The Amazing Life and Strange Death of Captain Cook: Crash Course World History #27

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to talk about the life and astonishing death of Captain James Hook. Who's death by a crocodile ch- what? James Cook? There's no crocodiles? HGGG! Stupid history, always disappointing me. Well, Captain Cook is pretty interesting too and his death is a nice entree into one of the great historian feuds of recent times. God, I love historian feuds.

(Intro)

So Captain Cook was born in 1728. He was a sailor and eventually a British Naval Officer, who saw action in the Seven Years War (which you will no doubt remember from last week) But he's best know for his three voyages of exploration and scientific discovery that took place in the Pacific Ocean.

The first was between 1768 and 1771, the second between 1772 and 1775, and the third between 1776 and 1780. Although on the last one, Cook's journey ended in 1779 because he died. And as you can see from the map, Cook pretty much OWNED the Pacific.

He mapped the coast of Australia, paving the way for British colonization and also paving the way for the near destruction of aboriginal peoples and their culture. As with the Columbian Exchange, Cook's voyages to Australia remade the biological landscape. He introduced sheep, which paved the way for Australia's huge wool industry. Right, there was a penal colony established in Australia; but the real story of Australia is its success as a colony. Within 80 years, Australia went from a 1,000 Anglo-Australians to 1.2 million.

Equally important, Cook explored and mapped out New Zealand. Again paving the way for colonization and paving the way for Crash Course World History to make an announcement! We did it! We finally talked about Australia and New Zealand! We're a real world history class! Huzzah! (plows party horn) Now all you Australians have to shut up about how we've never mentioned you!

Right, so in his voyage Cook also determined the was no such thing as the mythical continent of "Terra Australis" said to have existed here. And he helped to dispel the idea of a North-West Passage, which Europeans had been obsessed with for centuries. He was the first European to describe Hawaii and also the first to keep his ships' crews free of scurvy!

Cook and his successors were part of the middle wave of European colonization. The one that took place after Europeans settled in the Americas, but before they set their sights on Africa. One more thing to mention about the context of these voyages, or rather their impact. Besides huge territorial gains and increased wealth, exploration of the Pacific contributed to Europe's romantic fascination with science. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Europeans became obsessed with mapping and charting and classifying the world. Which maybe isn't like candle-light dinner romantic, but if you think about visiting never before seen lands and bringing back odd life-forms. Well, I mean think about how we feel about space. And then of course as they colonized people, Europeans portrayed themselves as a civilizing force; bringing both science and religion.

Oh, it's time for the Open Letter? An Open Letter to "The White Man's Burden." But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Ah! It's a moustache, so I can look like Kipling!

Dear White Man's Burden,

I'mma go ahead and take this off Stan. I think Tumblr has had enough to get their GIFs.

So White Man's Burden, you're a poem. And more that a century after Kipling wrote you, scholars still disagree over whether he was kidding. And this speaks to how weird and insane Imperialism really was. Europeans seemed to genuinely believe that it was their unfortunate duty to extract massive wealth from the rest of the world. Seriously, were you kidding when you called natives "Half Devil and Half Child?" Because in retrospect, that seems to describe... ya know... you.

Best Wishes,
John Green

Right, so now having discussed the life of Captain Cook, we shall turn to the most controversial thing he ever did. Die. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So Cook landed in Hawaii at Kealakekua Bay in early 1779 and explored the island. While he was ashore he was greeted by an important person, either a Chief or a God. And then in early February, he left. But the ship had trouble and was forced to return to the bay for repairs. During this second visit, he had difficulty with the Hawaiians, who'd previously had been pretty hospitable. And there was a fracas, in which Captain Cook was killed by at least one Hawaiian. We know this from journals kept by various crewman, but the historical controversy arises from the details and interpretation of his death. Why, in short, was Cook killed?

The traditional view is that Cook was killed for some religious reason, although what isn't always clear. One of the most fleshed out versions of this story comes from the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, in his book "Islands of History." So in the Hawaiian religious system Ku, the God of War and Human Sacrifice, rules for eight or nine months out of the year. The other months are reserved for the Fertility God, Lono. The season long festival for Lono is call "Makahiki" and during this the Hawaiian King, who is associated with Ku, is ritually defeated. During the Makahiki, an image of Lono tours the island, gets worshipped, and collects taxes. And at the end of the Makahiki period, Lono is ritually defeated and returned to his native Tahiti.

The thinking goes that because Cook arrived in the middle of the Makahiki, the Hawaiians perceived him as Lono. So Cook took part in the rituals and sacrifices that were made as part of the Makahiki and in Sahlins' view, Cook was killed as a ritual murder to mark the end of Makahiki. For Ku to return, the festival to end, and the normal political order to be restored, ***** Lono had to be defeated and presumably killed! For Sahlins, Cook's death fits perfectly with the ritual structure of Hawaiian culture.

