

The Poison Chalice of Captain James Cook, its Medical Background and Similar 'Cures'

Michael T. Connell

ABSTRACT: This article seeks to investigate the nature of the eventual instability of Captain James Cook, and, importantly, to shed light on the actual causes of the great navigator's obvious ill-health long prior to his death. What is uncovered is that he used a 'purgive cup' as part of his self-medication, causing him to ingest antimony, which attacked his nervous system and adversely affected his personality. Antimony ingestion has a long history of causing madness in those who purged themselves. Antimony purging cups were first used in Roman times and continued to be used by many notable figures thereafter. In Cook's case this 'self-medication' led to critical changes in the personality of the normally mild-mannered Yorkshire Captain, and various forms of madness became observable in his behaviour. These were manifested in a display of cruelty, floggings, murder and vindictiveness all uncharacteristic of Cook, and all received, scant mention by his biographers.

The Antimony Cup

A fascinating object with direct reference to Captain James Cook was sold at Christie's, London, on 21 September 2005. It was catalogued as—

Captain Cook's antimony cup—a squat drinking vessel made of antimony alloy. From this, the great South Seas explorer consumed red wine that, having reacted with the metal, created a potion with purgative qualities.¹

This handy laxative system fetched £220,800 (AU \$471,985) in 2005. In describing its provenance the catalogue notes that it had been featured in the Chelsea Royal Naval Exhibition of 1891, where it was described as 'a metal cup and case taken by Captain Cook in his voyages round the World, lent by Viscount Galway'. Also, this cup (with its case) had appeared as Exhibit No. 292, (A small metal antimony cup, which belonged to Captain Cook), at 'Rule Britannia', a Loan Exhibition of

¹ *Christie's Auction Catalogue, Sale 7073, Exploration and Travel with the Polar Expedition, 21 September, 2005.*

Paintings and Works of Art in aid of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution held in January 1986.

Correctly describing the 'antimony cup' as a seventeenth century medical device, used for turning wine into an emetic with purgative qualities, the lot notes support the belief that it had been part of Captain Cook's medicine chest at sea, at a time when a naval Captain would set great store by such a device. Antimony cups, it is noted, had fallen out of favour by the end of the seventeenth century, except, it would seem, in England, where they continued to be popular in the Navy.

England, at least, escaped the controversy about the use and abuse of antimony, because antimony was the basic ingredient in the notorious Dr Ward's 'drop and pill' and it is interesting that they were made by steeping 'glass of antimony' in wine. It was therefore evident that, in the eighteenth century, the effects of wine upon antimony were well known.²

Further evidence of provenance then supplied by Christie's was an extract from a letter dated 3 May 1983 from Sir James Watt, K.B.E., M.S., President, the Royal Society of Medicine, to Dr John Munday, Keeper, Department of Weapons and Antiquities, National Maritime Museum. The letter refers to an anonymous article published in 1773 entitled 'Considerations on the use and abuse of antimonial medicines in fevers and other disorders' and it makes these comments:

it is claimed that there were other active, hidden ingredients, although antimony was said to be the active principle. As you may know, the Admiralty bought large quantities of both these preparations during the eighteenth century for use at sea so that faith in antimony was widespread among naval captains. It is therefore entirely likely that antimonial cups were acquired privately by sea captains. After all, they produced 'sweating, and purging, which, at that time, were considered the first line of treatment in fevers and would be effective against the constipation prevailing at sea as a result of the sea diet of the period.³

Transmission of the Relic

According to Christie's, the cup was probably among the Cook relics bought by the fifth Viscount Galway from the sale of the effects of Admiral Isaac Smith, who was Mrs. Cook's cousin and who accompanied Captain Cook on his first and second voyages. Christie's did not reveal the exact identity of the people who sold the cup, but they

² *Ibid.*
³ *Ibid.*



Captain Cook's Antimony Cup (or poculum emeticum), 6.4cm high, with original fitted leather case. Image sourced from www.christies.com, Sale 7073, Lot 285, 21 September 2005.

said that it was 'the property of a family of trust', adding 'The cup may well have passed down through Viscount Galway's family'.⁴

However this cup had been incorrectly described by the Mitchell Library in 1970, when it was referred to as:

The Communion Cup used by Captain Cook on his Voyages and its leather case. The original is in the possession of the Dowager Viscountess Galway, Bawtry, Doncaster.⁵

There is no evidence to show that religion played any part in Cook's life, although on the few occasions when he was at home, his wife Elizabeth took her husband and family to St. Paul's Church Shadwell, in London's East End. Cook did not hold Communion for the crew while at sea.

