



## GOODBYE TO WHITBY

**James Cook spent his apprentice years in a small harbour on the Yorkshire coast.  
The bleak North Sea prepared him for an explorer's life.**

*By Zora del Buono*

*Photos by Jonathan Olley and Frank Meadow Sutcliffe (historical images)*

*Translated from the German by Sylee Gore*

LET US SPEAK OF GOD, AND OF rainy weather. And let us speak of poverty as well. Or of spirituality, or of a place, a social class. Of tolerance, a harbour town, a maritime milieu. In our specific case the trinity is: Quaker – Yorkshire – day labourer's son. These components dance around one another, inform and form each other, conspire with one another, complement each other, shape, restrict, advance. There's another component in this dance, something every individual is given at the beginning. Let's call it a resonator. When an instrument is played, the resonator is the basis for what in the end forms a person. This resonator and this triad produces the unique melody which is James Cook.

It is of God, then, that we wish to speak. And of John Walker. James Cook would have been another man without John Walker and his God; without Walker, he would perhaps have been a conqueror, not a discoverer. (The distinction is not one to be underestimated.)

“But yet the less Form in Religion the better, since God is a Spirit: For the more mental our Worship, the more adequate to the Nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the Language of a Spirit,” wrote William Penn, the founder of the state of Pennsylvania and a Quaker, as was John Walker, the ship-owner from the harbour town Whitby on the east English coast.

James Cook was seventeen when he was taken into John Walker's house as an apprentice. He and Walker would remain lifelong friends, as shown by their long-distance correspondence. Walker was far more than Cook's nautical mentor, though. The Society of Friends is a religious community whose meetings are characterised by silence, waiting for God's guidance, and a belief in humankind's inner light. God lives in the details, and therefore the details must be fundamentally good. The Friends of the Light know no clergy, no dogma and no preacher. Quakers are deeply spiritual, modest, sincere, and

open. They attach little importance to social differences and negotiating is frowned upon even in businesspeople, for negotiating changes truth.

But Walker was contrary, standing up to the strict London pacifists who forbade the possession of weapons. Walker could follow this reasoning as far as those living on land were concerned, but seafarers needed to protect themselves. So he protested. John Walker was tolerant, but headstrong. Walker was Cook's role model.

Cook didn't become a Quaker, but he shared small rooms with Walker's sons and daughter and a number of his cousins, and he went to sea with Quakers for days and weeks at a time. Through them he learned to accept all the gods, spirits and ancestors he encountered first in Yorkshire and later in the South Seas, all the rites and foreign customs, the various signs of God.

Because, once again: God lives in each of us. Only when evil gains the upper

hand does it need to be battled. Cook never forgot that, neither on Easter Island nor on Tahiti nor aboard his ship. Only on his third voyage did he battle overmuch, react too hard, shoot too soon, lose his nerve and distance himself from Walker's spiritual teachings. He slowly drifted away from his ideals and himself, losing his inner sense of equilibrium and becoming ill and depressed - the result, perhaps, of opium consumption. Indeed, opium is sometimes said to have led to his downfall on February 14th, 1779, the last day of his life.

**B**ut let us now turn away from God and towards the landscape. Moors so vast it took days to cross them, brown in winter, blooming in the spring. With sheep, naturally, and white cows. And hills upon hills, but few villages. Emptiness under a vast sky. Whitby lay below the moor on England's North Sea coast, a town with 5,000 inhabitants, built along both banks of the river Esk, which is hacked into the landscape like a notch, making Whitby a place between two cliffs. Steep streets and alleyways wend their way through the brick buildings of the village, whorls and bends that yield new views onto the sea, onto the sheltered harbour and the ruined abbey that rises above the town like a bizarre sculpture, a skeleton from early Christian times, looming from the mist and serving from a distance as a landmark for seafarers. It is a reminder that all is mortal, buildings as much as men. Messages from yesteryear have washed ashore there for millions of years. Whitby jet is the name of the jet pressed from the wood of the monkey puzzle tree and made into precious jewellery, a rare substance of pure, deep black. A steep staircase leads to the abbey with resting places along the way for coffin bearers, a staircase that leads the dead from the city below to the cemetery above,

and which the mourners scale step by step as they ascend the mountain. There the dead lie very close to heaven.

