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James Burney: A Brief Account

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Thank you for asking me to speak: I am greatly honoured to be addressing the Burney Society. This brief paper is a first report on my work on the journals of James Burney (1750-1821), the oldest son of Charles Burney and Frances Burney's elder, and favourite, brother. James's journal writings are interesting for two reasons; both because of the comparison and contrast they make to the writings of the other members of the family, and in their own right, as records of momentous historical events.

James was sent to sea at the age of ten. Later, his father, having lunch with his friend Lord Sandwich of the Admiralty, got him a position on the Adventure, which went with Captain Cook on his second voyage of scientific discovery to the South Seas (1772-74).[1] James had many adventures on this voyage, notably one in New Zealand which I shall mention again at the end of this talk. He formed a friendship with Omai, the Tahitian who was brought to London and whose good manners and charm in polite society Frances notes in her early journals. Her father was introduced to Omai as "'Jem's father"—he laughed, & shook Hands very cordially, & repeated with great pleasure the name thus, *Bunny*'[2] In 1776-81, James was on the *Discovery*, the smaller vessel that accompanied Captain Cook's *Resolution* on the third Pacific

voyage, to find the north west passage, the journey that was tragically interrupted by Cook's death on Hawai'i in February 1779. These exciting times for James coincided with exciting times for Frances: in 1777 and 1778 when she was recording Evelina's visits to the various London public entertainments, James was recording the sports, entertainments, and the music, of the Pacific islander peoples.

Part of the interest of James is that he, like his sister, kept a diary. His journal of Cook's second voyage was published in Canberra in 1975, but the journal of the third, which is quite extensive (four manuscript volumes) still remains unpublished. The original is in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. There is a copy made on small sheets of India paper at Macau on the return leg of the journey (so that they could, presumably, be hidden away) in the British Library, which differs in many small, and some significant, details. There is also a biography, *My Friend the Admiral*, by G. E. Manwaring,[3] published in 1931, which takes James's story through the period of his friendship with Charles Lamb, until his death in 1821. Manwaring does draw on the third journal, but when he quotes from it his text does not correspond to the text in the Mitchell Library and seems bowdlerised.

There is a lot of difference, of course, between a journal kept on a long sea voyage, and a journal letter written in the family. Frances could run away to write in solitude, but on board ship privacy was non-existent. As her half sister, Sarah Harriet perceived, Frances "bottled up" her vanity when in company, "[b]ut what was kept back, and scarcely suspected in society, wanting a safety valve, found its way into her private journal."[4] However reluctantly Frances Burney became known as a famous author, her diary was continually defining her feelings and sensations, her nervousnesses and her ambitions, characterising her as an embodied personality as we should understand the word. James himself, by contrast, has no physical presence in his journal: his feelings and sensations are conveyed only in laconic and conventional phrases such as "fortunately," or unluckily," or "we had some apprehensions."

James only rarely writes in the first person: his identity is merged with that of his ship and its crew.

Another interesting difference is that Frances's journals concentrate on dialogue: it is as if her ear were the most acute register of reality. One model for the diaries' reporting of conversations was certainly the drama. Partly this is conscious, for with the success of *Evelina* she was being encouraged to write a play, and she remarks indeed in her journal letters that she will "theatricalise" the conversations she reports between Johnson and Mrs Thrale.[5] For James, on the other hand, the eye is the privileged sensory organ. His journal actually contains charts, drawn by himself. But more significantly, he uses his eyes to assess and calculate what the appearances of things mean. He scrutinises not only coastlines and shores, but the appearances of natives—their boats and weapons, their manners, their demeanor, their signs. He is always using his eye to interpret meanings because, though he learned Tahitian from Omai, each island language is unique and complex—as he himself points out. Though he quotes the words of native songs, as he understood them, hardly any dialogue appears in his manuscripts.

Perhaps this is just a matter of different forms and genres, but just as it is interesting to examine the mould of convention on Frances's self-presentation and celebration, so it is interesting to read James's shipboard journals for the elements of personality and individuality that seep through the prevailing, rather wooden and orthodox, narrative. There were of course many logs and journals kept on the voyages, and sometimes journalists borrowed episodes and even whole passages from each other. But the more you read them the more you feel that, whilst they record the same events, and treat them within more or less conventional modes, they bear the stamp of personality nonetheless. Each man displays his own idiosyncrasy despite the fact that he writes, to adopt the famous phrase of Foucault, a disciplined text.

What then are the features of James's journals? There is the usual and necessary focus on facts found in journals kept

on board ship in both journals. The style of the journal of the third voyage is rather more polished and formal than that of the second (written avowedly for the family's eyes)—the record of a notably more seasoned, and perhaps hardened, man. One might say that Burney's journal of the third voyage has these distinctive characteristics. Its tone is moderate and restrained, especially where "natives" are concerned; James does not throw the word "savage" around indiscriminately, as so many of his colleagues do. The journal is often humorously phrased and alert to the humorous possibilities of incidents between folks of different cultures, and it has a genuine appreciation of indigenous skills, especially musical ones, and an interest in recording them. James follows in his father's footsteps in his attention to music and often describes musical performances. He is especially appreciative of the discipline, order and self-control he sees in the islander peoples—which he sometimes, most remarkably, uses to criticise European manners. In a sense he is an early ethnographer, interested in the other, aware that one must construct an account of others' motives, not merely attribute to them what oneself feels.