Self-Medication

Cook's antimony cup was for self-medication. Once filled with wine and allowed to stand for a few hours, the chemical infusion produced around two grains of antimony in two fluid ounces of wine.⁶ The standing wine leached out antimony from the little vessel, turning the tartaric acid in the wine into a potent brew of tartar emetic—a poisonous crystalline compound known as *antimony-a, a'dimercapto-potassium succinate*, (TWSb).⁷ One sip from this little cup caused a violent evacuation of the bowels and an instant episode of vomiting, an upheaval

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Bibliography of Captain James Cook R.N., F.R.S.*, ed. by M. K. Beddie (Sydney: The Library of NSW, 1970), p. 621.

⁶ McCallum, Ian R., *Antimony in Medical History* (Edinburgh: The Pentland Press, 1999), p. 66.

⁷ Friedheim, E.A., J.R. Da Silva, and A.V. Martins, 'The Treatment of schistosomiasis mansoni with antimony-a, a'dimercapto -potassium succinate (TWSb)', *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 3 (1954), 714 -727.

described by Hippocrates as, an 'up and down', and designated by the Romans as *pocuta emetica* or *calyces vomitori*.

As a medical remedy, purging has a long history. In 400 BC Hippocrates wrote,

In disorders of the bowels and vomitings occurring spontaneously, if the matters purged be such as ought to be purged, they do good and are as well bourne,

but he added the following reservation,

Persons in good health quickly lose their strength by taking purgative medicines, or using bad food.⁸

Around 65 AD, in the reign of Nero, Lucius Seneca recorded the Roman practice of purging after gluttony when he wrote,

Caesar, who was a temperate man, took an emetic after a heavy meal with Cicero, who mentions it without disapproval.

Vitellius the glutton and Claudius habitually used emetics⁹ and in 200 AD the Greek physician Galen of Pergamum commended the practice of purging by declaring,

To disbelieve such things (the absorption of nutrients) would of course be like refusing to believe that purgative drugs draw their appropriate humours from all over the body.¹⁰

Mediaeval Uses

In the Middle Ages antimony was used as a cure for constipation. The swallowing of *pilules perpetuelles* (small balls of antimony) irritated the gut sufficiently to expel its contents. The balls of antimony were recovered, washed and re-used, and are known to have been passed down from one generation to another. It was the custom to use the *pilules perpetuelles* in a goblet of wine, thus serving a multiple task in the purging process. Professor Ian McCallum in his scholarly book *Antimony*

⁸ 'Hippocrates', in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Robert Maynard, (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica Press, 1952), pp. 131-133.

⁹ Thomson M.D., Sir St. Clair, 'History of Medicine Antimonial Cupps: Pocula Emetica or Calices Vomitorii. 1824' in *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* (1925), pp. 123-128.

¹⁰ 'Galen of Pergamum. On the Natural Faculties continued in the Belief of Purging', in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Robert Maynard (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica Press, 1952), p. 209.

in Medical History states that examples of these pills survive and can be seen in the Schweizerisches Pharmazie Historisches Museum, Basel.¹¹

Industrially the principal function of antimony has been as a thickening component in paint and enamel, as a lead hardener, and as a constituent of alloys such as pewter and Britannia metal. Taken internally, antimony is toxic and produces symptoms resembling those of arsenic poisoning. It causes the body to purge by vomiting and diarrhoea, and, when taken continually, it adversely affects the nerves running from the brain and spinal cord to all other parts of the body. Used minimally, antimony could be efficacious, and indeed antimony sodium tartrate is in current use¹² in the treatment of schistosomiasis and leishmaniasis, tropical diseases prevalent in poor developing countries in South-East Asia, but when used long term, over a six year period, as in the case of James Cook, it has injurious consequences both mentally and physically. The deeper I delved into the history of antimony poisoning, the more evidence I found to support this view.

As I investigated antimony and its use as a purgative in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it seemed to me that there was a distinct and significant association between emetic drinks and the mental deterioration of the patient. The use of antimony for purging was considered a 'modern' treatment, but the dangers were little understood. Those historic figures who were regularly purged with antimony cups or antimony powders all recorded signs of mental disturbance. Rarely, however, were the words 'mental disorder' used, the truth being disguised in such terms as 'erratic behaviour', 'melancholia', 'perpetual cantankerousness', and (in the case of James Cook) 'the Heevas'.¹³

*

*

Famous People Almost Certainly Affected by Antimony Poisoning

I. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

On 22 March 1820 Napoleon's Corsican physician, Dr Francesco Antommarchi (1780-1838), noted that

Napoleon was given a lemonade drink with an emetic. The patient was suffering from *maladie de tanguék*. This *maladie* was first noted two months earlier. More emetic salts were prescribed, and in the following days Napoleon was given additional emetic drinks of antimony

¹¹ McCallum, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

¹² Both of these are parasitic diseases. Leishmaniasis is particularly rife in those areas depending on polluted water.

