

JOHN WEBBER: AND HIS AQUATINTS

John Webber, RA, (1752-1793) was the official artist appointed by the Admiralty to Cook's third voyage. Biographical details are available in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (which gives the birth-date of 1750?), Beaglehole¹ and Bernard Smith² (who gives the death-date of 1798). These notes are concerned with points that are little known.

Webber's Christian name too often appears as James. The origin of this error is shown below but unfortunately the wrong name was perpetuated in the catalogue³ of the centennial exhibition of New Zealand art, which has been subsequently quoted elsewhere. Further, the New Zealand-born naturalist Dr Averil Lysaght⁴ explains that Webber sometimes signed himself William, although more often John. (She also lists his bird paintings which, with his other natural history works, are preserved in the British Museum.)

The *DNB* records that Webber witnessed Cook's death, but Professor Beaglehole denies this. The Cleveley aquatint of the event is therefore more likely to be accurate than Webber's versions, often engraved. The third representation of it, by Zoffany, is purely imaginary.

It is believed that Webber's portrait of his brother, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1776, attracted the notice of Dr Solander and that this resulted in the artist's appointment to Cook on the third voyage. Yet it was as a landscape painter that he joined the *Resolution* and it is for his landscapes that he is known, although his work on the voyage necessarily covered every aspect. As a portraitist Webber is perhaps unfairly neglected.

The popular portraits of Cook are those by Dance, which have been engraved in numerous versions, becoming progressively less like the originals. But Dance was a fashionable professional portrait painter and one would expect that he flattered his subjects. His Cook appears romanticized, even idealized, to present the image the public expected. Cook's contemporaries described him as good-looking but plain, rather than handsome. Webber's portraits of him are probably more true to life. Engravings have been made from that done at the Cape of Good Hope, but the most interesting is that in the National Art Gallery, Wellington. Beaglehole gives its provenance, according to which the picture was painted in 1776 and given by Cook to his wife. In 1960 the oil painting was purchased in England by the New Zealand Government. The only other authentic portrait of Cook is that by William Hodges, official artist on the second voyage. The original is lost but an engraving from it by J. Basire, 1777, appears as the frontispiece to the official account of the second voyage, and has often been copied by other engravers.