

A Treasure Trove

A few years ago, I wrote an article entitled "Stories of the Voyages",¹ in which I discussed the role 18th century books have played in our understanding of Captain Cook. In that article I discussed the official accounts issued by the Admiralty, secondary accounts published by other crew members, and Cook bibliographies. I then went on to say,

So what's a Cook fan to do if he or she is attracted to original and antiquarian books about Cook's voyages; but: (1) is not a diehard book collector; (2) cannot afford original 18th century accounts of the voyages; and (3) gets little thrill out of reading bibliographic descriptions?

There actually is an answer, and it's the one chance those of us with more interest than income have to take advantage of the great collections of Cook material – specialized catalogs produced by auction houses and antiquarian booksellers.

Book collectors come in all types, but there is a very small group that has the means and interest to develop specialized collections of rare and valuable books. When such collections are ultimately passed on to others, it is usually by one of two pathways: (1) donation to or acquisition by libraries; or (2) the sale of individual books to others through auctions or specialized antiquarian book dealers.

While the great research libraries of the world offer amazing resources to those in search of information, they seldom produce non-scholarly listings of their specific collections that can be enjoyed by the casual collector. That's an area where the auction houses and booksellers have an edge.

Those words stand as true today as when I originally wrote them, and bookseller catalogs continue to delight the casual collector of books related to Cook. Without doubt, the finest such catalog to come along in my memory was recently published by Hordern House,² a Sydney-based antiquarian bookseller with a long history of handling some of the "best of the best" of the early publications related to Cook. The catalog in question is entitled *Captain James Cook: The Greatest Discoverer*,³ and describes the collection of Robert and Mary Anne Parks.

About the same time I wrote the article referenced above, I was fortunate enough to spend an evening with Bob Parks in his beautiful home in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. Bob and I had previously communicated for several years, but this was the first opportunity we had had to meet.

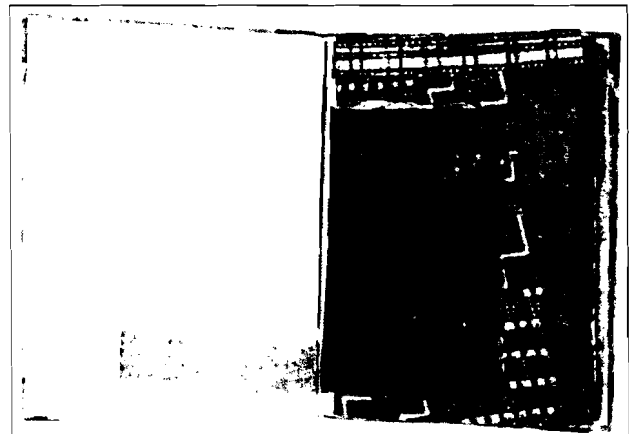
Bob and I share a common passion for antiquarian books about Cook and my evening in his home was absolutely delightful. As I entered his home, I was immediately struck by the wonderful assortment of familiar images I knew mostly from books – Joseph Banks, the Death of Cook, beautiful aquatints of the South Seas. The

difference was, of course, that the images I was seeing were the original prints and publications, not reproductions from other books. And each item was tastefully and archivally framed, whether it was hanging on a wall or resting on a dedicated easel. The overall effect was stunning.

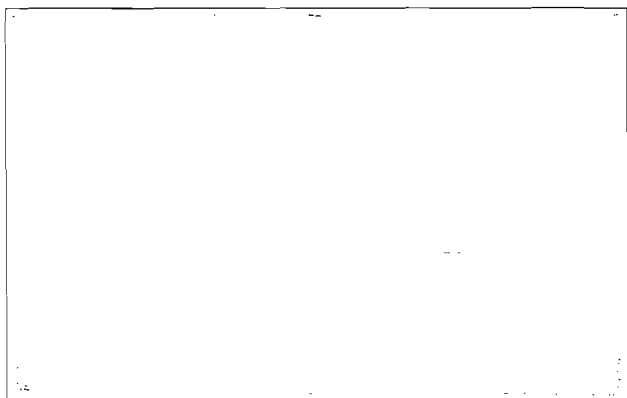
But the real fun began when we went into his nearby den to see the books. And what books they were!

