

## Blue-Lip'd Cannibal Ladies: The Allure of the Exotic in the Illicit *Resolution* Journal of Gunner John Marra

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### WILD NATIVE OR WILD GOOSE?

Some future faunist, a man of fortune, wit, I hope, extend his visits to the Kingdom of Ireland; a new field and a country little known to the naturalist. He will not, it is to be wished, undertake that tour unaccompanied by a botanist, because the mountains have scarcely been sufficiently examined... The manners of the wild natives, their superstitions, their prejudices, their sordid way of life, will exort many useful reflections. <sup>(1)</sup>

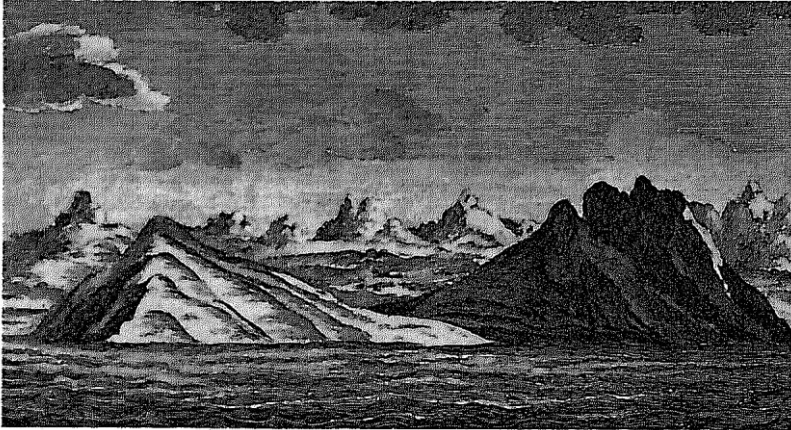
IN 1776 SCIENTIST Gilbert White proposed an expedition into Ireland, part of Britain's imperial heartland. The programme of scientific investigation he recommended was very similar to that employed by his friend Joseph Banks during James Cook's first Pacific voyage, six years earlier. <sup>(2)</sup> Ironically, just as White was making his plans for Ireland, one of the Emerald Isle's own "wild natives" was having published, illicitly and anonymously, the first account of Cook's second – and arguably most successful – voyage of exploration in the Antipodes.

The *Journal of the Resolution's Voyage* <sup>(3)</sup> first announced to the world how Cook had decisively proved that no Southern Continent existed in the temperate zone. It was also the first account of Cook's discovery of the great ice-mass subsequently known as Antarctica, and of the expedition's diverse encounters with natural elements and native peoples in the South Pacific. While the publication was something of a private coup for its author, it was of great concern to the Lords of the Admiralty, who had been assured by Cook that no such unauthorised journals existed, and to the officers and "scientific gentlemen" of the voyage, who were already locked in battle with their superiors and with each other over limitations being imposed on the publication of their own accounts.

Soon after arriving back in England in mid-1775, Cook heard rumours of a pending publication by one of his *Resolution* crew. He sent a subordinate around their London haunts and printing houses to investigate. Eventually the focus turned on John Marra, a gunner's mate, who admitted having sold his journal to Mr Francis Newbery of St Paul's Churchyard. He also stated that two other crew members had "each kept a Journal which they had offered to the Booksellers but they were so badly written that no one could read them"; at least three other lower-deck seamen were also named as having kept some written record. On hearing this, and on being advised that Marra's account was "not... worth regarding", Cook dropped the matter. <sup>(4)</sup> The journal was duly published in London in late 1775, with a pirated edition being printed in Dublin in 1776, and German and French translations appearing in 1776 and 1777. <sup>(5)</sup>

In the two centuries since, "Marra's journal" has been totally overshadowed by officially sanctioned accounts written by Cook himself (1777), by the scientists George Forster (1777) and Johann Forster (1778), and by several other gentlemen and officers. The eminent historian of Pacific exploration, J.C. Beaglehole, described Marra's effort as "a small book even when blown up by the editor, but interesting enough". <sup>(6)</sup> Without a doubt he has a point: the frequent subordination of Marra's individual voice to an overall editorial authority, plus the inclusion of extracts from the works of earlier Pacific voyagers and some entries from the journal of a seaman on *Adventure*, companion-ship of the *Resolution*, does make this an unconventional voyaging text. But, I ask, can a book of 328 pages be dismissed as "small", and should the journal that

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"The large Fields of Ice by which their Passage was obstructed". Enderby Land, southeast of Capetown — probably the first published illustration of Antarctica. Engraving from a sketch by John Marra.

constitutes the bulk of its content realistically be treated as insignificant?