¹³ A euphemism employed by the crew to describe Cook's bouts of ill-temper—'the het-vas' being a native dance.

potassium tartrate which, being *highly* toxic, quickly induced purging, 'upper and lower'.

On 28 March 1820 Napoleon suspected that he was being poisoned by his minders, especially the Grand Marshall of the Palace, St. Helena (Count Bertrand), who was also 'feeding emetics' into the Emperor. In a fit of rage Napoleon refused Bertrand's services.¹⁴ Not trusting another soul to look after his welfare, Napoleon augmented his own diet and self-medication with Orgeat, a drink of barley, orange, and bitter almonds (4-9mg of hydrogen cyanide per almond!), of which he drank a great deal.

Dr Antomarchi was totally opposed to any outside interference in caring for his patient, but under protest from the patient another doctor, the British physician Alexander Arnott (1771-1855), purged the unfortunate Napoleon with 10 grains of calomel (mercury chloride—the miracle drug of the day), together with tartar emetic and Orgeat. This dose failed to work, so it was repeated, and then it worked, producing enormous bowel evacuations of 'black pitch or tar'.¹⁵

It is small wonder that on 9 April 1820 Dr Antomarchi was to state that, with his body now toxic, 'Napoleon's mind was unhinged',¹⁶ with heavy metals driving his brain to the brink of madness. He was plagued with hiccoughs which caused concern to his physicians, and a weakness in the lower limbs¹⁷ confined him to his bed where he died on 5 May 1821. After his death the witch hunt for the 'murdered' was on in earnest. Dr Antojnarchi, who performed the autopsy, a fellow Corsican and Napoleon's trusted friend, was free from suspicion.

Was Napoleon poisoned by his British captors? Did Major General Count Charles Tristan de Montholon (1783-1853) acting for the Bourbons, murder his Emperor? Did he organise the Emperor's demise as payback for his wife Countess de Albine Montholon's indiscretions in the Emperor's bed? He certainly had a motive. Montholon's brother was Commissioner of the Bourbon Government at St. Helena and Charles Tristan de Montholon was, after all, responsible for trying to get rid of Dr Antommarchi by bringing, in the British military doctor, Dr Arnott. Importantly, too, Napoleon was unhappy that the British were trying to become involved in the preparation of his food.¹⁸

¹⁴ Weider, Ben, and David Hoggood, *The Murder of Napoleon* (London: Robson Books, 1982), p. 224. The later medical analysis was based upon tests on Napoleon's hair conducted at the University of Glasgow by scientist Hamilton Smith, requested by Sven Forshufvud of Goteburg, Sweden, who helped with the research for his book.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁶ Weider and Haggood, *op.cit.*, p. 230.

¹⁷ These last two symptoms were also experienced by James Cook.

¹⁸ Weider and Haggood, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

In 2005, tests conducted with very sophisticated ICP-MS (Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry) by Dr Pascal Kintz Robert Wennig of the University of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg, on the lock of hair given to Napoleon's valet Abram Noveraz as a token of esteem, yielded alarming results. In (not on) Napoleon's hair was evidence of arsenic 42.07 ng/mg; mercury 3.33 ng/mg; lead 229.2 ng/mg; silver 4.80 ng/mg; and antimony 2.10 ng/mg. The benchmark normal antimony level to be expected is a maximum 0.0004-0.006.¹⁹

II. King George III (1738-1820)

The English King George's mental instability was long thought to have resulted from an hereditary disease, porphyria, which arises from defects in the oxygen-carrying pigment, haemoglobin. His symptoms of lameness, abdominal pain, insomnia, periodic mental disturbance, and discoloured urine are typical of porphyria, but recent evidence suggests that the root cause of King George's condition could have been arsenic poisoning, induced, no doubt, by regular emetics.

In July 2004 a remarkable exhibit came to light, hidden in the vaults of a London museum. It was a scrap of paper containing a few strands of hair, labelled 'Hair of His Late Majesty, King George III'. Tests conducted on these samples by Harwell International Business Centre for Science and Technology in Didcot, Oxfordshire, showed large concentrations of arsenic (17 parts per million), 300 times the toxic level.

