

WILLIAM WEBB ELLIS,
COOK'S SCIENTIFIC ARTIST;
PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

William Hodges, the artist on James Cook's second voyage, in the *Resolution* (1772-75), was one whose graphic style and artistic perspectives were profoundly influenced by his Pacific and other extra-European experiences. In 1793 he wrote:

A constant study of simple nature, it is well known, will produce a resemblance which is sometimes astonishing, and which the painter of ideal objects can never arrive at.¹

Cook's three voyages contributed significantly to an evolution in artists' ideas and perspectives on how to view, record, reproduce and compose visually the rich and 'curious' objects and phenomena seen in exploration. Science and the more practical interests of naval men, argues Bernard Smith, helped change the artist's vision in the South Pacific, influencing him away from neo-classical or other preconceptions of art form to a more naturalistic and a more rigorously scientific—and hence accurate—record of what was seen: 'typical landscape' and interests in individual life or still forms or groups of such forms (including islanders and their natural and material environments) emerged as developing desiderata for the artist's styles and skills. In consequence, the graphic records of Cook's and later voyages became experimental; like the voyages themselves in all their aspects they explored and opened up new frontiers to the European experience. All this evolved in the Pacific, a vast region ripe to influence the European mind, science and ideas for another one hundred years and ready—for good or ill is not material in this argument—to be influenced by Europe in art, culture, religion and ways of life. 'In the end', notes Smith, 'scientific method triumphed in both the description of nature and man'.²

'Scientific method' involves, of course, both theory and the trials and observations upon which theory advances—experimentation. In the latter, William Webb Ellis, surgeon's second mate in the *Discovery* on the third voyage, stood high among Cook's scientists and artists. Ellis strove to be both scientifically accurate and delicate in his artistic recreations and experimentally artistic in his work on views and landscapes and in the recording of individuals or groups—animal, vegetable or mineral. Of course, becoming an 'experimental gentleman' on Cook's voyages was not in itself the sole passport to success in all 'departments' of natural philosophy and art—the stimulation, the advance (as in science itself) lay in the very trial and error, in the unknown 'novelty'