

Captain Cook's Third Voyage, 18th Century Ideologies, and Indigenous People of Alaska: John Ledyard's Journal and the Coming of English into Alaska

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Overview

John Ledyard's *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, and In Quest of a North-West Passage, Between Asia and America, Performed in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779* was published in 1783 and is a written record of American John Ledyard's participation on British explorer Captain James Cook's third voyage. Captain Cook was sent on the voyage in 1776 in order to prove the existence of the famed North-West passage, which would provide an easier route to the resources of the East, as well as map out the previously unexplored North-West coasts of the Pacific Ocean.

Ledyard's journal is significant to the history of English in Alaska because of the unique perspective it gives of the interactions between Cook, his crew, and the natives that resided along the Alaskan coast during the year 1778, depicting the first-ever contact between indigenous people of Alaska and the English language. By analyzing the broad historical context of 18th century exploration, the specific historical context of Captain Cook's search for the North-West passage, and the linguistic representation of Native Alaskans, it is evident that Ledyard's journal marks the starting point of the future development and establishment of English in Alaska.

John Ledyard and Captain James Cook's Third Voyage

- American explorer John Ledyard joined Captain Cook during his third voyage and was very much involved in enlightenment through global exploration (Wolf 438).
- Captain Cook's third voyage was from 1776-1780, and explored the Pacific ocean, including the coasts of Alaska. It sought to discover a passage between Russia and America in order to provide Europeans with better trade routes to the East, but ultimately failed in finding a practical route due to the abundance of Arctic ice (Waters 163).
- As described in Ledyard's journal, Cook's exploration of the coast of Alaska led to interaction and trading between the crew and indigenous people, illustrating the first contact between Native Alaskans and the English language.

The Developing Sciences of Nautical Discovery and British Exploration in the 18th Century

- The later half of the 18th century saw an explosion in international oceanic exploration. British, American, Spanish, French, Dutch, and Russian voyagers were all main contenders in the international competition for new resources, trade routes, and undiscovered lands during this time period, especially in the Pacific (Raj 81).
- The 18th century also saw a shift in scientific beliefs towards a more enlightened science, which prized empirical methodologies and knowledge collected from observation, classification, and organization of natural occurrences (Mackay 5).
- This new empirical ideology created an increased interest in seafaring technology and the exact mapping of coastlines, as well as observation and recording of foreign flora and fauna from distant lands. Expeditions established national power by collecting scientific knowledge from the natural world as well as improving agricultural and industrial developments.
- Scientific aims for discovery during exploration was often backed by commercial goals, such as mapping new coastlines while looking for new trade routes or resources (Burnham 430).
- Advances in British navigation under the reign of George the III allowed for much more extensive voyages, such as Cook's third voyage to the Pacific... "The often enormous returns of profit and knowledge from these voyages were made possible only by their lengthy duration, for it took anywhere from three to six years to travel through the Atlantic, past Cape Horn, and across and around the Pacific on voyages seeking undiscovered lands, resources, and trade good" (Burnham 426).
- Travel in the Pacific, specifically the North-west Pacific, was not notable until the discovery of the profitability of otter pelts which could be acquired from Native Alaskans and sold for a high price in China. At first this market was discovered by Russian merchants in the early 1700s, but after Captain Cook's third voyage and exploration of the Northwest coast of America, news of possible wealth from otter pelts gained the interest of both European and American voyagers and led to multiple private expeditions to the Northwest coast in pursuit of quick riches (Burnham 431-433; Mackay 59).
- Captain James Cook is claimed to be the most memorable explorer in the 18th century due to his mapmaking accomplishments and navigational achievements. He disproved the existence of a great southern continent, filled in missing spots on the world map, and was able to keep an entire crew healthy for an extended amount of time at sea (Waters 162).



Captain James Cook, ASL-Cook-James-1, Alaska State Library, public domain

On the 14th while we were employed in these several services we were visited by the natives who were the same kind of people we had seen the preceding day. We continued here until the 20th, during which time we sent our boats to explore the inlet, and found it to be a large sound without any communication to any other sea or water northward. We therefore called it Sandwich-Sound. It lies in lat. 61° 39' north longitude 214° east, about 1500 miles from George's-Sound. The inhabitants seem to be a distinct tribe from those at George's-Sound, and bear a very striking resemblance if not an exact one to the Esquimaux. I need give no other description of them. Their skin-canoe, their double bladed paddles, their dres and other appearances of less note are the same as on the coast of Labrador and in Hudson's-Bay. We found them possessed of a few knives and copper trinkets like those we had seen at George's-Sound, and found the wampum among them, which proves the commercial intercourse as universal as I before observed it to be.

On
(Excerpt from Ledyard's journal, p. 80)

Shaping Ideologies of Ledyard's Journal

- The imperial and scientific ideologies surrounding 18th century exploration influenced the interactions between the crew and the natives and shaped the nature of Ledyard's representation of Alaska Natives in his journal.
- During exploration of the Alaskan coast, the empirical push of the scientific approach called for careful observation of natives, and through the eyes of Western civilization they were framed as "static objects of a dominant imperial gaze" rather than a developed society with their own traditions and ways of life (Douglas 714).
- Ledyard's journal often uses words like "specimens" or "savages" to describe the Native Alaskans (Ledyard 79). He also describes the speech of Native Alaskans as "guttural" and harsh to the ears, implying an inferiority of Native Alaskan life compared to European civilization (Ledyard 97).
- Ledyard also analyzes and compares similarities observed between different indigenous populations throughout his travels, and notes the similarity in appearance between Native Alaskans and the "Tartars" or indigenous people of Russia (Ledyard 85).

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