The BBC then contacted Professor Tim Cox, an expert on extreme cases of porphyria at Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge, who confirmed that porphyric attacks can be triggered by a wide range of substances—alcohol, common medication, even monthly hormones. When questioned about arsenic, Professor Cox confirmed that arsenic was listed as a trigger, and the massive levels found in King George's hair suggested that arsenic had been liberally ingested over a period of some time.²⁰

In the king's medical records there was passing reference to arsenic being used as a skin cream, and as a wig powder, but nothing that could explain the staggering levels of arsenic showing up in the king's hair. The most common medication given to him was 'James Powders', a routine medicine, administered several times a day—made of antimony.

It was 150 years after his death before George III's true medical condition was fully understood. The king did suffer from a rare incurable

¹⁹ Emsley, John, *The Elements of Murder* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 128.

²⁰ 'Medical Mysteries: George III: Mad or Misunderstood?' [Radio Broadcast]. BBC One, 14 July 2004.

blood disorder—acute porphyria. This was the cause of bouts of epileptic fits and severe abdominal pain and cramps, and the oft-reported 'red urine'. Yet the treatment he was given did nothing but exacerbate his medical condition. His medical practitioners were regularly inducing emetic tartar into him potassium antimony tartrate via 'James Powders'. Since the king took about 180 mg of emetic tartrate a day, he could have received 9mg of arsenic—not enough to kill him, but more than enough to cause chronic poisoning, especially when combined with his hereditary disease and the other indications forced upon him.

The royal archives at Windsor detail the king's treatment, and they also indicate the use of 'arsenic skin cream', 'arsenic wig powder', and the ingestion several times a day of 'James Powders'. None of these assisted in the cure, but they would have exacerbated his condition, for they all contained antimony. The poor 'Mad King' was being sent even madder, and his porphyric attacks prolonged by the poisons which had accumulated in his body.²¹

III. Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727)

Regarded as the Father of Modern Physical Science, Sir Isaac Newton left hundreds of notebooks, which unfortunately were scattered around the world after being auctioned by his descendants. Economist Milton Keynes purchased many of them for Cambridge Library, and thanks to his diligence, some of these are available for inspection. They reveal details of Newton's health which indicate melancholia and the fact that he was treated for a mental disorder. It is also documented that Newton experienced an eighteen month period (1692-1693) of psychosis.²²

His experiments with antimony are described, and also his attempts to transmute base metal to gold. It was known by Sir Isaac and his physician Dr Richard Mead (known widely as a 'purge and vomit' man) that antimony causes vomiting, diarrhoea and breathing difficulties when touched or ingested. The 'purge and vomit' practice was challenged by their contemporary, Professor of Psychic John Woodward, a renowned geologist, who pointed out the dangers of this treatment. This interference led to a foolish sword duel, during which Woodward slipped and fell to the ground unhurt. His second and other colleagues intervened, breaking up the nonsense before any injury occurred.²³

²¹

Ibid.

²² Keynes, M., 'Isaac Newton and his Madness of 1692-1693, *Lancet*, 1 (1980), 529-530.

²³

Glynn, Ian, and Jennifer Glynn, *The Life and Death of Smallpox* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 34.

IV. Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1872)

Beethoven is a 'legendary' composer, who experienced decades of illness that caused him great misery, is thought to have died from lead poisoning. Modern researchers noted high concentrations of lead matching earlier findings of lead in his hair. However, according to scientists, half-life measurements suggest it was present in Beethoven's body for many years.²⁴ While the source of the lead is unknown, researchers state that Beethoven drank a respectable amount of wine, and the lead may have come from a wine goblet made of the metal antimony.

Beethoven's own physician, Dr Malfatti, ordered spa treatment which was intended to cure his chronic bowel problems and reduce the constant ringing in his ears. For his internal disorders, his doctors often went to great extremes to purge the body of its stomach contents in order to 'expel the noxious humors'. This treatment was usually accompanied by a routine of drinking the medical waters found in and among the spas. It is to be noted that in August 1812. Beethoven continued this purging while spending the month at the cold spas of Franzenbrunn.

In December 2005 researchers at the U.S. Department of Energy's Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois, found massive amounts of lead in the bones of Ludwig von Beethoven, confirming the cause of his years of chronic debilitating illness.²⁵ The bone fragments, confirmed by DNA testing to have come from Beethoven's body, were scanned by X-rays from the Advanced Photon Source at Argon, which provides the most brilliant x-rays in the Western Hemisphere. A control bone fragment sample from the same historic period was also examined. Both bone fragments were from the parietal section, the top of the skull.

Bill Walsh, chief scientist at the Pfeiffer Treatment Centre in Warrenville, Illinois, and director at the Beethoven Research Project has stated that,

The finding of elevated lead in Beethoven's skull, along with DNA results indicating authenticity of the bone/hair relics, provides solid evidence that Beethoven suffered from a toxic overload of lead. In addition, the presence of lead in the skull suggests his exposure to lead was not a recent event, but may have been present for many years. Beethoven suffered from bad digestion, chronic abdominal pain, irritability and depression. Since he died in 1827 at age 57, there has

²⁴ Emsley, *op.cit.*, pp. 294-296.