The city was a bustling one, crowded with sailing ships built to transport coal from around Newcastle to London via the North Sea. People lived in close quarters, the harbour flourished, and manufacturers of rope and sails lined the banks of the Esk. One can assume it was noisy. Children swam in the deep dock that had been excavated for the large ships. The hinterland was large and wide, and the sea route to London was quicker than travelling by land. Whitby, a stormy, rainy spot, was completely focussed on the North Sea.

Cook learned a great deal about seafaring in Whitby. He was a diligent scholar, supported by the Walker family's housekeeper, good old Mary Proud, who kept him supplied with food and candles and who fell into maternal cooing when she spoke about "James honey". Over long winter evenings in the attic he acquired his knowledge of navigation. The room was large, completely lacking in natural light, and not even his own. He had to share it with younger apprentices who passed the time with "pointless gossip" while he brooded over maps and tables, a hard-working, disciplined, and taciturn young man.

With the Whitby Cats, those dumpy colliers he first became familiar with at the age of eight, he would later explore the world. His first vessel, the *Freelove*, was a 450-ton ship, small by today's standards but larger than the *Endeavour*, the ship with which he would discover the South Seas. The Cats were roomy, flexible, and ready for anything. When the government chartered the *Three Brothers* for troop transport, Cook learned just how many men and cavalry horses could be transported in tight quarters.

These apprenticeship years prepared

him for the future, but an inner force compelled him to move on. Leaving John Walker and his coal ships in order to become a sailor for the Royal Navy, just at the moment when Walker offered him a ship to pilot, was quite possibly the most radical decision Cook ever made. He could have become a captain and settled down in the small town, become a local personality, had a wife and children and peace when the day's work was done, sat with others in pubs so small, dark, and cramped that it seemed they might at any moment begin to sway, like a ship setting off for sea.

**B**ut no, he wanted to begin again from the very bottom, and willingly embraced his reduced circumstances without any fear. After all, a man of good character who has started out at the very bottom and has risen to the top will not forget where he came from. Cook wasn't above scrubbing the deck. Therefore he rose to the top once again - further, indeed, than almost anyone else in his time.

And thus we come to the final point in the trinity: a day labourer's son. Let's look a few years further back. In a mud hut covered with straw Grace Cook brought him into the world in the hamlet of Marton-in-Cleveland. We know the entry in the church registry from November 3rd, 1728, that reads: "James, the son of James Cook, day labourer, baptised." There were eight children in total, but apart from James only two sisters and an older brother survived their childhood. As a six-year-old he tended the cattle of a local landowner and received reading lessons from his wife in exchange. Two years later his family moved a few villages away, and there too the talented boy had the luck to find a patron. The farmer himself paid the school fees for the determined Cook.

He was drawn ever further, his world grew ever larger, even if his first steps out of the family took him to a place so tiny that one might expect an attack of claustrophobia. Staithes lay 15 miles north of Whitby, just a few houses stuck under a cliff, a fishing town with a handful of inhabitants. The sea is the only thing that's large there. The sea, and the world beckoning from beyond it.

Cook was an apprentice for the grocer William Sanderson. He had to sleep under the shop counter and sell the fishermen all the essentials of life. The episode that led to the abrupt termination of his apprenticeship has become a legend; it is a story that is so perfect that one might question its authenticity, and yet it's said to be true.

A shilling lay in the grocer's cash register, a very special coin, the so-called South Seas shilling, minted under George I. The young Cook took this symbol of his desire and of distance, and put another coin in the register. The substitution didn't escape William Sanderson's attention, a certain unpleasantness resulted between Cook and his master, and they agreed to end the apprenticeship.

The son from the poverty-stricken house wanted more, wanted something greater. A city, ideally a harbour city, where he could become a sailor, and relieve his inner discontent. So the ship-owner John Walker and lively Whitby entered the scene. And Walker brought with him his tolerant god and the lumbering Whitby Cats, ships with a shallow draught that could take on a journey to the end of the world. Thus the circle closes in on itself and the young James becomes Cook the explorer. ☺

*experience.*

*The London-based photographer Jonathan Olley knows Whitby and its coast very well. His photos on the theme of coastal erosion can be found in **mare** No. 54.*

*The photographs of Whitby taken by Frank Meadow Sutcliffe (1853-1941) are legendary. His father was a landscape painter; the young Frank opted for the new medium of photography. At the age of 70 he became curator of the Whitby Museum.*

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*Zora del Buono, Deputy Editor of **mare**, lives in Berlin. As a child, she ate fish and chips out of a newspaper for the first time in Whitby – a memorable*