Cook first encountered Marra at Batavia in December 1770, during the final leg of his first Pacific voyage. The seaman had deserted from a Dutch ship which was demanding him back, arguing he was "Jan Marre, a Dane, from Elsinore". Much in need of replacements for his own depleted *Endeavour* crew, Cook refused to surrender him, claiming him as a British subject, "John Marra, a young Irishman of Cork". With this re-found identity and allegiance, the 22-year-old Marra sailed from Java, and began familiarising himself with the ways of Banks and his scientific associates. <sup>(7)</sup> Once in England he remained in Cook's service, and appears to have been an early volunteer for the projected second voyage. His main recorded distinction at this time, however, was being punished for mutiny and desertion during preparations for the July 1772 departure of *Resolution* - a taste of things to come. <sup>(8)</sup>

Marra's record of continued insubordination to British naval authority played a large part in subsequent generations of scholars bypassing his account. It is my view, nevertheless, based on a careful reading of his published journal, that Marra was far from the semi-literate misfit he is generally assumed to have been. Take, for example, his detailed account of how, just before their return to England, Cook called together all the men of the *Resolution* to congratulate them on their collective achievements, and to demand that "all those officers who had kept journals... deliver them into his custody, to be sealed up in a chest, not to be opened till delivered to their lordships at the proper office". <sup>(9)</sup> It is both a masterpiece of subversive humour and a serious exposition of

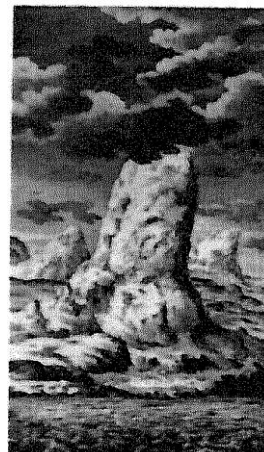
how standard British naval practice automatically assumed that ordinary seamen lacked the ability to produce such documents. Consider also Marra's description from 15 December 1773 of the *Resolution's* encounter with the ice-packs in the southernmost depths of the Pacific, as it pushed its way across the Antarctic Circle in terrain never previously encountered:

Here the ice-islands presented a most romantic prospect of ruined castles, churches, arches, steeples, wrecks of ships, and a thousand wild and grotesque forms of monsters, dragons, and all the hideous shapes that the most fertile imagination can possibly conceive. About these islands the penguins are heard continually screaming, and add to the horror of the scene, which cannot be beheld by the most intrepid without some emotions of fear. <sup>(10)</sup>

Or, from 30 January 1774, another entry by "our journalist aboard the *Resolution*", during Cook's deepest and final - plunge beyond the Antarctic Circle:

This day [we] passed by a great island of ice, and heard many dreadful cracks, as if the whole earth was cleaving asunder. Saw several whales and a strange bird as before. Taking a view from the mast-head nothing was to be seen but a dreary prospect of ice and sea. Of the former might be seen a whole country as far as the eye could carry one, diversified with hills and dales, and fields and imaginary plantations, that all had the appearance of cultivation; yet was nothing more than the sports of chance in the formation of those immense bodies of congregated ice. This second attempt at discovery of land in this dreary region being attended with no more success than the first, the captain thought it advisable to give over the pursuit of the present, and once more to direct the ship's course to the northward. <sup>(11)</sup>

"A remarkable high Mountain".  
Probably Freezeland Park, South Sandwich Island,  
South Atlantic, Engraving from a sketch by John Marra.



