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Sailors in Port by Thomas Stothard, William Ward and John Raphael Smith (1798). Sailors and visiting women dance to a fiddler's music on the deck of a ship. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, Caird Collection ID PAH7355

Dancing with Cook

Soft airs and hornpipes with the great navigator

One perspective of James Cook that has rarely been examined is how music, theatre and dance were interwoven into his life and served to venerate him after death. He used music and dance to keep his crew healthy and to establish peaceful communications with people he encountered on his voyages, and his own life was commemorated in dance. By Dr Heather Blasdale Clarke.

*Captain Cook wisely thought that dancing was of special use to sailors ... it was to this practice that he mainly ascribed the sound health which his crew enjoyed ...*¹

DURING THE 18TH CENTURY, the English were known as a nation of keen and accomplished dancers, from the king to the lowliest labourer. Indeed, it was one of the chief ways people entertained themselves. The English country dance was a highly social dance form; perhaps this accounts for its great popularity. Many new compositions were published each year to cater for the burgeoning demand, and their titles were inspired by current affairs of the world. Important events, famous people and significant places were all celebrated in music and dance. My research began with the discovery of *The Transit of Venus* in a collection of dances from 1775.² This sparked an extensive study that traced Captain Cook's life, achievements and death through the popular culture of the time.

The enthusiasm for dancing in the Georgian era led to the building of so-called 'assembly rooms', constructed expressly for this purpose. It is fascinating to note that after his marriage, Cook chose a home for his young family next door to such a venue in Assembly Row, Mile End, east London – a place itself celebrated in the dance *The Mile End Assembly*. Assembly rooms were reserved for the upper and middle classes, while people lower down the social ladder danced in taverns. The English navigator William Dampier noted that his sailors learnt to dance in the 'musick houses'³ in Wapping, the same dockside area in the London where Cook's in-laws kept the Bell Tavern.

For sailors, dancing on board ship had a long and established tradition and was a favourite entertainment. It was more than the drunken frolic that we in the 21st century might imagine; it was a skilful art requiring balance, co-ordination, strength and endurance. The best sailors were the topmen, who climbed high into the rigging and were regarded as the elite in the seamen's hierarchy. They were also considered the best dancers.

Dancing was widely judged to have health-giving qualities, and Cook recognised these benefits and utilised them to good effect. According to the historian Carlo Blasis writing in 1830, Cook, 'wishing to counteract disease on board his vessels as much as possible, took particular care, in calm weather, to make his sailors and marines dance to the sound of a violin, and it was to this practice that he mainly ascribed the sound health which his crew enjoyed during voyages of several years continuance.'⁴ Modern scientific research endorses dancing as one of the best forms of exercise, maintaining good physical, mental and emotional health, including as it does creative expression, co-ordination, musicality and social interaction.



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Wapping by Thomas Rowlandson (1807) depicts a scene from a sailors' tavern in London. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London ID PAF3823

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Assembly rooms were reserved for the upper and middle classes, while people lower down the social ladder danced in taverns

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Cap^t Cook
 N^o 7

Change sides a back again, Han's scrofs half round, back again, lead down the middle, up again, Allemand.

01

On Cook's voyages in the Pacific, the ability of sailors to dance added a positive and cheerful tone to encounters with Indigenous people. It was employed in cultural exchanges when Cook's men danced hornpipes and country dances to entertain the islanders, in attempts to reciprocate the islanders' rituals of greeting. Music was provided by the ship's musicians; on the *Endeavour*, the fiddler was Thomas Rossiter. On subsequent voyages the Admiralty arranged for a number of musicians to be part of the crew.

As Cook noted in August 1773 in Tahiti:⁵

When the king thought proper to depart, I carried him again to Oparree in my boat; where I entertained him and his people, with the bag-pipes (of which music they are very fond) and dancing by the seamen.

