

Interpreting history and our naval heroes.

In my Dispatch, August 2018, headed ‘Toppling Heroes’, I considered the arguments around the removal of statues erected to honour people from history and also examined the ill-informed accusations against Lord Nelson concerning his attitude to the Atlantic slave trade. While I disagree entirely with the recent claims, which position Nelson as a proactive supporter of slavery I do believe we must be fair. Nelson did support the Atlantic slave trade. It is an uncomfortable fact that goes against every other aspect of his humanity and religious faith. I realised that we had to explore the various issues involved because this accusation is about much more than the loaded phrase ‘white supremacist’ attitudes. The 1805 Club exists to preserve monuments and memorials, including those to Nelson. By honouring Nelson and his kind were we therefore also by implication supporting white supremacy?



**Point Wild
Elephant Island
Antarctic**

There is not a single shred of evidence that Nelson considered white people superior to black people and in his personal dealings on land and at sea the evidence shows he treated all equally. In fact, he fought hard for the rights of individual black men who gave him good service. Maybe he could be considered naïve but it is more likely that he was being pragmatic. Nelson was certainly no white supremacist! Moreover, it is mendacious to use an inaccurate assertion to condemn him for perpetuating “tyranny, serial rape and exploitation”.

However, these are important issues that we should continue to debate widely, but honestly and not through the fog of ultra-political correctness. ‘Fake history’ driven by hysteria or protest interest groups who judge history by the prevailing cultural and moral values of the time should be challenged vigorously. Everyone needs to be sincere about our shared past so that historical characters can be interpreted in perspective and in context. We must not judge historical figures based on modern sensitivities. On that basis every historical character is culpable. No one can emerge unscathed. Adjusting history to our modern perception is unfair to the times and circumstances that preceded us. It is bad history.

In August 2017 I speculated whether we have heard the last of this. I thought not and my qualms have been born out as we have seen the same style of condemnation applied to Captain James Cook RN and most recently to Sir Winston Churchill. In the latter’s case, as witnessed by astronaut Scott Kelly, it is no longer permissible to reference inspirational quotes by Churchill, such as, “*In War: Resolution, In Defeat: Defiance, In Victory: Magnanimity, In Peace: Goodwill*”, because of the bad things Churchill is adjudged by the Twitterati to have done. They cite the Bengal Famine. For them, the good things, like standing up to the tyranny of Nazi fas-

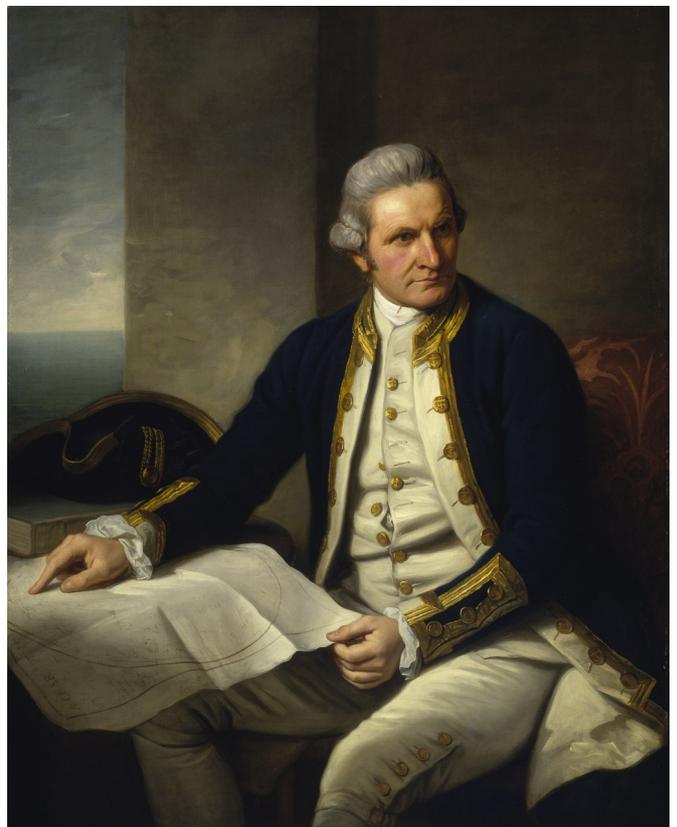
cism count for nothing. The single-issue approach will always ignore the incredible complexity of any situation, for instance in the famine’s case, that Churchill was immersed in a global, total war where there were conflicting priorities and demands.

Why does this matter? Simply, because historically inaccurate abuse of historical characters, including Horatio Nelson, is indicative of something far more worrying in our society – a disintegration of mature, open and sensible discourse. We may be small in size, but The 1805 Club has a voice and it is one that in the name of the Georgian naval heroes whose memory it seeks to preserve, must always be balanced, honest and free of any infection that may corrode the sinews of free discourse.

I shall now add to that discourse!

In May we enjoyed a splendid Cecil Isaacson Memorial Lecture on James Cook, given by Vanessa Collingridge. It highlighted how in the second half of the 18th Century the Royal Navy, an institution characterized by meritocracy, offered talented people two routes that could advance their careers: warfighting, exemplified by Nelson, and exploration, best represented by Cook. It is fascinating that the Royal Navy produced these exceptional sailors at more or less the same time.