Marra's writing is far more literary than navigation notes and diaries kept by other lower-deck crew of Cook's ships. It even reads more eloquently than the published Journals of the Captain himself, and of some of his officers and "scientific gentlemen". This suggests that John Marra was, relatively speaking, not lacking in education. If, as seems likely, he was Catholic, this education would probably have been gained in the illegal "hedge schools". Until the Penal Laws imposed by their British Protestant overlords began to be dismantled from the 1780s, such schools provided Ireland's "wild natives" with their only access to basic learning. Marra was probably also one of those thousands of refugees remembered in Irish history as the "Wild Geese", who during this period sought education, employment and freedom in Continental Europe and beyond. <sup>(12)</sup> Which is how, presumably, this particular "wild Irishman" came to be in the service of the Dutch in Batavia.

Marra's account is refreshing because it has not been shaped or limited by the homogenising "scientific" atmosphere of the upper deck and grand cabin, and, by extension, the diverse agendas of the Royal Society and the Royal Navy, and their aristocratic and commercial patrons. It reflects more the everyday dramas, gritty realism and battered souls of the lower deck. This view does not negate the other; they are entangled, alternative accounts of this particular encounter with the Antipodean exotic.

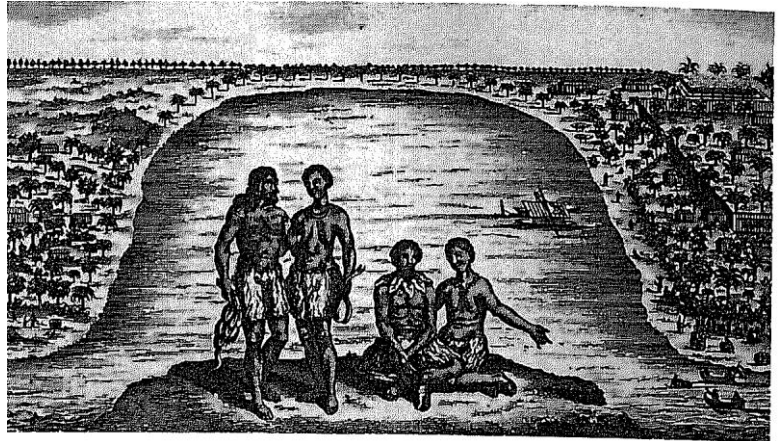
#### **WILD IRISHMAN OR WOULD-BE- ANTHROPOLOGIST?**

Our treatment at this isle was such as had induced one of our gunners mates to form a Plan to remain at it, he knew he could not execute it with success while we lay in the Bay, therefore took the opportunity as soon as we were out and all our Sails set

to slip overboard (he being a good swimmer) but he was discov[er]ed before he had got clear of the ship... I kept the Man in confinement till we were clear of the isles then dismissed [him] without any other punishment, for when I considered the situation of the Man in life I did not think him so culpable as it may first appear, he was an Irishman by birth, a good Seaman and had Sailed both in the English and the Dutch service... I never learnt that he had either friends or connection to confine him to any particular part of the world, all Nations were alike to him, where can Such a Man spend his days better than at one of these isles where he can enjoy all the necessaries and some of the luxuries of life in ease and Plenty. <sup>(13)</sup>

**THUS WROTE JAMES COOK** of John Marra in the official *Resolution* journal entry of 14 May 1774, en route from Tahiti to Huahine. As reflected in their respective writings, there was always a unique relationship between the Englishman and the Irishman: the former admiring the young gunner for his seamanly skills, but despairing of his indifference to authority and society; the latter in awe of his commander's maritime and leadership qualities, but cynical of the earthly powers he represented. Undoubtedly, too, it was this same mutual regard which the following year caused Marra to quickly confess when asked by Cook's emissary whether he was the author of the rumoured journal, and which in turn caused Cook to desist from taking action against him.

