"Of Follies, Vices, & Unspoilt Virtues": 'The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman,' Imperialist Mythmaking, and Violent European-Pacific Islander Encounters on the Cook Voyages

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Abstract

*The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* (1778) is a satirical travelogue that, despite its status as the “first New Zealand novel,” has been forgotten by time until only recently. As a dramatization of Captain James Cook’s second voyage to the Pacific, the work has attracted the interest of modern scholars who regard the Cook expeditions as symbols of progress. Yet the novel’s portrayal of the Grass Cove Incident of 1773 and its contrast of European and indigenous New Zealander violence can be used to complicate the relationship between colonialist thinking and the British imagination that existed in the eighteenth century. By supplementing passages from *Hildebrand Bowman* with artistic representations of violent encounters on the Cook voyages, this paper establishes the significance of the text within the British myth of glorified imperialist exploration. Furthermore, I analyze the novel’s parody of Age-of-Enlightenment theories of behavior and civilization to highlight the mythmaking involved in the vilification of Pacific Islander hostility to colonization. In its study of *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* as an exemplar of the colonizer’s gaze, this research identifies and confronts the devices of Western propaganda that sought to promote sensationalized portrayals of the violence of Oceanic peoples and erase Pacific Islander narratives of the Cook voyages.
Keywords: The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman, Captain James Cook, Pacific Islanders, New Zealand, Oceania, Grass Cove Incident, stadial theory, imperialism

Introduction

When The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman was published anonymously in 1778, it seemed that this fictitious account of a sailor on Captain James Cook’s second voyage to Oceania (1772-1775) would enter into the canon of eighteenth-century travel literature that included the likes of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels. But after almost 250 years, the novel is only now re-emerging in the scholarly world as a valuable survey of Enlightenment thinking. A satire of what anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere calls European mythmaking—an imperialist device that unjustly validated Western perceptions of non-Western peoples and dismissed Pacific Islander narratives of contact history (10)—this once-forgotten travelogue follows its title character on his travels throughout New Zealand and documents his encounters with six imagined indigenous societies (the Carnovirrians, Taupinierians, Olfactarians, Auditantes, Bonhomnicans, and Luxo-Voluptans). Inspired by the scientific writings and journal accounts that were compiled on Cook’s first and second voyages, Hildebrand Bowman’s narrative begins with its own interpretation of the Grass Cove Incident of 1773—a historical British-Maori conflict that resulted in cannibalism—and is shaped by its protagonist’s subsequent confrontations with native New Zealander violence. By centering its plot around such an infamous event, the novel capitalized on the European obsession with violence in the Pacific that was ignited by the anthropological writings of the Cook expeditions. The work’s assessments of indigenous New Zealander behaviors exemplify the deceptions that the
Western tradition used to manipulate accounts of Pacific Islander violence; therefore, I argue that *Hildebrand Bowman* offers an insight into the covert methods of European mythmaking in colonialist thought. In my close reading of the novel, I pair relevant passages with artwork associated with the Cook voyages to situate the text within the eighteenth-century debate about race, civilization, and human behavior. My analysis of the novel’s problematic portrayals of violence in Oceania is not to privilege European perspectives or minimize Pacific Islander peoples’ own perceptions of British contact. Rather, I examine *Hildebrand Bowman* as a model of the imperialist gaze to expose how print and material culture reinforced the harmful myths that eighteenth-century Britain told itself about Cook’s violent encounters with various Pacific Islander cultures—specifically that hostile resistance to colonialism was evidence of Pacific Islander savagery.

**A Study of Stadial Theory**

As a piece of Western propaganda, *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* must be examined as a representation of emerging racial theory in the Age of Enlightenment. This novel and its themes directly reflect the discourse that was taking place in this period about human social development, human behavior, and the implications of the expanding British empire. The structure of the novel’s plot maps out the controversial ways in which Oceanic cultures were being portrayed in the European imagination at the time of Cook’s first and second voyages (Bertelsen 18). After surviving the novel’s account of the ill-fated cannibal encounter that became known as the Grass Cove Incident (which will later be examined in more detail), Hildebrand Bowman is presumed dead and is abandoned in New Zealand’s Wharehunga Bay. His ensuing travels throughout New Zealand “[provide] a theatre for the dramatization of stadial theory...each land [and culture] sequentially introduces the reader to a further stage in the
development of human society” (Bertelsen 18). By the end of the novel, Bowman returns to England having discovered the Great Southern Continent, but his greatest contribution to European global exploration is arguably his scientific observations of the novel’s New Zealander societies. His accounts describe in extensive detail the language, religion, economy, political system, gender roles, sexual practices, and war customs of each invented culture, but most importantly, his writings mimic the “scientific” system of classification known as stadial theory that scientists used to vilify the violent behaviors of Oceanic peoples.