There, lined up in a row, were titles and books I knew from sources like Sir Maurice Holmes' *Captain Cook – A Bibliographical Excursion*,³ one of the classic bibliographies of works related to Cook. But that was really no surprise, as Bob had previously told me that he used Holmes' work as an informal collecting list. It's one thing to hear, but a completely different thing to actually see!

For the next few hours, Bob and I talked Cook, books and collecting, all the while examining the treasures that small room held. A few stand out in memory.

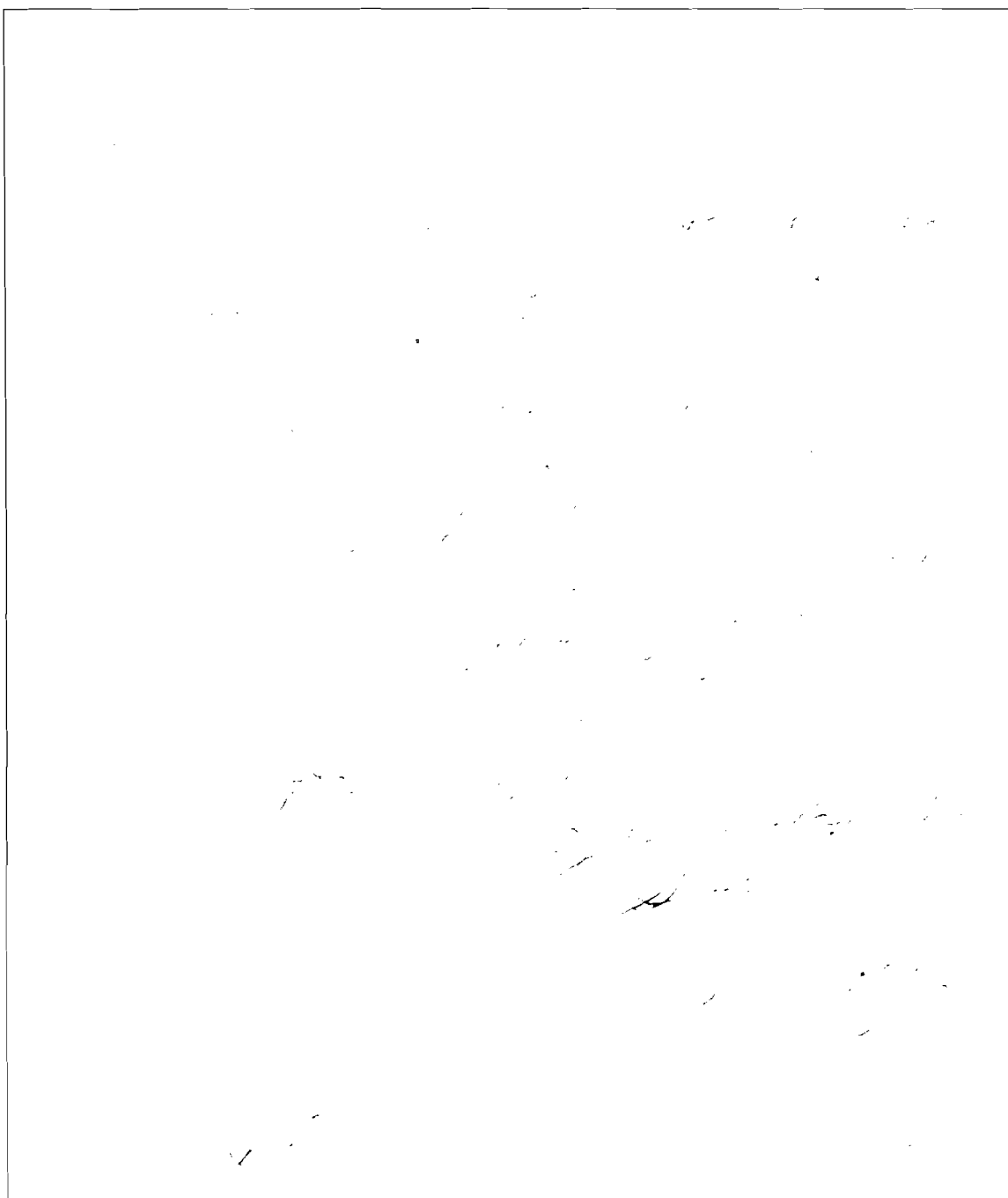


The Shaw (item 83 in the Parks Catalog) – As we continued reviewing the wonderful volumes on his shelves, Bob handed me a rather unimpressive looking volume that at first glance seemed much "rougher" than the other books. As soon as I opened the covers I knew why: the book was filled with samples of tapa cloth. One of the almost unobtainable goals of even the most well-heeled Cook collector is to obtain a copy of Alexander Shaw's 1787 album of tapa cloth samples that were actually collected on Cook's Third Voyage. I now held a copy in my hands. This book was truly different from the others: it wasn't *about* the history of the voyage, it *was* the history of the voyage.