Marra's own account of his attempted desertion at Tahiti deserves scrutiny. Consistent with the overall anonymous tone of his published journal, it describes the event from the perspective of a fictitious and unnamed ordinary crewman on the *Resolution*. For good measure it also takes a swipe at the anthropological pretensions of the "gentlemen" on Cook's two voyages:



Engraving after an illustration in Abel Tasman's account of his 1643 visit to Amsterdam Island, or Tongatapu "Being a View of an Harbour and Plantations in the Island of Rotterdam, with the "Manner of the Inhabitants sitting and standing".

[it] proved to be the gunner's mate, endeavouring to escape with a view to being left behind; and pity it was that he happened to be discovered, as from him a more copious and accurate account of the religion and civil government of these *people* might *have* been expected after a few years stay among them, than could possibly be collected from a few short visits, by gentlemen who had the language to learn, and whose first business was to procure necessaries, in order to enable them to pursue more important discoveries. But this attempt failing, and the man taken up, he was brought back, and laid in irons to bewail his ill-fortune, having flattered himself, as a man of enterprize, with being made king of the country, or at least prime minister.

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But, according to the memoirs of John Elliott, a trainee officer aboard *Resolution*, Marra deserted because he had been "promis'd a House, Land and a Pretty Wife" by the Tahitians. The following marginalia can be found in Cook's original handwritten account of the incident: "I know not if he [Marra] might not have obtained my consent if he had applied for it in proper time." J.C. Beaglehole is *suspicious* of the way Marra "ingeniously puts forward anthropological research as an advantage to be gained from his desertion".<sup>(18)</sup> My own position is more generous to Marra: I accept his word simply because his published narrative suggests a genuine ability and interest in writing intelligently, even "anthropologically", about the indigenous peoples encountered in his travels and trysts.

In their dealings with the local inhabitants, many ordinary seamen on Cook's ships, and not a few of their officers and gentlemen, were inclined to "shoot first and ask questions later". So it is interesting to see the genuine humanity – if sometimes tinged with a roguish wit – in Marra's accounts of "Indian" life. He

shows this in the reports of his earliest encounters, with Maori at Dusky Bay and Queen Charlotte Sound in New Zealand, through to his last, with the Patagonians of Tierra del Fuego. Along the way, Marra provided Europe with its first-ever published descriptions of the indigenous peoples of a number of Pacific societies, including Niue, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia; and with its first reports by an English-language observer of several others, especially Easter Island, the Marquesas, Tonga and the Solomon Islands. Similarly, during two separate visits to Tahiti and the Society Islands, he aligned himself through his writing with those who privileged fact over fiction in their descriptions of these overly-Arcadianised locales.

While it would be pointless to attempt to summarise the ethnological material in Marra's text, two examples seem appropriate. The first concerns the southern Tongan islands of Eua and Tongatapu, visited by Tasman in 1643 and named by him "Middleburg" and "Amsterdam" respectively. Marra observed and documented many aspects of their people's *customary ways* in the course of his October 1773 visit. He mentions trade, ceremonies, entertainment, chiefs, priests, gardening, livestock, fences, houses, sleeping, eating, families, weaving, clothing, bark-cloth, weaponry, tools, coconuts, water, theft, sex, beauty and more. The following quotes show how Marra compared the natural and cultural attributes of these islands with those of the recently-farewelled Society group. In the process, he represented Tongatapu as being as close to a terrestrial paradise as the already-fabled Tahiti:

This island is level, the lawns of a beautiful green, and the woods



Engraving of a scene from a narrative by one of *Adventure's* crew "Representing the landing of Port of the *Adventure's* Crew in search of their Companions, who were murdered and eaten by the Savages of New-Zealand". Grass Cove, Queen Charlotte Sound; note tattooed hand of Thomas Hill and dog eating human flesh.