²⁵ Craven, Aaron, 'Beethoven's Medical Ailments and Their Influence on his Music' <[>](http://home.adelphia.net/acraven/Essays/Cravenn)

been much speculation but no proof of the cause of his illnesses and death.²⁶

Walsh also confirmed that the original autopsy findings were consistent with lead poisoning.

V. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Mozart may have died from antimony poisoning ingested through his medication. He had been prescribed antimony salts and mercury as a treatment for his frequent attacks of melancholia. The more melancholic he became the more he was known to purge. He appears to have been poisoned with antimony tartrate, which had been prescribed by his doctors, and with which he also self-medicated. The late Dr Ian James of the Royal Free Hospital in London offered a theory that Mozart had died of iatrogenic antimony poisoning, which had been prescribed as a compound by his physicians, as a treatment for melancholia and depression.

The symptoms of antimony poisoning are coughing, anthralgia, arthritis, myalgias, headache, fainting, apnoea, abdominal pain, 'vascular collapse, facial oedema, skin rash, chronic indigestion, renal disfunction and renal failure. When chronically ingested, antimony, like most heavy metals, can lead to polyneuropathy, tremors, gait disturbances, hearing loss, and mental deterioration. Most of these symptoms were apparent in Mozart.²⁷

*

*

And So Back to Cook's Maladies

While it is my belief that antimony purging caused James Cook's physical and mental deterioration, this belief is without medical foundation. But what I have unearthed is an historic link between antimony purging and the adverse effect of this practice. Modern tests on the original hair of a number of historical figures using inductively coupled Plasma-Mass Spectrometry have discovered some significant facts. It seems certain that if similar tests were conducted on the hair of James Cook a similar accumulation of antimony poisoning would be discovered.

²⁶ 'All Things Considered' [Radio Broadcast]. National Public Radio (NPR), 6 December 2005.

²⁷ Guillery, Edward N., 'Did Mozart Die of a Kidney Disease?', *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology*, 2 (1992), pp. 1672-1676.

In 1769 on the first voyage aboard *HM Bark Endeavour*, James Cook took to his bunk complaining of severe gut pain. Fearing the death of his Captain, Joseph Banks ordered that his own pet greyhound dog be butchered and a special broth made to nurse Cook back to health. On 16 September 1769 Cook made the following observation on his own state of health, which was noted by Banks,

Myself rather better but still very sick at the stomach which continually supplies a thin acid liquor which I discharge by vomit.²⁸

Cook had long used his 'cure-all' antimony cup to purge his bowels and stomach. Through this self-medication he gradually lost his ability to be rational. The longer the voyage, the worse the state of his mind seemed to suffer. Cook's health and temper declined over the three voyages. The sicker he felt, the more he would purge himself with his antimony cup. The crew learned to keep clear when their Captain had an attack of 'the heevas'.

On Cook's Second Voyage, on 4 May 1773 Johan Forster commented thus on Cook's condition,

The Captain fell Sunday night ill with a fever, and a pain in the groin which terminated in a rheumatic swelling in the blade of the right foot, caused by cold contracted by wading too frequently in the water and sitting too cold and wet in the boat.²⁹

The foot pain was more than likely to have been saturnine gout brought on by the self-medication of antimony. Forster was later to suffer the same problem. Five days later he shows serious concern over Cook's illness, contemplating the fear of having to continue the voyage without their Captain,

It rained all afternoon and evening, and I am sorry for the Cap' who in this bad weather ventured out with an ill health and a bad foot, which might throw him in a disease and make all on board unhappy, for the very thought, or contemplating the thought that the First Lieutenant should then command the ship if the Captain should die, is enough to frighten every living soul in the same ...³⁰

²⁸ Sir Joseph Banks, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, 25 August–16 September 1769.

²⁹ Hoare, Michael, *The Resolution Journal of Johann Reinhold Foster 1772-1775* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1982), pp. 456-457.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 456-457.

Another bout of serious illness was evident in August 1773, during the second voyage. While supervising a simple operation of dropping the best bower-anchor Cook lost control of his actions. He ordered the crew to prepare to drop the anchor, but as the vessel approached the drop, he doubled over in agony with a violent attack of stomach pain and sought urgent refuge in his quarters. The ship continued forward and was nearly put aground at Vaitepha Bay, Tahiti.