The president of the Royal Society, Lord Morton, issued 'a list of hints' to Cook and the gentlemen on the *Endeavour*. These hints include advice on how to approach the people they would meet – 'not with the report of Guns, Drums, or even a trumpet ... but if there are other Instruments of Music on board they should be first entertained near the Shore with a soft Air'. The Admiralty supported this approach and on Cook's second and third voyages organised a variety of instruments, including Highland bagpipes, French horns, hautboys (oboes), fifes and flutes. It was firmly believed music and dance helped to establish friendly contact, having the power to entertain, amuse and pacify: 'I caused the Bagpipes and fife to be played and the Drum to be beat ... this they admired most', noted Cook in 1773 while in Dusky Bay, New Zealand.⁶

News of Cook's travels and discoveries caused intense interest in Britain and throughout Europe. Before the era of film and television, it was difficult for people to visualise the places and people he had encountered. An important way to present the story of Cook's voyages was through the theatre.

The first ballet to portray Cook was produced in Italy in 1784 and was titled *Gl'inglesi in Othaiti* (The English in Tahiti). It received dazzling reviews, was staged many times and was translated into German and Spanish.

The first English production was the pantomime *Omai, or, A Trip Around The World*. The title referred to the Tahitian man Omai, who had travelled to England with Cook in 1774 and achieved celebrity status before returning home two years later. The pantomime, staged in 1785 at the Covent Garden Theatre, London, was an immediate success – a blockbuster of the 18th century. The characters and scenery were drawn from the places Cook had visited, featuring authentic costumes, impressive stage designs and extraordinary special effects. The plot had little to do with Cook, but presented Omai as a Prince of Tahiti who fights the enchantress Oberea in order to regain his throne, before sailing for Britain to claim his bride 'Londina'. A theatre critic from *The Morning Chronicle* wrote:⁷

Every person who has read the history of Captain Cooke's [sic] Adventures, should see the new pantomime Omai. The manners of the natives in the new discovered islands being there pourtrayed [sic] to the life, and the soil, and culture of Otaheite, &c. picturesque beyond imagination, or what can be conveyed into the understanding by reading or plates.

Following the great success of Omai, a new theatrical extravaganza was created, first in Paris, then in London: *The Grand serious pantomimic ballet, The Death of Captain Cook*.⁸ The story bore little resemblance to any actual event. It did, however, give an elaborate depiction of the people and places Cook had visited. The scene is set on 'The Island of O-Why-e in the South Sea' where the king of Hawaii is at war. Cook assists in defeating his enemies and although the ruler wishes to execute the prisoners, Cook saves them. Despite this he is attacked and murdered by the enemies, as they regard him as responsible for their defeat. The first performance evoked tears and hysterics when the audience saw the captain stabbed to death. This dramatic if fanciful representation of Cook's death was an important factor in the ballet's ongoing success and popularity throughout the British Isles, Europe and America.

In the late 18th century it was common for plays, pantomimes and ballets to include dances that could be adapted for a social setting. The dance *Omai* was an example of this – it came directly from the pantomime and was published in Campbell's *2nd Book of New and Favourite Country Dances* (c1786). People across an increasingly industrialising Europe and North America were fascinated with Cook and with his travels in the exotic and remote Pacific region. We know of the numerous books and paintings created about the great navigator, but comparatively little about the number of dances created, such as *Transit of Venus, South Seas, Island of Love, Trip to Ottahite* (Tahiti), and *Captain Cook's Country Dance*. It was in dance and song that people from all walks of life could venerate the great navigator.

- 1 Blasis, C, *The code of Terpsichore*. 1830, London: E. Bull.
- 2 Bride, *Favourite Collection Of Two Hundred Country Dances*. 1775, London.
- 3 Dampier, W, *A New Voyage Round The World*. 1697, Printed for James Knapton ... London.
- 4 Blasis, op cit.
- 5 Cook, J, *The three voyages of Captain James Cook around the world*. 1821.
- 6 Cook, J, J C Beaglehole and S Hakluyt, *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery*. 2, 2. 1969, Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press.
- 7 *The Morning Chronicle*. 1785 London.
- 8 *The death of Captain Cook a grand serious-pantomimic-ballet, in three parts*. 1789, London: Printed for T Cadell, in the Strand.

Dr Heather Blasdale Clarke is a dance teacher and historian specialising in early Australian colonial culture. She has carried out extensive research in this hitherto untouched area of social history, including doctoral research into the intriguing topic of convict dance 1788–1840. She has developed a free online resource: colonialdance.com.au/dancing-with-cook. A book and CD, *Captain Cook's Country Dances*, have recently been released, as well as a unit for teachers aligned to the primary school curriculum; they can be purchased at the above website.