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abounding with fruit-bearing trees, so varied in colour that nothing in nature can afford a more enchanting prospect.... [T]he homes and plantations of the inhabitants of the inland part of the country [are] infinitely preferable to any in that part of the world [we have] yet beheld. Their houses are far more commodious than those of the islanders near the line. <sup>(16)</sup>

On these islands the virtue of chastity has not yet taken place. The women, though less inviting, are not less willing to gratify strangers with all they can desire. But it would seem from their remarkable populousness, that their domestic concerns are under better regulations among themselves than has *yet* been observed among the islanders [we] lately left. <sup>(17)</sup>

Their working tools, their proas or canoes... their nets for catching fish, their fish-hooks, and their domestic utensils, their arms, and in short all their mechanical inventions are each so curiously made and polished, that it would require the utmost skill of an European artificer to excell them. <sup>(18)</sup>

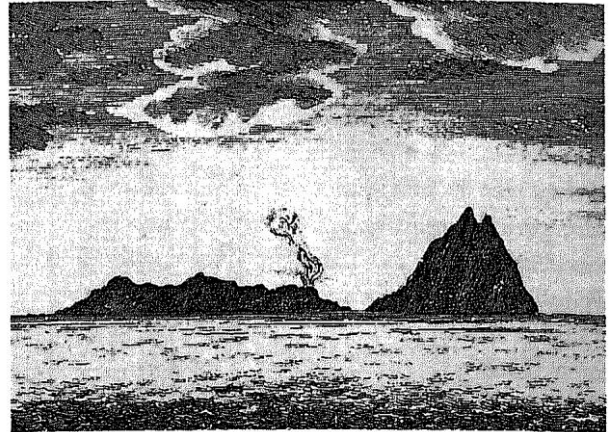
Our second example relates to the Marquesas Islands, visited and so named by Mendana in 1595, and next encountered by Europeans with the arrival of *the Resolution* in April 1774. Again, much diverse information is recorded by Marra, especially regarding the sexual modesty of the women and the beauty of the people's tattooing, its aesthetic and social dimensions, and its comparability to Maori practices:

[They] were in general more elegantly painted than any [we] had met with, even more so than the New Zealanders, having their very lips tattooed; and the figures on their faces and breast so curiously traced and delineated, that no printer in Europe could have sketched the outline of a bird, fish, or animal, with more nicety, or with greater exactness. <sup>(19)</sup>

The most conspicuous mark of distinction appeared to be tattooing. In this the difference was very discernable. The chiefs were tattooed from their faces to their finger ends, not in volutes or spiral lines like the chiefs in New Zealand; but in figures of various kinds, suited to the different parts of the body, according to the artist's fancy, in which no small ingenuity was displayed. Perhaps the different qualities of those chiefs might have been discovered *by* observing the characters represented; but time *was* wanting for such nice observations. <sup>(20)</sup>

Marra's point - that careful observation of tattooing is necessary in order to understand it - is notable. Five weeks later in Tahiti he tried to desert, claiming as primary motivation a desire to engage in long-term observation of "the religion and civil *government* of these people". Back in Queen Charlotte Sound in November that same year, no such scholarly intent appears to have been proffered when Marra was again facing a charge of desertion, indeed, such an excuse would not have been believed given the circumstances of his actions,

At that time there was great concern on the *Resolution* over the *fate* of their companion-ship *Adventure*, which twelve months earlier had disappeared during a storm off the New Zealand coast. In reality, while *Resolution* went on to undertake a second circuit of the South Pacific, a cutter-load of ten men from *Adventure* had been massacred and cannibalised at Grass Cove, in Queen Charlotte Sound, after which *Adventure* had immediately left for England. A year later, while *Resolution* was in the same harbour being prepared for its own final departure, Cook -already well aware that cannibalism was a real feature of Maori culture - received garbled reports from local people, which he interpreted



"A View of two Burning Mountains". The volcanic island of Tofua and its near neighbour Kao, He "pai Group, Tonga. Engraving after an illustration by John Marra.

as meaning a European ship had been wrecked and its crew eaten.