Stadial theory, a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, proposed that societies advanced through four stages of increasing sophistication: the “Age of Hunters,” “Age of Shepherds,” “Age of Agriculture,” and “Age of Commerce” (Adam Smith qtd. in Bertelsen 207). Extremely simplified, stadial theory was fabricated by European philosophers and scientists using Western values to rank non-European cultures on a spectrum of “civilized” behavior (Burnham 110). In her article “Visualizing ‘Race’ in the Eighteenth Century,” Snait B. Gissis discusses that travel literature introduced newfound theories of civilization and cultural “perfectibility” to the Western tradition. She elaborates that the appearance of such theories in texts like The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman,

underpinned the discussions of non-European peoples and served to order hierarchically varieties of human groups...By the end of the eighteenth century, humans who lacked the potential for perfectibility—especially compared with white Europeans—were regarded as partaking only partially in humanity, and were placed lower in the hierarchical classification of humanity (71).

In Hildebrand Bowman, this racial hierarchy is employed to other Oceanic cultures based on how their behavior succeeds or fails to conform to the white colonizer model. The novel,
therefore, is crucial in complicating the tactics by which British society perpetuated the racist myth that Pacific Islander cultures were inherently inferior to Western cultures; most important to my analysis of the novel, *Hildebrand Bowman* allegorizes the colonizer’s quest to dehumanize the other by implementing theories of violent behavior and race. By examining the novel’s sketches of Pacific Islander violence more closely, we see that the text as a satirical travelogue both critiqued contemporary theories of social organization and exploited the European fascination with systematic othering.

**Making a “Civilized” Hero: Cook’s Celebrity and Death**

Drawing from the Age of Enlightenment discourse on humanity that Gissis discusses in her article, it is necessary to situate *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* within the narrative of Cook’s celebrity, as the novel presents British and Pacific Islander behavior as foils of “perfectibility” on the scale of stadial theory. In Enlightenment Britain, literary and artistic representations of Captain Cook’s journeys and death transformed him into the “ancestral hero figure” that played a significant role in the overarching myth of noble colonialism. While *Hildebrand Bowman* perpetuates the myth of Cook as a “colonial British explorer-benefactor-founder, remembered forever by the descendants of converted ‘savages’ and white settlers” (Scobie 59), the satire simultaneously exposes the British empire for fabricating a hero figure that justified its imperialist regime. The novel’s portrayals of Cook’s celebrity illustrate eighteenth-century Britain’s perception of its own aggression as a touchstone of civilization and its condemnation of Pacific Islander hostility as savagery.

In his introduction to the novel, Lance Bertelsen speculates that the anonymous author of *Hildebrand Bowman* sought to profit from “Cook’s growing fame” by associating his social commentary with the famous captain’s second voyage (9). To capitalize on his connections with
a heroic British figure and establish his fictional narrative as historical truth, the protagonist Hildebrand Bowman appeals to members of Cook’s celebrity circle that participated in his first voyage, namely the naturalists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander and the Raiatean Omai (Burnham 116). In his introductory letter to the novel, Bowman utilizes his alleged friendship with Omai to persuade Banks and Solander “not [to] refuse your Patronage to one...with whom you held a friendly intercourse in the Southern Hemisphere” (Hildebrand Bowman 49). Bowman takes the mythmaking of his introduction a step further by directly framing his travels within the renown of Cook’s first and second voyages; his interest in joining Cook’s second expedition was aroused by the reports of Captain Cooke’s [sic] voyage round the world in the Endeavour bark, accompanied by Messrs. Banks and Solander. The wonderful relations which were made concerning it, and the report of two ships fitting out to proceed in the Spring under the same commander on further discoveries, occasioned in me an eager desire to make one of the adventurers (Hildebrand Bowman 56).

