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Review of *The secret life of James Cook: a novel* by Graeme Lay

Abstract:

Review of Graeme Lay's *The secret life of James Cook: a novel*.

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is currently lecturing in creative writing, drama and storytelling to Master's level at Waikato Institute of Technology. The only New Zealand executive member of the AAWP, she regularly contributes papers to their and other conferences in the areas of writing and communication, having also been a member of the New Zealand Communication Association since 1997, and of the Tertiary Writing Network of New Zealand since 1998. More recently, she has been investigating more popular genres of writing, namely food and crime writing, and has had academic articles and chapters accepted by the UK based journal of creative writing, *New writing*. She writes poetry and short stories as well as reviewing theatre for New Zealand newspapers and theatre websites and reviewing books for National Radio NZ's *Nine to Noon* show.

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Creative writing – Fiction – New Zealand – Graeme Lay – James Cook

The secret life of James Cook: a novel

Graeme Lay

Fourth Estate (Harper Collins), Auckland 2013

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NZ\$37.00

Well known in New Zealand and the Pacific as a writer and editor of fiction as well as travel stories, and also as sponsor of the Graeme Lay Prize for fiction, Lay here turns his gaze upon one of the greatest travellers of all, Captain James Cook. While most of Cook's travels are well documented, including in his own captain's journals, little is known about his early or personal life apart from the bare facts of places of work and habitation. Although well-researched and with acknowledgements to two recent historical reads, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog* by Anne Salmond (2004) and *Tupaia, Captain Cook's Polynesian Navigator* by Joan Druett (2011), Lay chooses to treat Cook as a fictional subject. This novel takes its subject from his birth place in Great Ayton, inland North Yorkshire, as the son of an illiterate farm labourer and his wife, to a life devoted to and on the sea.

In the book's introduction, Lay states the range of his enquiry – from Cook leaving his home village in 1745 at the age of 16, to achieving a royal audience with King George III in 1771, after successfully circumnavigating the world – and asks, 'How did this remarkable transformation occur?' The novel develops the character of James Cook as determined, driven, intelligent and dour. Yet it reveals a softer side from the severe postage stamp portraits and bronze figures that tower over visitors in the Mall or Greenwich Naval College, and which most antipodean tourists in London recognise, to suggest a devoted husband, loving son and grateful acolyte to his wealthy or influential supporters.

With little documentation for the early period, Lay creates a convincing scenario of a young man progressing swiftly, after his aptitude and intelligence had been noted by the local squire who sponsored his education. Already rising above his parents through his application to his education, and after displaying skill in arithmetic, Cook was first employed in a draper's shop in Staithes, the nearest town to his home village. He was then supported by the shop's owner to become apprenticed as an assistant to

John Walker, a Whitby Quaker and ship owner, whose work ethic and moral outlook are seen as influencing the young apprentice, and are later evident in his stern but principled leadership of the sailors under his command.

Although he was born inland, the sea became his calling above all others, and one that Cook was to seek and apply all his intelligence and tenacity to pursue. So, then to Whitby, where he learnt the rough trade of the sailor, working his way until he became the commander of a collier. After nearly a decade, Cook chose to join the navy at the age of 26 and began, again, first as a naval seaman, making his way through these ranks until he eventually became Master then Captain of British Royal Navy vessels. Lay painstakingly reveals Cook's skill with hydrography, cartography, astronomy, in all of which he was entirely self-made, and posits that his brilliant mapping of the St Lawrence River and Newfoundland during, and after, the Seven Years War with France drew him to the attention of the admiralty and Royal Society. With the added sponsorship of Captain, later Sir, Hugh Palliser and Stephens, the Secretary of the Admiralty, Cook secured the responsibility to captain the expedition to observe and record the Transit of Venus in 1769.

Cook's journals are already known for minimising personal details, being confined to noting wind, weather, latitude, longitude, nautical miles, cartographical and astronomical readings, along with notes about the well-being of the crew. Furthermore, an admiralty ruling stipulated that all journals and papers on board ship were to be handed in at journey's end. It is this notion which gives rise to the secrecy noted in the title of this text; Lay has Cook record an illicit secret journal, written to Elizabeth, his wife, which he presents to her after this first three year voyage is complete. Elizabeth Cook (the heroine of Marele Day's 2004 fictional biography) is given a strong place in this work as recipient of her husband's inner thoughts and hopes. To her, he notes his ambitions to rid the crew of scurvy, of the problems of maintaining discipline with over ninety men on the small HM Bark, Endeavour, and of his horror at uncovering violent jealousy over a case of 'buggaree'. Most entertainingly, he records his antipathy to Joseph Banks, the gentleman botanist, who has paid his own way on the expedition to observe the Transit of Venus, but seems to most enjoy the application of Venus' qualities in his dealings with the native women at each port of call.

Cook's voice in these imagined journals is reticent, sombre and even pedestrian, but it does reveal occasional moments of nostalgia and domestic yearning for the family home, which was acquired relatively late in his life, and for Elizabeth and their children. *As we depart for the unknown and the unfathomable, it is the known and the beloved who are uppermost in my thoughts*, he writes (241), on 14 August 1769, as he turns the bark due south from Tahiti, obeying the Admiralty instructions to investigate the southern continent of which Abel Tasman has written, and also to chart the land Tasman named New Zealand. Based on the experiences of previous adventurers, he had taken on board cases of nails and beads, to use in bartering with the natives and these seemed to be well received in Tahiti.

These secret musings are interspersed with notes from Cook's nautical journals and embedded into the primary third person narrative which concentrates upon the first

great voyage of the Endeavour, as well as events at home for Elizabeth and the children. In contrast to Cook, Banks is portrayed as a lively, frank although sometimes excessive character, whom Lay suggests Cook had met earlier in New Foundland, and even then formed a disliking to. But it is through Banks that Cook meets Tupaia, the Tahitian chieftain who becomes an invaluable navigator through the Pacific islands, and eventual translator with the Maori once they reach New Zealand. This section of the book is the most engaging, with Cook's encounters with what he calls 'the Indians' of Australasia, already officially journalled, but now fleshed out into narrated events and his later reflection in the secret text. Lay represents Cook as humane and open about his hosts in New Holland who are unimpressed with the offers of beads and nails: *They are, I believe, contented creatures, entirely at one with the land, river and coastal waters. These offer all they require and they appear to have no ambition whatsoever to develop or acquire the appurtenances of civilised beings* (322).

It is alleged that Elizabeth Cook destroyed all the papers and letters from her husband before she died in 1835. She bore Cook six children, all of whom were born while he was away at sea over all of his voyages, and several more who also died during his successive expeditions. While many wonder why she took this action, Lay makes it possible to imagine the grief and pain she might have felt long after the deaths of the children and her husband, which might have led her to destroy these invaluable documents. He skilfully underscores Cook's journey with the ironic facts that the birth and death of the Cooks' baby Joseph and the death of their daughter Elizabeth feature strongly as events unknown to him, on the opposite side of the world, while in his journals he is anticipating seeing them all again.

These and many other facets of this volume make it an absorbing read, a text which is not only rich with incident and detail, of course, but also deepened with the personal and interpersonal accounts of Cook's family and the invented inner thoughts which are given prominence.

Endnotes

Day, Marele 2003 *Mrs Cook* Sydney: Allen and Unwin

Druett, Joan 2011 *Tupaia, Captain Cook's Polynesian navigator* Auckland: Random House

Salmond, Anne 2004 *The trial of the cannibal dog* Auckland: Penguin