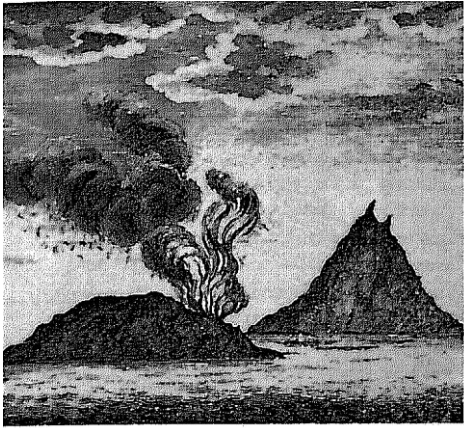
Soon after receiving this disturbing news, the Captain was told that Marra had got drunk and hidden himself in a canoe to go ashore in pursuit of "the fairer sex". Furiously declaring that he would have left him there "if he were not well assured the fellow would be killed and eaten before morning", Cook dispatched an armed party ashore to drag the miscreant back to face the inevitable. <sup>(21)</sup> Marra's journal details his view of the event, again as if through the eyes of a fellow crewman:

[S]everal strange Indians came rowing down the Sound, having a variety of articles, the produce of the country, to dispose of... These savages had with them seven or eight young red painted blue-lip'd cannibal ladies, who were by no means unwilling to be introduced to the company of such of the ship's crew as fancied them. The gunner's mate, who had been confined in irons for endeavouring to leave the ship at Otaheite, was here punished with twelve lashes for going ashore without leave in pursuit of one of those beauties. <sup>(22)</sup>

A few days later *Resolution* upped anchor and sailed eastwards across the Pacific, reaching England in July 1775. Then, six weeks on, an illicit shipboard journal written by a "wild Irish" gunner was delivered to a London bookseller. Several months afterwards it reappeared as the anonymous and somewhat disembodied voice of the first published account of this unparalleled voyage - from a Eurocentred perspective - to the most distant and exotic reaches of the globe, And the rest, as they say, is history.

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1. Gilbert White (c.1776) cited in Bernard Smith *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850* Oxford University Press, London, 1960. p3. 2. Bernard Smith, op cit. p3. 3. Anon. [John Marra] *Journal of the Resolution's Voyage, in 1772, 1773, 1774, and 1775 on Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, by which the Non-Existence of an Undiscovered Continent Between the Equator and the 50th Degree of Southern Latitude, is Demonstratively Proved. Also a Journal of the Adventure's Voyage, in the Years 1772, 1773, and 1774. With an Account of the Separation of the Two Ship, and the Most Remarkable Incidents that Befel Each. Interspersed with Historical and Geographical Descriptions of the Islands and Countries Discovered in the Course of their Respective Voyages. Illustrated with a Chart, in which the Tracks of Both Vessels are Accurately Laid Down, and Other Cuts* F. Newbery, London, 1775. 4. *The Voyage of the Resolution and the Adventure 1772-1775* (ed. J.C. Beaglehole) Cambridge University Press, 1961. pp961-2. 5. J.C. Beaglehole *The Life of Captain James Cook* Stanford University Press, 1974. p456. 6. *Ibid.* p456. 7. *Ibid.* p263. 8. Marra's disciplinary record as it unfolded over the course of his service on *Resolution* is as follows: April 1772, England, mutiny and desertion, 12 lashes and confinement; July 1772, Madeira, insolence, 12 lashes; August 1773, Tahiti, insolence, 6 lashes; May 1774, Tahiti, attempted desertion, put in irons and confinement; November 1774, New Zealand, desertion and drunkenness, 12 lashes. 9. Marra, op cit. p325. 10. *Ibid.* p111. 11. *Ibid.* p125. 12. *Ireland and the French Enlightenment 1700-1800* (eds. G. Gargett and G. Sheridan) Macmillan, London, 1999. 13. James Cook, cited in *The Voyage of the Resolution and the Adventure 1772-1775* op cit. p403-4. 14. Marra, op cit. pp235-6. 15. *The Voyage of the Resolution and the Adventure 1772-1775* op cit. pp403-4. 16. Marra, op cit. p59, 61. 17. *Ibid.* pp63-4. 18. *Ibid.* p65. 19. *Ibid.* pp 157-8. 20. *Ibid.* pp163-4. 21. J.C. Beaglehole *The Life of Captain James Cook* op cit. p422. 22. Marra, op cit. pp304-5.



"A View of two Burning Mountains"