***** (under the talking, a robotic voice says "I'm sorry Dave. I cannot allow that." ends when scene changes)

Thanks Thought Bubble. So the big problem with this interpretation, which admittedly sounds pretty cool, is that we don't have much evidence that Hawaiians would have actually seen Cook this way.

We find a really interesting opposing view from Gananath Obeyesekere and I will remind you that mispronunciation is my thing! Sorry Gananath. Anyway, he criticized Sahlins' interpretation of Cook's death for looking a lot more like European myth than like a Hawaiian ritual.

First off, Obeyesekere argues that Cook himself would not easily be confused with Lono. In fact if he were taken for a God, it would probably be Ku, the War God, what with all the cannons and muskets. Also there's the fact that the name Cook sounds more like Ku than Lono. Also, arguing that native Hawaiians would see a European and think him a God has all kinds of troubling implications. One of them being that native Hawaiians aren't terribly smart. When in fact we know that they are very smart because

unlike the rest of us, they live in Hawaii. And last but definitely not least, Lono is associated with fertility and the Hawaiians would have associated the Europeans with the exact opposite of fertility because they introduced gonorrhea to Hawaii.

And there's a further problem with the "Cook equals Lono" equation, which is that nothing in Hawaiian religion has any of their gods being ritually killed. Part of their mythology can be seen as sanctioning a ritual killing of the King, but not of a god and also it's a long way from ritual killing to actual killing!

The truth is probably a lot less spectacular, which is that Cook was probably killed during a melee in which a bunch of Hawaiians were also killed. Before his death, Cook had attempted to take a Hawaiian King hostage in response to Hawaiians taking a bunch of stuff from Cook's boats. This was common practice for Cook. He had done the same thing in Tahiti and other Polynesian Islands after Islanders had taken European goods. Which by the way happened everywhere Cook went in the Pacific, so maybe he should have figured out that it was like a thing! That you were allowed to take stuff off boats in exchange for the right to hang out there! Great sailor, terrible anthropologist. Although to be fair, anthropology hadn't be invented.

Additionally, right before Cook was killed there were rising tensions between the Hawaiians and the Europeans. Even though at first their relationship had been quite cordial as evidenced by all that gonorrhea. So why the tension? Probably because the Europeans dismantled a Hawaiian ritual space, some sources call it a temple, and used it for firewood. Cook attempted to pay for it, but his low-ball offer of two hatchets, I'm not making that up, was refused!

I'm sorry we destroyed your temple, but I'll give you two hatchets! One for each hand! I mean, what would you even do with a third hatchet?!?

So unfortunately, the earliest Hawaiian account offering this explanation for why Cook was killed comes well after the accounts. But at least it's a Hawaiian explanation. Of course it's also possible that the Hawaiians were just upset that Cook had attempted to kidnap their King! Most accounts from the time portray a chaotic scene in which Cook himself fired at least two shots, probably killing at least one Islander. And one thing that seem pretty clear, even as described by European chroniclers, is that Cook's death does not look premeditated and it sure doesn't look like a ritual.

But even so, the idea that Hawaiians saw Cook as a God has ended up in a good many accounts of his demise. Why? Well one explanation is that it fits in with other stories of explorers. You've all probably heard that Taínos thought Columbus was a god and that the Aztecs supposedly thought Cortés was a god. And this just makes Captain Cook one in a long line of Europeans who were thought to be gods by people who Europeans felt were savages. And making Cook a god also sets up a stark contrast between the enlightened West and primitive Polynesia, because Captain Cook often appears in history books as a model man of the Enlightenment.

Sure he never had much formal schooling, but his voyages were all about about increasing knowledge and scientific exploration. And having him die at the hands of a people who were so obviously mistaken in thinking him a god makes an argument for the superiority over the intellectualism of the Enlightenment versus the so called "Primitive Religion" of the colonies. But whenever a story seems to fit really well into such a framework, we need to ask ourselves, "Who's telling that story?"

One of the reasons we know so much about Captain Cook and the reason he shows up in so many history textbooks is because we have tons of records about him, but they're almost all European records. Even the Hawaiian records we have about Cook have been heavily influenced by later contact with Europeans. So if we cast Cook's death as part of a native ritual, we're implying that Hawaiians were just performing a ritual script. Which takes away all their agency as human beings. Are we making them recognizable, having them respond as we think Europeans would by flying off the handle? I don't have an answer, but the debate between these two historical anthropologists brings up something that we need to keep in mind.

Very often in history, we make statements about people who haven't written their own story. Whether it's Hawaiians or Native Americans or working class people. And we try to imagine that we're seeing the world as they have seen it. But the best we can really do is offer an approximation. So is it really possible to present a Hawaiian version of Captain Cook's death? Or is the exercise inherently condescending and paternalistic? And most importantly, is our inability to escape our biases a good excuse for not even trying? As usual, those aren't rhetorical questions. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Last week's "Phrase of the Week" was fancier hats! If you want to guess at this week's "Phrase of the Week" or suggest a future one you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome. UH OH!