These passages exploited Cook’s celebrity status to establish Bowman’s imagined travels as factually “credible.” However, I assert that the novel’s romanticized portraits of Cook, his celebrity circle, and his voyages did not simply serve as a sensationalist ploy that pandered to the British public’s perception of heroic colonialism. In its parody of Cook’s celebrity, Hildebrand Bowman exposed the Cook myth as an imperialist conspiracy that engaged in the mythmaking of stadial theory to proclaim the “moral superiority” of European conquest (Scobie 84).
The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman, in conjunction with contemporaneous works of popular culture, lay the foundation for the Cook legacy that would reach its apex in the years succeeding his death. While in life Cook was a national celebrity of modest renown, in death, as illustrated by John Webber’s *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (see fig. 1), Cook was transformed into an immortal colonial hero (Scobie 64). A version of Webber’s etching was created for the 1784 pantomime *Omai* that, despite its title, was written as a memorial to Cook who had been killed in a conflict with native Hawaiians in 1779 (T.C. Mitchell 81). Dominating the piece is Webber’s Cook who ascends into heaven and faces away from the attacking Hawaiians below. He is carried to his apotheosis by Britannia, in full headgear to Cook’s right, and the winged
Fame to his left (T.C. Mitchell 86). Cook’s affiliation with patriotic British symbols and his posed indifference to the violently portrayed Hawaiians created a “contrast between a white hero and a Owhyhee [Hawaiian] mob” and “prompted tears amongst” a large part of its English audience (Scobie 85). Making use of Cook’s celebrity image that was represented in Hildebrand Bowman, Webber’s etching upheld Cook as a martyr that died for the sake of colonial progress. Popular images like The Apotheosis, which endorsed Cook as an ancestral hero and characterized Pacific Islanders as violent, uncivilized peoples, were problematically used in Western culture to uphold racial hierarchies and romanticize the narrative of European exploration. Ultimately, Hildebrand Bowman sustained the practice of mythmaking that it sought to ridicule by preserving the Cook legacy in the British consciousness. As a result, Hildebrand Bowman symbolized the role that eighteenth-century popular culture played in contrasting the perfectibility of European humanity and the alleged imperfectability of Pacific Islanders to create the myth of glorified colonialism.

**The European Consumption of the Cannibal Myth**

As I touched on briefly in the introduction to my research, Pacific Islander cannibalism in The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman parodies anthropological discussions about human behavior and civilization in the eighteenth century. Taking inspiration from the Grass Cove Incident, one of the most notorious cannibal encounters that occurred on the Cook voyages, the novel promotes propaganda from this era that painted Pacific Islanders, and not European colonizers, as unprovoked aggressors. Just eight days before Christmas 1773, ten midshipmen sailing on Captain James Cook’s Adventure set out to gather provisions in New Zealand’s Grass Cove. When the sailors failed to return to the main ship, a party was sent out in search of the missing men (Burnham 105). The graphic scene that the crew subsequently discovered on the beach was
referred to by the *Morning Chronicle and London Adviser* as proof of Maori cannibalism: “They discovered where the infernal repast had been held upon their poor companions by the number of human bones and fragments lying around...the only tolerable remains of distinction was the hand of one [Thomas Hill], who had his name tatowed [sic] upon it” (qtd. in Bertelsen 213). As evidenced by this report from 16 July 1774, the fate of those ten sailors captivated the British curiosity. To the anonymous author of *Hildebrand Bowman*, the Grass Cove Incident was more of an opportunity than a tragedy; to appeal to the British public’s fascination with cannibalism, the novel’s interpretation of the Grass Cove Incident maximized the barbarity of the image of the indigenous cannibal “Other.”

By claiming that he was a midshipman on the *Adventure* and a forgotten member of the group that was first sent to forage for greens onshore, Hildebrand Bowman “writes himself into this particular moment in the voyage’s history” (Burnham 105). After separating from the ten other sailors in his party to hunt for game, Bowman returns to shore to discover that an unthinkable fate has befallen his fellow midshipmen. Echoing the sensationalized newspaper reports of the incident from this period, Bowman writes,

> What a horrid spectacle appeared! All our men lying dead on the place, and surrounded by some hundreds of savages...The fire was kindled, and the mangled limbs of my poor countrymen and shipmates, were put on it to broil for their unnatural repast; nay even some parts I saw devoured” (*Hildebrand Bowman* 59).