Later that year, in December, Johan Forster recorded that Cook, 'looked pale and lean and laboured under perpetual costiveness and frequently vomited,³¹ while the Swedish botanist, Sparman, described the Captain's obvious distress on a certain occasion,

Although he had from beginning to end of the incident appeared perfectly alert and able (he) was suffering so greatly from his stomach that he was in a great sweat and could scarcely stand.³²

On 26 February 1774, sixteen days out of Easter Island, Cook was still desperately ill, which he tried to hide from the crew. The Forsters however noticed his obvious distress and purged him a number of times with the antimony cup, gave him medicines and glisters. Cook took to his bunk and 'took a purge but vomited'. Forster recorded the situation thus:

The Captain who had likewise felt for several days a pain in his Stomach and being confined, did not chuse to use something: he ate little and what he ate were hard, salted, indigestable materials, which could afford no nourishment in the weak state of his Stomach: at last the pain grew to such a height, that he took to his bed, he took a purge but vomited; tne iniiciation was helped by Ipecacuanha and Camomile Tea, a glyster was added and Castor-oil not spared, but there soon appeared a hiccough which was unconquerable by opiats, warm bathing and plaster of Theriac in the Stomach, nor would Tobacco in glysters have any effect, and he is now so weak as not to be able to stand on 'tiis legs. If the hiccough will not leave off, his life I think is in danger; or if the scibalous faeces cannot be cleared out of the intestines.³³

However, a little later he was to add,

The Capt. is easier, having had several stools from repeated glysters and the hiccough is not returned till this noon, and there are hopes that he will grow better, if nothing intervenes.

³¹ Hoare, pp. 456-458.

³² Hoare, *op. cit.*, pp. 458.

³³ *James Cook: The Journals: from the original Manuscripts by J.C. Beaglehole*, ed. by Philip Edwards (Penguin Books, 2003), p. 457.

Cook's own record of this episode reads as follows,

27 February 1774. I was now taken ill of the bilious colic which was so violent as to confine me to my bed, so that the management of the ship was left to Mr Cooper the first officer, who conducted her very much to my satisfaction. It was several days before the most dangerous symptoms of my disorder were removed, during which time Mr. Patten the surgeon was to me not only a skilful physician, but an affectionate nurse, and I should ill deserve the care he bestowed on me, if I did not make this public acknowledgement. When I began to recover a favourite dog belonging to Mr. Forster fell sacrifice to my tender stomach. We had no other fresh meat on board, and I could eat of this flesh, as well as the broth made of it, when I could taste nothing else. Thus I received nourishment and strength from food which would have made most people in Europe sick.³⁴

On 1 March 1774, Forster was able to report that 'The Captain is much better, sits up and eats something, but is very weak and quite emaciated and will continue so for a good while unless we meet with land and get some refreshments.'³⁵ At the end of that month, on 26 March, he noted that 'Captain Cook was now much better, but very weak.' This was as close to death as Cook came during the voyage.

In addition to the deleterious effects of his medication, it must be remembered that throughout his voyages Cook had to contend with poor diet, bouts of scurvy, attacks of ciguatera poisoning brought about by the consumption of tropical fish, and episodes of erratic behaviour due to an infestation of round worm.³⁶ That he was able to maintain health and discipline on board while navigating his long voyages is remarkable, but his *modus operandi* is indicative of increasing mental instability.

Floggings and Punishment

Punishment was an expected part of the sea-life of a sailor and was carried out as a solemn ritual, but it was by no means as frequent an event as is commonly thought. Some ships and captains gained a reputation for flogging, and some of these reputations were misconstrued

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

³⁶ This possible cause of the mental degradation of James Cook was raised by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Lewin of Greenwich in his London lecture of 1970, 'James Cook: The Man and His Achievements', quoting as his authority the eminent physician Dr Surgeon Admiral Sir James Watt. See Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, (Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 133. The author attended Lord Lewin's lecture - and R. Fisher and H. Johnson, Editors, *Captain James Cook and his Times*, Vancouver, 1979, p. 155. See also *Captain James Cook and His Times*, ed. by R. Fisher and H. Johnson (Vancouver, 1979), p. 155.

and unearned, while others were rightfully deserved. History has rarely recorded that Cook was a bigger tyrant than Bligh. Although Bligh had the reputation of being a bully, he would not have countenanced the behaviour demonstrated by Cook during his three voyages. In contradiction of the myths perpetuated by Hollywood there is evidence to show that the frequently reviled Bligh was not as harsh a commander as the widely respected Cook, and this is upheld by the accompanying chart.

