

**AUSTRALIAN JOINT COPYING PROJECT**

**DAVID SAMWELL**

**Journal, 1776-79**

**Reel M1583**

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Great Russell Street  
London WC1B 3DG**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

David Samwell (1751-1798) was born in Nantglyn in north Wales, where his father was the vicar. He was educated at one of the local grammar schools, probably Ruthin. In 1775 he gained his certificate as a second mate from the Court of Examiners at the Royal College of Surgeons. He was apprenticed to John Crosier, who had been surgeon on HMS *Dolphin* on its Pacific voyage in 1764-66. In 1776 Crosier secured Samwell's appointment as surgeon's mate on HMS *Resolution*, commanded by James Cook. Following the death of the Surgeon William Anderson in August 1778, Cook promoted Samwell to the position of surgeon on HMS *Discovery*, commanded by Charles Clerke. Both Cook and Clerke died in 1779 and Lieutenant James King commanded HMS *Discovery* on the return voyage to England in 1780.

Samwell served under King on HMS *Crocodile* in 1780-81 and later on HMS *Kite*. He retired on half-pay in 1786 and established a medical practice in London. He had provided some assistance to King on the publication of the official account of Cook's third voyage. In 1786, encouraged by Andrew Kippis, he published *A narrative of the death of Captain James Cook*, much of which was incorporated in the major biography published by Kippis in 1788. Samwell returned to sea in 1793 on the outbreak of war with France and served on HMS *Marlborough* and HMS *Unicorn*. In 1798 he was appointed as one of the surgeons to attend British prisoners-of-war in Paris, but he died in the same year.

Samwell was a leading figure in Welsh cultural activities in London. He was secretary and later vice-president of the Gwyneddigan Society, which had been founded in 1771 to read and discuss Welsh poetry and debate Welsh historical topics. He was also involved in the revival of eisteddfods. He published occasional poems in English and Welsh and became a friend of Anna Seward, the author of *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780).

Reference: Martin Fitzpatrick, Nicholas Thomas and Jennifer Newell, eds. *The death of Captain Cook and other writings by David Samwell* (Cardiff, 2007).

## DAVID SAMWELL

### Reel M1583

**British Library, Egerton MS 2591 (318 folios, 635 pages)**

The journal of David Samwell is entitled 'Some account of a voyage to South Seas in 1776 – 1777 - 1778'. This is slightly inaccurate as the last entry is dated 29 November 1779, when HMS *Discovery* was entering the Canton River on the journey back to England.

The journal describes the voyage of HMS *Resolution*, departing from Portsmouth (13 July 1776) and visiting Kerguelen Island (f. 5), Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land (f. 7), Charlotte Sound, New Zealand (f. 10), Nomuka (f. 29), Tongatapu and the Friendly Islands (f. 41), Tahiti (f. 67), the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii, f. 92), Nootka Sound (Canada, f. 100), Prince William Sound (Alaska) and the Aleutian coast. Following Samwell's transfer to HMS *Discovery* in August 1778, the journal describes the voyage to the Bering Sea, Unalaska Island, the Sandwich Islands (ff. 152-241), Kamtschatka (ff. 245-62), the coast of Japan (f. 288) and the Canton River (f. 296).

The first part of the volume is a summary account rather than a journal, with the voyage from England to Kerguelen covered in a single page. After about twenty or so pages it becomes a journal, with daily entries. There are, however, some gaps. For instance, there are no entries for 14-22 October 1777, 9-23 December 1777 or 1-17 January 1778. In general, when the ships are at sea the entries are extremely succinct, giving the course, wind, weather and position (eg. February – March 1778) or just the weather and position (eg. March – April 1779).

The bulk of the journal describes the lands and islands visited by the ships and the relations between the British seamen and the Indigenous peoples of those lands. There are detailed descriptions of topography, flora and fauna, villages, houses, canoes, crops, fishing, weapons, military exercises, artefacts, the social organisation of places visited, religions, customs, clothing, and the physical appearance of the people, including tattoos and other decorations. Samwell deals at length with trading for provisions, meetings with kings and chiefs, feasts, dances, music, marriage and burial ceremonies, and sexual relations between European seamen and Indigenous peoples. He also refers to conflict between seamen and Maoris (f. 14), Cook's skill in negotiating with local leaders, Omai's dealings with islanders, the parting with Omai at Tahiti (f. 84), and meetings with Russian officials, traders and priests at Kamtschatka. The second visit to the Sandwich Islands (November 1778 – March 1779) and the death of Cook (f. 201) are covered in great detail. There are also word lists for the Friendly Islands (ff. 62-63), Nootka Sound (f. 112), Unalaska (ff. 149-50), Hawaii (ff. 240-41) and Kamtschatka (ff. 259-60).

The volume also contains an engraved portrait of Samwell, a silhouette, possibly of Samwell, and a few prints of indigenous peoples, including a man and woman of Prince William Sound. At the end of the volume is a copy of Samwell's pamphlet, *A narrative of the death of Captain James Cook to*

*which are added some particulars concerning his life and character and observations respecting the introduction of the venereal diseases into the Sandwich Islands* (London, 1781), and a printed poem *Ode for the year 1790 as it was intended to have been rehearsed this day at St James's*.

The journal of David Samwell was purchased by the British Museum in 1881. The text was reproduced in J.C. Beaglehole. *The journals of Captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery*, vol. 5 (Cambridge, Hakluyt Society, 1967), pp 989-1295.