George Forster’s marvelous narrative of the second Cook voyage, which lasted from July 1772 to July 1775, came about through a series of setbacks. In the first and most critical of these, Sir Joseph Banks angrily withdrew from the expedition when Captain Cook made the decision that the modifications to the lead ship required by Banks and his large party rendered it unseaworthy. The German naturalist, Johann Reinhold Forster, was appointed in his stead; he brought along his 18-year-old son, George, who had worked at his father’s side for several years as a collaborator and translator. The senior Forster had a short temper and managed to make enemies of several important figures during and after the voyage. The Admiralty, with whom he had signed an agreement, refused him permission to write an independent account of the voyage. George was under no such constraint, however. Drawing upon his father’s journals and his own recollections, he wrote a 1,200 page text in nine months, publishing *A Voyage Round the World* in 1777 followed by a German version a few years later. An annotated version of the German edition was republished by the East German state in 1968; but this is the first new English edition since the original publication.

Cook’s secret mission was to search for a southern continent. Three arduous cruises into high southern latitudes convinced him (wrongly, of course) that the southern ocean was a solid sheet of ice. These expeditions were relieved by two long periods spend in recuperation and exploration in the temperate and tropical zones of the south Pacific. As well as renewing and extending their prior contacts in Tahiti and New Zealand, Cook and his crew chartered a lengthy course from Easter Island to New Caledonia, making first contact with several islands in eastern
Melanesia. While Forster documented the entire voyage, the chief interest in his narrative, for himself as much as modern readers, lies in the extended description of the two seasons among the peoples of Oceania.

Forster was a careful and astute observer, whose graceful prose paints vivid scenes: the sailors in the grip of sickness and near-starvation in the Antarctic seas; the distressing barrenness of Easter Island, overlooked by somber lines of massive statues; the exotic dances and mysterious customs of the Arioi society in Tahiti; the often subtle differentiations of appearance and behavior denoting rank in central Polynesia; the tense tentative trading supervised by Cook on the beaches of the New Hebrides, frequently interrupted by outbreaks of violence; and much else. Forster provides meticulous descriptions of the appearance of Pacific islanders, their habitations, temples and gardens. Well-read in the philosophical literature of his day, he speculates on the clues the islanders seem to furnish on the early history of humankind, the effects of climate on culture, and the nature of human morality, giving us a window into past Enlightenment thought. The narrative also provides an abundance of historical information on such matters as the political arrangements in the islands during the early contact period; the early introduction of European goods, plants and animals, and diseases; and the linguistic, economic and political links and separations between different island societies.

The editors have enhanced the text in several ways. They provide an informative introduction, reviewing the genesis of the manuscript, its relationship to contemporary works and impact. They have added a number of illustrations, including reproductions of plates from Cook’s own account of the second expedition and photographs of variety of artifacts mentioned in the text. The five appendices include a helpful list of the modern equivalents of the Pacific island names used by Forster, along with: Forster’s introduction to the German edition; an attack
on Forster account written by the ship’s astronomer, William Wales; Forster’s reply to Wales; and Forster’s public letter protesting the Admiralty’s treatment of Johann Reinhold. The book is rounded out by a detailed bibliography and index.

Thomas and Berghof are to be especially commended for the extensive annotations, which, more than anything else, alert us to the continuing relevance of Forster’s observations and commentaries to contemporary concerns in anthropology, history and colonial studies. The annotations display an impressive mastery of the massive Cook literature as well as archaeological and ethnographic writings on Pacific cultures. This brings me to my only quibble with this publication. I regret the editors’ decision to employ endnotes instead of footnotes. The annotations always enhance the text and often are indispensable to a modern reader – I was thus annoyed to have to constantly flip to the end of the two volumes and find my place again in the cramped reduced-sized text of the endnotes.

But this is a small complaint. The editors venture that A Voyage Round the World “is arguably the richest of any eighteenth-century account of Pacific peoples” (page xiii). They are undoubtedly right and modern scholars, Pacific islanders and casual readers alike are greatly in their debt for bringing this wonderful text out of the archives and making it available in this beautifully produced edition.

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