	Ships	No. crew	No. crew lashed	No. lashes	% lashed	No. of dozens	Days of voyage	Av. Floggings per day
1st Voyage	<i>Bark Endeavour</i>	94	30	360	31.9	30	1095	.328
2nd Voyage	<i>Resolution and Adventure</i>	212	37 +	483	17.46	40	1113	.433
3rd Voyage	<i>Resolution and Discovery</i>	193	87 *	1189	45.076	99	1237	.936
3rd Voyage	Capt William Bligh <i>HMAV Bounty</i>	46	5	60	10.87	5	492	.013

+ includes 3 natives

* includes 10 natives

On the first voyage Cook used the lash many times, although its use was officially confined to two dozen lashes for theft; one dozen for getting drunk; one dozen for ignoring an order from an officer; one dozen for stealing from the natives, and six more for complaining.

During the second voyage the lash rate was upped, contravening Cook's standing orders that limited its use to twelve per offence. A perusal of the punishments meted out to the crew reveals that they were often well deserved, particularly by those who repeatedly thieved from the ship, from their mates and from the natives), and by those who were habitually 'wild and drinking. But the floggings were excessive, and were certainly not all recorded by Cook in his own journals. Irishman John Marra, 26 years old gunner's mate, was the most flogged seaman aboard. He had served on *HM Bark Endeavour* during the first voyage, and he sold a narrative of the second voyage to John Newberry who published it anonymously in 1775

Further records of punishments meted out to the crew are to be found in the journal kept by John Forster aboard the *Resolution*; in the memoirs of John Elliott A.B. who sailed on the second voyage on the *Resolution*; in Captain Furneaux's narrative concerning the separation of the *Adventure* and the *Resolution* while in Antarctic waters, and in the records of John Henry Martin, midshipman on the *Discovery*. A summary of the punishments administered during the three voyages indicates that Cook's rate of flogging seemed to keep pace with his mental deterioration.

In his encounters with the natives, Cook exhibited behaviour even more unstable and capricious, contravening his orders and breaking his Articles of War. Although regulations did not lay down specific punishments for natives confronted during the voyages, by repeatedly flogging them Cook broke Article 32 in the Articles of War—

If any flag officer, captain, or commander, or lieutenant belonging to the fleet, shall be convicted before a Courts Martial of behaving in a scandalous, infamous, cruel, oppressive or fraudulent manner, unbecoming the character of an officer', he shall be dismissed from His Majesty's service.

Flogging was not the only inhumane punishment that the natives suffered. Cook did not record them, but others did.

At Eimi, Moorea, 6 October 1777, Midshipman George Gilbert recorded that the natives (whose concept of 'stealing' was very different from that of the English) took a small goat off the ship, upsetting Cook, who demanded its return. He departed the ship and set out with a party of around thirty, including marines from both ships, all well-armed. Three boats manned and armed with marines followed to join the shooting party. Houses or canoes belonging to the thief's family were burnt. The innocent souls fled in panic, so none of them were killed or maimed. Several women and old men remained by their homes, begging for mercy, but Gilbert reports that Cook was not moved,

All their tears and entreaties could not move Captain Cook to desist in the smallest degree from those cruel ravages which he continued till the evening, when he joined the boats, and returned on board having burnt and destroyed about twelve houses and as many canoes. The next morning he went round again with three boats where he completed the devastation he had left undone the day before; and all about such a trifle as a small goat which was that evening brought back onboard by the natives.

Gilbert adds, 'I can't well account for Capt. Cook's proceedings on this occasion as they were so very different from his conduct in like cases in

his former voyages.³⁷ The final tally of destruction after this rampage was the incineration of twenty-five great war-canoes, recorded tersely in Cook's journal as 'a troublesome and rather unfortunate affair'.³⁸

Gilbert's remarks notwithstanding, Cook had shown his vindictive side during the first voyage, when, in October 1769 he had attempted to stop a canoe full of Maori fishermen in order to make their closer acquaintance, but had miscalculated their attitude. Maoris had been killed and Cook had suffered great remorse. From thereon he doubled and redoubled his guard against bloodshed, and when driven to hostilities he preferred to inflict fright rather than death. He chose to use small shot rather than ball, because he knew that ball usually killed. Generally speaking, his men were under the most stringent orders in this matter and disobedience caused his rage and wrath. But this began to change as the voyages progressed, and his vindictive behaviour peaked during the third voyage. He adopted a different policy involving much destruction of native property with malice. Some of his puzzled officers asked why he caused needless damage. James Cook had earned a reputation for humanity, but by the third voyage this was in tatters.

