment when British [overseas](#) exploration and empire-building were really beginning. In 1768, the Government decided to send an expedition under Cook to the Southern Hemisphere to observe [Venus passing](#) in front of the Sun. This would help determine the distance of the Earth from the Sun. Cook, commanding [HMS Endeavour](#), also had secret plans to search the south Pacific for the postulated southern continent of Terra Australis Incognita — and [claim](#) it for Britain. The Passage of Venus was recorded perfectly in 1769, but no continent was found. However, Cook was able to map the complete coastline of New Zealand, a marvel of cartography. He was the first European to communicate with the Māori — but eight Māoris were killed in violent encounters. He then became the first European to reach the eastern coastline of Australia in 1770, which he [claimed](#) for Britain, naming it New

South Wales. Dramatic scientific discoveries were made on the voyage, including thousands of new species. Cook's revelations of other cultures and civilisations inspired [awe](#) in Europe.

FINAL VOYAGE

Cook [set out](#) from England again in 1772 to look for the [fabled](#) southern continent once more. His two ships [sailed](#) close to the Antarctic, but were forced to turn back by the cold. He then visited New Zealand and Tahiti, making [charts](#) that would remain in use until the 1950s. He returned to England in 1775 and was finally made captain. Cook's final voyage, in 1776, was to find the postulated North-West Passage near the Arctic, believed to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. He was frustrated again, but he [charted](#) most of the North American coastline for the first time. He then took his two ships south to explore the island of Hawaii. However, Cook now suffered violent [moods](#). He [punished](#) his crew, tortured natives and even reportedly burnt down villages. After the [theft](#) of a [longboat](#) from [HMS](#) Resolution on 14 February 1779, Cook tried to [take the Hawaiian chief hostage](#). Thousands of Hawaiians [retaliated](#). They surrounded Cook and his men, and a [skirmish ensued](#) during which Cook was [stabbed](#) and [clubbed](#) repeatedly, dying from his [wounds](#). While accounts of the captain's death and its [aftermath](#) remain [contentious](#), according to a recent historical study, the Hawaiians then prepared Cook's body with funerary rituals usually reserved for a [vanquished](#) chief, with his body dismembered and his bones divided among the natives, possibly as religious icons.

CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE

In Cook's three voyages, he [sailed](#) thousands of miles across largely [uncharted](#) areas of the globe, mapping lands in greater detail than any other Western explorer — although often with the help of local islanders. He left a [legacy](#) of scientific and geographical knowledge that profoundly influenced his successors into the 20th century. Yet while his [seamanship](#), courage and leadership were never in doubt, his sometimes violent contact with indigenous peoples remains a [source](#) of huge controversy today.

Glossary

- **longboat** = barcaccia
- **set out** = partire
- **Venus passing** = transito di Venere
- **claim** = reclamare
- **trade** = commercio
- **theft** = furto
- **retaliated** = vendicarsi
- **legacy** = eredità
- **to survey** = ispezionare
- **moods** = umori, stati d'animo
- **ensued** = seguire
- **seamanship** = arte della navigazione
- **fabled** = mitico
- **overseas** = oltremare
- **take the Hawaiian chief hostage** = prendere in ostaggio
- **aftermath** = periodo successivo
- **chart** = tracciare
- **awe** = stupore
- **sailed** = navigare
- **skirmish** = scaramuccia
- **wounds** = ferite
- **vanquished** = sconfitto
- **boundaries** = confini
- **stabbed** = pugnare
- **clubbed** = bastonare
- **contentious** = polemico
- **source** = fonte
- **HMS** = Nave di Sua Maestà (His Majesty's Ship)
- **punished** = punire