Upon being marooned in New Zealand by the *Adventure* after the events at Grass Cove, Hildebrand Bowman—now the sole European amongst Oceanic peoples—assumes the title of ethnologist and evaluates the indigenous groups he encounters using the construct of stadial history. As he makes his so-called scientific observations of indigenous New Zealander violence,
Bowman has moments of both prejudice and objectivity, condescension and empathy. For example, after witnessing the events of the Grass Cove Incident, Bowman reflects upon the cannibals’ behavior. He considers,

The wide difference there is, in the manners and ways of thinking of different human beings. In nothing more remarkable than that what I beheld these savages guilty of, the devouring their own species; which all civilized nations hold in the utmost detestation; and even believe it an innate principle in our natures... but education and habit was all in all; and had I been born in this part of New Zealand, I most certainly would have been a cannibal (Hildebrand Bowman 62).

Bowman’s musings in this passage are somewhat progressive—he theorizes about the importance of nurture over nature and complicates the eighteenth-century practice of racial stereotyping—yet he compares cannibal “savages” to the “civilized nations” that detest such practices. In his attempts to comprehend the custom of anthropophagy, Bowman draws attention to the disparities between European and non-European cultures on the scale of stadial theory and interprets such violence as contradictory to civilized humanity. Essentially, Hildebrand Bowman is an illustration of the European philosophy that the indigenous cannibal is racially inferior (Kitson 79).
Although much scholarly debate exists concerning the accuracy of European tales of anthropophagy in the Pacific, Shirley Lindenbaum explains in her article “Thinking about Cannibalism” that the European obsession with anthropophagy was rooted in, “the dominant Western mode of producing meaning through strategies of exclusion...Cannibalism was viewed as a calumny used by colonizers to justify their predatory behavior” (476). To expand on Lindenbaum’s assertion, the cannibal narrative in The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman not only provided the British public with a macabre form of entertainment. Its portrayal of anthropophagy in the Pacific also manifested the Western stratagem of using stadial theory to dehumanize Pacific Islanders and establish colonial superiority. This idea explains why European culture would create texts like Hildebrand Bowman and images like John Marra’s illustration “Representing the landing of part of the Adventure’s crew in search of their Companions who were murdered and eaten by the savages of New Zealand” (see fig. 2). Such images were paired with descriptions of cannibalism like the one in Bowman’s account so that
Europeans could immerse themselves in the myth of Pacific Islander violence. When an enlightened public observed the flesh-eating dog in the left-hand corner of Marra’s illustration, it is possible that they would not consider the fact that the incident was a culmination of microaggressions on the part of Cook’s crew. It is more likely that they would picture their fellow Europeans being attacked by indigenous New Zealanders, no matter how sensationalized that image may be. In the British imagination, Cook and his crew would remain victims of violence, and any aggression on the colonizers’ part would be justified by one glance at the severed hand of Thomas Hill that appears in Marra’s engraving. Britain’s consumption of John Marra and Hildebrand Bowman’s narratives of cannibalism proved dangerous, as they further cemented the barbaric Pacific Islander myth and vindicated colonial exploitation in the Western perception (Burnham 109).

**States of Civilization & Pacific Islander War Culture**

In its explicit depictions of white colonialist supremacy and Oceanic-European conflict, *Hildebrand Bowman* took inspiration from racist observations that scientists recorded on the Cook voyages; yet the novel also engaged in covert forms of discrimination, reflecting how colonizers communicated their prejudice against Pacific Islander violence in more nuanced ways. More specifically, returning to the concept of stadial theory, *Hildebrand Bowman*’s evaluations of indigenous New Zealand war cultures epitomized the means by which Western culture exalted itself as the superior civilized power and acculturated Pacific Islander societies. Significantly, Bowman’s observations of Oceanic warfare echo the historical writings of ethnologists that sailed with Cook and imitate the European public’s depictions of said writings. Bowman’s portrayals of Pacific Islander war culture used Western values to rationalize in the European mind the contrast between the savagery of the Carnovirrians (the novel’s cannibal culture) and
the more civilized groups that he encountered (Bertelsen 15). To Bowman, the ability of each fictional war culture to assimilate to British practices was an indicator of their place on the hierarchical scale of cultural development.