Let me give one example of James's characteristic mode and tone. Leaving New Zealand at the end of February, 1777, the Resolution arrives at Watdu in the Cook, or Friendly, islands in April. After some initial overtures, Burney and three companions, including Omai, venture ashore on Wednesday 2 April, in order to trade. They are brought to the chief, or Aree, who receives them "with great cordiality" but who "preserved a degree of gravity rather bordering on self-consequence" (as Burney puts it), perhaps an ominous sign. "The crowd being very great," Burney and his friend, William Anderson, the surgeon on the Resolution, escape, but are waylaid on their return by men with clubs, heading a crowd who rob them with impunity. Burney is separated from his companions and detained by a chief. "With him I remained an hour which was by far the most uncomfortable situation I experienced during our stay ashore," he writes—a characteristically laconic phrase.

Finally he struggles with his captor and escapes, but then the group is surrounded again by a hostile crowd. It is getting dark, and he has distributed all the gifts and trinkets he has on him. But with Omai's help they find a way of deflecting the anger of the islanders. "Omiah... put the best face he could on the matter and taking one of their clubs began to talk about the Otaheite method of fighting. he then stood up in the middle of the Ring and shewed them the Otaheite war Hevah." With this piece of diplomacy, the atmosphere thaws, Omai demonstrates a musket cartridge, and they escape. One has to read in any terror one might suspect, for cannibalism was always feared, and according to Anderson's report, Omai saw the natives heating an oven in the ground.[6]

Yet the conclusion of the episode is touched with humour. The seamen are presented with a basket of roast hog and plantains each. Reconciliation prevails: "A conductor was appointed us, The cocoanuts and remains of our dinner were carried down to the Beach, and canoes brought to carry us over the Reef... being at liberty, I proposed finishing the remains of the dinner, but on examination found nothing but the plantains, the blackguards having stole the roast pork." Omai, James is amused to note, pretends not to miss his sword which has also been snatched. "Could we have had any intercourse with these people on an equal footing, there is little doubt but we should have found them hospitable and friendly," Burney characteristically concludes. As his treatment of this episode suggests, the Enlightenment civilisation of which James Burney was a representative was not always or uniformly as brutal or exploitative as some later historians have suggested.[7]

For all their reserve, Burney's diaries record more than one momentous and terrifying experience. I will conclude by mentioning two more of these. In New Zealand, on the second voyage, in December 1773, he was sent in search of missing comrades, only to find the remains of a cannibal feast, their bones and other parts left charred on the beach. His account of this discovery, written for the Admiralty, is a fine piece of restrained eighteenth-century prose, whose austerity somehow

communicates the horror, and his own shock, the more fiercely. (Frances, apparently intending to reproduce his account, leaves half a page blank in her journal but never it seems brings herself to do it).[8]

In February 1779, on the island of Hawai'i, Burney was witness to the death of Captain Cook. When a broken mast forced the ships to return to Hawai'i, they were not received with the rapture that had greeted them the first time round. In fact trouble was brewing for days. Cook went on shore with the intention of taking the Aree hostage, but instead he was surrounded by hostile Hawaiians. Burney was on board the *Discovery*, where they knew nothing of what was happening on the beach, until, as he writes, "we heard the firing of muskets on shore which was followed by the Resolution's pinnace and launch firing. With glasses [ie. through the telescope] we could see Capt Cook receive a blow from a club and fall off a rock into the water." This is the only eye-witness account of an event that, for so many reasons, is a critical moment in the West's encounter with the Pacific. In the hours that followed what he called "this unlucky event" James Burney was in charge of the boats that were sent to demand the bodies of the dead men, but the account he gives of this extremely dangerous mission typically erases all mention of himself.[9]

It is through James that the Burney family, epitomising as they do late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century English achievements in literature, art and music, touch and encounter other civilisations and other worlds. But James was not rewarded at home for his courage and endurance. His Journals, which seems to have composed with at least some hope of publication, never circulated beyond the family. When he returned to England, he did not get the promotion from the Admiralty he expected, until Madame d'Arblay's influence finally succeeded in obtaining for him the title of Rear Admiral. He died three months after hearing the long awaited news, in November 1821.

Notes

[1] Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958) 40.

[2] *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Lars E. Troide, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988-) II: 41.

[3] G. E. Manwaring, *My Friend the Admiral: The Life, Letters and Journals of Rear-Admiral James Burney, F.R.S. the Companion of Captain Cook and Friend of Charles Lamb* (London: Routledge, 1931).

[4] *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997) 463.

[5] *The Early Journals*, III: 234.

[6] "Anderson's Journal" in J. C Beaglehole, ed., *The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery*, 1776-1780, III, Part Two (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1967) 837.

[7] Most notoriously Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook; European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); See also Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: about Captain Cook, for example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[8] *The Early Journals*, II: 43.

[9] Manwaring,142-43.