I am a great fan of Cook, as well as of Nelson, and there is in my mind one unexplained feature of his outstanding career that may never be resolved, but which will continue to haunt his good reputation: This is his personality change towards the end of his life. The difference between the enlightened and humanitarian Cook of the *Endeavour* voyage



**James Cook by Nathaniel Dance-Holland
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.
[Public domain]**

(1768-1771) is in stark contrast to the oppressive and cruel Cook of the *Resolution* and *Discovery* voyage (1776 – 1779/82). “. . . the most moderate, humane and gentle circumnavigator that ever went upon discoveries,” as described by Richard Hough; a man exhibiting an enlightened and refreshingly civilized attitude toward the men who served under him and the natives of the lands he exposed to European society for the first time changed into a man who had lost his burning curiosity and had become cruel, irritable, and profane. His seamanship had become faulty; whereas before he had been both concise and precise, he constantly delayed and vacillated from one plan to another, and he tempted fate repeatedly with foolhardy acts, such as sailing fast with the wind in fog with visibility down to 100 yards.

Cook exhibited prolonged symptoms. They first appear in his second voyage and include stubborn constipation, loss of appetite and loss of weight; also fatigue, loss of interest and initiative, irritability, loss of concentration and memory, and the change of personality. The distinguished Surgeon Vice Admiral Sir James Watt Medical Director General of the Navy (1972-1977) believed that Cook was suffering from a parasitic infection of the intestine: “The parasites would cause inflammation of the wall of the intestine allowing colonization of bacteria which could interfere with the absorption of the B complex of vitamins and probably other nutrients.” In other words, Cook was suffering from an intestinal blockage that deprived him of Vitamin B. However, at most lectures I have given on Cook this diagnosis has been challenged – by doctors! They say Vitamin B deficiency alone would not be enough to explain the personality change. Therefore, if they are right, there are two mysteries. Why did someone as illustrious as Watt proffer an explanation that he must have known to be inadequate? And, what other explanations could there be to explain Cook’s change in personality?

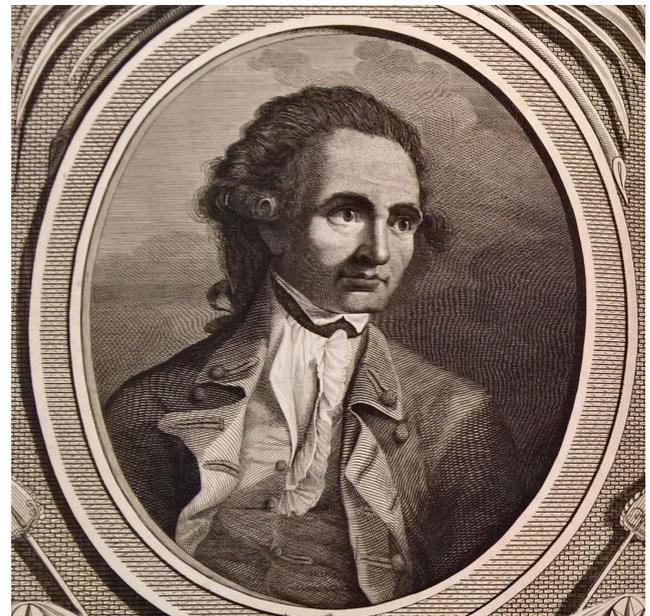
One suggestion that has been put forward and which addresses both of these questions is that Cook was displaying the symptoms of third stage syphilis and in that in order not to tarnish Cook’s reputation Watt put forward the Vitamin B deficiency diagnosis as a smokescreen. Having studied Cook I find it very hard to find any credence, let alone evidence, to suggest that Cook had a sexual relationship with any women other than his wife and none on Tahiti, where the women were in his words “free with their favours” or indeed elsewhere during the *Endeavour* voyage. Whereas there is evidence for many of the ship’s crew and also the naturalist Joseph Banks, who ‘went native’. Cook was modest with a strong sense of duty and loyalty to home and country and he was very much aware of the “Venereal distemper”, attempting to limit its spread. He wrote, “We debauch their morals already too prone to vice and we interduce among them wants and perhaps diseases which they never before knew and which serves only to disturb that happy tranquility they and their forefathers have enjoyed.” Moreover, I believe his religious faith also protected the sanctity of his marriage.

If Watt is wrong and syphilis cannot be believed what other possible diagnoses could there be?

Another that has been put forward is PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) after PTE (potential traumatizing events).

Those events could have only been the unremitting stresses of his two harrowing voyages of discovery. However, the nature of the available source documents - his formal journals written for the Admiralty only - do not reveal his mental health or display post-traumatic symptoms. At best they might endorse signs of anger and irritability. PTSD is a fragile diagnosis.

Based on personal experience and talking to specialist doctors and surgeons I believe there may be one other possibility that is valid and which coincidentally protects Cook’s reputation. I would like to suggest that Cook was suffering from a brain tumour. Personality changes brought on by brain tumours include irritability or aggression, loss of inhibitions or restraints and behaving in socially or culturally unacceptable ways, confusion and forgetfulness, depression, mood swings, difficulty identifying emotions in yourself and others and difficulty planning and organising. All of these symptoms can be applied to Cook especially in respect of his third and final voyage. Unfortunately, we shall never be certain. The



brain tumour remains speculation, but then history is always about interpretation based on the best factual information available! Compared to ‘fake history’ based on analysis through the lens of contemporary social values, it is reassuring that *contemporary* scientific knowledge can assist our understanding of the past.

As always before closing, I wish to express my thanks to our *Kedge Anchor* editor, Ken Flemming. This issue will be his penultimate edition and while it is clear that he will be a hard act to follow I hope that as a member of the Club you will consider seriously whether you could put yourself forward to be the next editor and carry on the fine tradition he has established.

With all good wishes, yours aye,

Peter