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Cook Books: For His Prized Set, Collector Stumbled Upon Rare Printers' Sheets

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

In his 1952 essay "Collecting Captain Cook," Sir Maurice Holmes described the three types of thrills he felt when on the trail of a book by or about the 18th-century navigator and explorer:

"First there is the excitement of paying more than one can afford for a much-desired book," he wrote. "At the opposite pole is the almost unbearable excitement of acquiring a real rarity for next to nothing.

"Lastly, there is the excitement of getting a book which one has come to regard as an 'impossible.' "

The trio resonates with Columbus collector Ron Ravneberg, who will speak this evening to the Aldus Society, A Columbus Book Club, on the subject "Searching for Captain Cook: A Serendipitous Journey."

"I've pretty much experienced all three things on Holmes' list since I began collecting Cook in 1992," Ravneberg said in a recent interview.

Serious Cook collectors eventually purchase an original "set of Cook," which includes John Hawkesworth's 1773 account of Cook's first voyage; Cook's account of his second voyage (published in three editions, in 1777, 1779 and 1784); and Cook and James King's account of the third voyage (1784 and 1785).

A set also might have *The Life of Captain James Cook*, a 1788 biography by Andrew Kippis.

Ravneberg has his set of Cook, a little tattered when purchased but beautifully re-bound by conservator Don Etherington -- and "safe now for another 250 years, when some other collector can have it re-bound again."

An advertisement for another Hawkesworth piqued his curiosity last year.

On the surface, the ad was discouraging: Volume I was missing, and volumes II and III were "rubbed and soiled." Volume II was "bound without a title page."

Other bits of information in the ad, though, made his pulse quicken: With "extensive ink corrections" but "no maps or plates," the set seemed to be a "proof."

Ravneberg bit, sending money to England and receiving the second and third volumes.

Then he went to school: His research took him to the libraries at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and the University of California, Berkeley.

After all the snooping he could do in the United States, he bravely mailed his books to the Hodern House in Sydney, Australia, where Capt. Cook expert Derek McDonnell examined them and declared them the

“printers’ sheets for the resetting of the second and third volumes of the second edition.”

In other words, the books are one-of-a-kind. (“Rubbed” and “soiled” actually referred to the thumbprints, which stained many of the pages that the proofer handled.)

Ravneberg had his “impossible” find.

The three Cook voyages in the Pacific became models for exploration and the gathering of scientific information.

His second voyage, the first circumnavigation and penetration of the Antarctic, remains one of the greatest sailing feats in human history.

“I think I’m drawn to Capt. Cook,” Ravneberg said, “because I’d much rather stand in a brisk wind on Point Barrow, Alaska, than walk the Champs Elysees. Cook lived in a world of edges. He sailed utterly away from civilization for years at a time.”

Warming to his subject, he continued: “Today the Caribbean is like Broad and High. It’s a busy intersection. Ships are 56,000 tons. They all have GPS (global positioning systems). When Cook sailed, he sailed out there .”

Ravneberg bought his first Cook, a Heritage Press volume, for \$20 at Jeffrey’s Antiques in Findlay.

Today he owns more than 400 volumes relating to Cook.

Ravneberg described a recent Martin Dugard book, *Farther Than Any Man: The Rise and Fall of Captain James Cook*, as “the worst piece of Cook scholarship in recent memory.”

Still, *Farther Than Any Man* has a place on his shelf.

“No book about Cook,” he explained, “is 100 percent tripe.”

He purchased his “set of Cook” from a book dealer in Daytona Beach, Fla. -- where he often traveled on business -- “after about a year of looking at them and soul-searching.”

Unfortunately, the set did not include the original maps and plates, which he bought separately from a rare-book dealer in Australia.

“I buy my books like some folks buy houses,” Ravneberg said. “I buy the cheapest house I can find in the most expensive neighborhood. You could buy a set of Cook for \$115,000. I’m not a high-end collector by any means.”

All book collectors are eccentrics, but not all are readers.

“I have read all of the first and second voyages,” he said, “and I’m working my way through the third voyage.”

The surprises that Ravneberg routinely uncovers as he examines his collection seem endless.

“Look at the bottom of that plate,” he said excitedly, pointing to a painting of the third voyage. “Do you see that man on the surfboard? The first description of someone using a surfboard comes from Cook’s voyages.”

When he speaks tonight, he'll have his books, some of which are more than 225 years old, on hand for inspection.

"Don Etherington is quoted in *The Island of Lost Maps*," Ravneberg said of the conservator. "He says: 'I don't think we should be restoring things to put in a glass case, never to be handled. Books were never designed to not be read.'"

"I couldn't agree more."