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Natural History in the Contact Zone

The ‘factual’ travel account and its deconstruction

The emerging discipline of natural history sought order in nature, and this desire for order manifested itself in the organisation of museums at the European centres and in the schemata and protocols used by collectors. This chapter examines the practices of gathering and recording information about the natural world in the contact zones of the South Seas, as presented in the journals of prominent traveller-scientists. The argument is that the journal or factual travel account had a crucial role, both in the development of the science of natural history, and in shaping public perceptions of a wider natural world. The journal form used by traveller-scientists was highly organised, with a linear narrative whose authority was based on presence (and *presencing*) and the visual scrutiny of the eyewitness. Despite highly objective and rational intent, the content could be uncertain and even ambiguous, suggesting that observation and the identification of natural phenomena in unfamiliar territory was not straightforward. In fact, due to difficult conditions of travel, the process of recording nature was often serendipitous and arbitrary. Furthermore, although scientific protocols demanded detachment and a disinterested eye, the observer/narrator’s objectivity was often compromised as he was forced into the role of actor in tense dramas within alien environments. Even in Cook’s journals, where diminished subjectivity is the dominant mode, fraught interactions with natural and social worlds disrupt the calm flow of factual narrative.

As well as difficult conditions in the field, the traveller-scientist also carried cultural values and beliefs with him: his presence shaped the behaviour of those he observed, coloured what he saw and determined
where he looked. In the contact zone, these values and beliefs, together with the *habit* of collecting, had the advantage of providing a stable platform and an ontological shell to protect him from the intense otherness of alien environments. The obsessive collecting, measuring and shooting of birds and animals recorded in journals might then be interpreted as attempts to preserve a collective identity and offer distraction from frequent bouts of physical and mental sickness.\(^1\) For navigators such as Cook, this particular problem was less intense, partly because he was a sturdy and self-contained individual, but also because he never really needed to justify why he was there. Self-preservation for him was guaranteed by simply executing his navigational duties. His maps and charts confirmed his purpose and his being.

The journals of traveller-scientists were published widely, and not primarily for their scientific content. Drawings and descriptions of plants, animals, landscape features, natives and their customs, as well as navigational data, were all published separately from the narrative and circulated around different communities of readers.\(^2\) Major published journals, such as George Forster’s *A Voyage Round the World*, revealed little original scientific knowledge, but as personal narratives they served broader social purposes. One was simply to confirm the ‘phenomenological “thereness”’ of a rapidly expanding and various external world.\(^3\) This was more of a social function than a scientific one, because it widened economic, political and imaginative horizons for a European audience in an age of expansion. It was largely because the journals were asked to perform different and conflicting functions for different audiences that they became inherently unstable texts. These functions included: 1) to confirm the existence of remote lands and the nature of the external world for an increasingly outward-looking public, and to ascertain the scope for improving and exploiting remote environments; 2) to record absolute positions and, by tracing the lineaments of coastlines, give shape to *terra incognita*; 3) to settle scientific debates about the natural world by recording observations and the conclusions of experiments on, for example, the temperature of volcanoes and the salinity of icebergs; 4) to describe flora and fauna, especially *new species*, and confirm or contest information and theories; 5) to witness and reflect upon the natural world and relations between nature and humanity; 6) to record native customs and behaviour, responding to a particular fascination with cannibalism, sexual habits and dress.

The factual travel account as a genre suppressed ornate and artificial forms of writing, responding to a taste for non-fictional literature, and distancing itself from the effusions of sentimental and