It seems obvious from a medical viewpoint that, as his time at sea progressed, Cook was beginning to show the impact of antimony poisoning in his body. His 'heevas' were more frequent, and so was his 'bilious colic', first noted by Forster and Marra during the second voyage. As for his increasing irrationality, surely there can be no clearer indication of this than his fourth mad attempt to consume a poisonous fish, tellingly reported by Johan Forster, on 6 October 1774 off Norfolk Island,

The First Lieutenant caught a fish of the identical kind which had poisoned the Captain, my Son and myself Sept 8th. He [Cook] heard from everybody that the fish was poisonous; but he obstinately refused to give ear to these good advices; he ordered the fish to be cleaned, skinned, and wanted the same to have dressed, and accordingly it was dressed. His mess mates fairly laughed him out of his mad design to eat the fish when they saw that friendly and serious advice would not persuade his mulish temper. However a little dog given by the Captain to Mr. Clerck had eaten some of the guts and garbage, and this poor Creature has ever since been in a most miserable condition groaning, howling, and having lost entirely the use of all its Limbs.³⁹

³⁷ Captain Cook's Voyage: The Journal of Midshipman George Gibert, ed. by Christine Holmes (Trowbridge, UK: Brian Clouston, 1892), pp. 46-47.

³⁸ 'The Death of Captain Cook'. An address, *The Australian Journal of Science*, 26.10, p. 296.

³⁹ Hoare, *op.cit.*, p. 665.

The last eighteen-month period of Cook's life is punctuated by a series of bizarre and worrying events, and depicts a very different man to the one who sailed from Plymouth in 1768. Tired and ill he assuredly was, but in addition, by June 1777 his officers noticed that their Captain was consuming a significant amount of kava on a daily basis, a drink to which he had been introduced at Raiatea, in the Society Islands, a short time earlier. It is probable that it dulled the corrosive internal pain of antimonial poisoning, but kava, being an intoxicant, would also have affected his behaviour. Forster, having followed him ashore one night, was alarmed to see the inebriated Captain with his hair down, and minus his shirt, prancing and dancing around the fire with the natives.

At around the same time, Thomas Edgar, Master of the sloop *Discovery*, recorded Cook's excessive reaction to an incident of petty theft, writing, 'At noon Captain Cooke shot an Indian in the side with small shot as he was escaping from the ships he having committed theft.'⁴⁰ And again, on 28 June 1777 a bemused Edgar filed the following report,

About ten in the Morning those of the old offenders who had ston'd our sentinels and Wood Cutters were taken prisoners. Captain Cooke punish'd one with three dozen lashes, another with four dozen and the third with six dozen lashes. After this a strange punishment was inflicted on the Man which received six dozen as Captain Cooke said that he might be known hereafter, as well as to deter the rest from theft or using us ill, when on Shore—this was by scoring both his arms with a common knife by one of our Seamen, longitudinally and transversely, into the Bone.⁴¹

Midshipman George Gilbert also recorded this instance of his Captain's untoward behaviour in disapproving terms, writing in his journal,

Capt Cook punished in a manner rather unbecoming of an European... one in particular he punished by ordering one of our people to make two cuts upon his arm to the bone one across the other close below his shoulder.⁴²

In October the 'troublesome and rather unfortunate affair' took place when Cook burned twelve houses and incinerated twenty-five great war-canoes in an exhibition of uncontrollable rage. This was shortly followed by another bout of temper, or, as Second Lieutenant James King describes it—'Passion',

⁴⁰ Obeyesekere, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴² Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Just before we got in the harbour, an Indian we had brought from Eimaio had been caught with something he had stolen, on which the Captain in a Passion orderd the Barber to shave his head and cut off his ears. After the barber had finished with his head, he began to execute the other part of his orders, and woud in a short time have compleat'd it; luckily for the fellows ears, an officer [Lieut King] was looking on and stopd the barber, being convinced that the Captn was only in a Passion, and made him go to him to receive fresh orders, which were mitigated and the fellow escap'd with the lobe of one ear cut away, and was then made to swim on shore.⁴³

The Lieutenant seems to have been close to Cook, and the most telling significance of this sorry incident is his evident familiarity with and acceptance of his Captain's tantrums. He appears to have become accustomed to Cook's outbursts to the point where he felt no hesitation in interfering. It is obvious that by this time Cook had developed a real obsession over the natives' habit of pilfering, and lost all reason in his efforts to stamp it out. As he approached his dreadful end at Kealakeua Bay, James Cook was a broken man, wracked in body and bedevilled in mind by toxins from his poison chalice. What a tribute to the plain sailor from Yorkshire that he remains, to this day, in spite of such handicaps, the world's greatest navigator.

*

*

*

⁴³ *The Journals of Captain James Cook: The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery 1776-1780*, ed. by J.C. Beaglehole (London: Hakluyt Society; Cambridge University Press, 1967), Part 2, p. 1383.