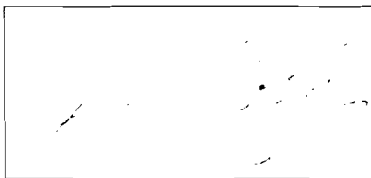
The Samwell (Item 100) in the Parks Catalog) – After handling rarity after rarity, I was beginning to

get a little numb. It was simply overwhelming to see so much depth in any field, let alone my own collecting area of Cook. But I hadn't seen one item (and really didn't expect to see it) – *Discovery* surgeon David Samwell's extremely rare description of the death of Captain Cook. It was the next book Bob handed to me. Published in 1786, Samwell's description provided many particulars not included in the official account of the voyage. But I was aware of only one copy that had come up at auction for decades and it sold to an anonymous buyer. I said so to Parks and he simply nodded toward the slim volume in my hands. "Who knows you have this?" I asked. "You do." He replied.



The Cook Letter (Item 34 in the Parks Catalog)

The Banks and Solander Map (Item 7 in the Parks Catalog) – Later in the evening, while sitting and enjoying a glass of wine, Bob began talking about the earliest map to show the discoveries of Cook on his First Voyage. It was a proof pull of a map prepared in 1772 at the request of Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander that was never published. He cited documentation stating that only one copy of the map was known and it was in the British Library. As such it was the rarest of all publications relating to Cook's voyages. He then smiled and commented, "The second copy is at your feet." Looking down, I noticed for the first time a medium sized map nicely framed and resting on the floor under the coffee table in the center of the room.



The Cook Letter (Item 34 in the Parks Catalog) – We finally got to one of Bob Parks' favorite items from his collection – a letter written and signed by Cook seeking the return of one of *Resolution's* men who had been press-ganged into the English East India Company's service. It was not written by a ship's clerk, but by the great captain himself, and this personal interest in his company was what made the item so special to Parks.

My evening with Bob Parks and his books was completely amazing. Never before (or since) had I encountered so many significant Cook publications, and certainly not in one place. And to top it off, I was encouraged to explore whatever I chose, to handle the works, and to simply enjoy myself. I'll not forget that evening, and Bob and I have continued to stay in touch ever since.

Few members of the Captain Cook Society will be in a position to own such treasures or to share the kind of experience I had that evening in Detroit.

However, most members will be able to acquire the Parks catalog itself, and with that single addition to their libraries they will come as close as they can to enjoying and appreciating the wealth of early published material about Cook I saw that night.

The catalog is stunning and is more likely to end up as a coffee table conversation piece than tucked away on a dusty bookshelf. It is hardbound with a color dust jacket and measures approximately 8.75 inches by 11.25 inches. Between its covers are detailed 133 items, including full descriptions and color illustrations. And it's all about Cook. With its price of AUD\$45, it's about as inexpensive an introduction to the richness of the Cook literature as one is likely to find.

So if you want to have your own instant collection of the most significant works on Cook without spending many hundreds of thousands of dollars you should certainly consider acquiring a copy of Hordern House's catalog of the Parks collection, *Captain James Cook: The Greatest Discoverer*.

Oh yeah, Bob Parks' collection of Bligh and Bounty material was pretty interesting too. If anybody ever asks you about the only document that contains the signatures of both William Bligh and Fletcher Christian ... I've held it!

But that's another story.

Ron Ravneberg
5642 Moorgate Drive, Columbus,
Ohio 43235-2506, USA
Email: RRavneberg@aol.com

References

1. *Cook's Log*, page 7, vol. 29, no. 1 (2006)
2. Hordern House website: <http://www.hordern.com/>
3. *Captain James Cook: The Greatest Discoverer*, Hordern House Rare Books Pty, 2008
4. Holmes, Sir Maurice Gerald. *Captain James Cook, R.N., F.R.S.: a bibliographical excursion*, F. Edwards, 1952.