Hildebrand Bowman’s ethnocentrism permeates his accounts of indigenous New Zealanders. As seen in the novel’s interpretation of the Grass Cove Incident, Bowman makes no attempt to make contact with the Carnovirrians, whom he “detested” and “feared” and described as a “vile” people (*Hildebrand Bowman* 63). He implies that cannibalism as a war ritual was far beyond the scope of Western reform. When Bowman lives among the Olfactarians (an indigenous hunter-gatherer group with an acute sense of smell), he is appointed as a war chief and persuades their leaders to adopt European military tactics. Despite the Olfactarians’ willingness to embrace Western war practices, Bowman cannot reconcile their custom of torturing their prisoners of war, which he insists is “a shock to the [European] reader’s humanity” (*Hildebrand Bowman* 87). Finally, in his reflections as the newly-appointed military advisor of Bonhommica (an agricultural society that is the novel’s caricature of Elizabethan England), Bowman praises the New Zealander nation’s “powerful navy” which “has laboured for some years to create...a maritime force, and not without success.” He observes that the largest of their warships “does not equal one of our ships of fifty guns,” but he concedes that “that is a great deal for the time.” Bowman concludes his evaluation of the Bonhommicans’ navy by stating, “I have no doubt but in a century or two the kingdom will become a great maritime power...it is my good fortune, to contribute in some small degree of attaining such wise purposes” (*Hildebrand Bowman* 128).

In Bowman’s surveys of these three indigenous New Zealander war cultures, British military power is the standard that non-Western cultures are required to fulfill in order to achieve
civility in the colonizer’s mind. In the case of the Olfactarians and Bonhommicans, when Pacific war practices resemble their European counterparts, the Islanders are perceived from a Western standpoint as “noble savages” on the scale of stadial theory (Kruger 109). Rather than objectively examining Pacific Islander war cultures as the autonomous entities that they were (indeed, the point can be made that there was no justification for a European observation in the first place), Bowman recognizes Oceanic forces as subsidiary to British maritime powers. His conceit captured the falsehood that the British imagination told itself about Pacific Islander violence through the “science” of early anthropology—that tolerance is only earned through conformity to the European ideal.

Fig. 3. Hodges, William. *Review of the War Galleys at Tahiti*. Oil on panel. 1776, *Royal Museums Greenwich*.

*Hildebrand Bowman’s* depictions of Oceanic warfare made sense of the “exotic” by making associations between the social development of Western society and the other; this
method of cultural comparison was also perpetuated in William Hodges’ oil painting *Review of the War Galleys of Tahiti* (see fig. 3), an artistic interpretation of Captain Cook and Georg Forster’s accounts of European contact with Pacific war culture. By referring to Tahitian war canoes in comparison to the Greco-Roman concept of a war galley, Hodges projects European values of naval prowess onto Oceanic war culture. This connection was inspired by the account of Georg Forster in which he described Tahitian society and warfare as comparable to that of the ancient Greeks:

> The united efforts of Greece against Troy, in remote antiquity, could not be much more considerate than the armament of O-Too against the isle of Eimeo...What I have said here is sufficient to prove, that men in a similar state of civilisation resemble each other more than we are aware of, even in the most opposite extremes of the world (qtd. In Kruger 115).

Forster, a German ethnologist who took part in Cook’s second voyage, sought to eradicate the European perception of exotic peoples as savage “Others” by examining Pacific Islander warfare independently from Western ideals (Kruger 109-110). Yet, like Bowman’s depictions of the Bonhommican navy, Forster’s observations of Tahitian war canoes reflected the Pacific Islander-European contrast that contributed to the eighteenth-century depictions, both literary and artistic, of the Western “criteria of progress” (Gissis 73). While the cultural parallel of Forster’s conclusion communicates his reverence for both the ancient Greeks and eighteenth-century Tahitians, he condescendingly refers to Tahitian society as antiquated in the progression of human civilization.

Cook’s journal accounts of the Tahitian navy, like Forster’s scientific observations, also served as an inspiration for Hodges’ painting. Cook writes in April 1774 that the Tahitian vessels
“made a grand and noble appearance, such as we had never seen before in this sea, and what no one would have expected.” Hodge’s painting visualizes Cook’s description of the spectacle produced by the Tahitian fleet, but above all, the piece expresses Cook’s opinion that Tahiti’s impressive war canoes were “a mark of [their] more developed state than other Polynesian societies” (National Maritime Museum). We observe from Cook’s engagement with stadial theory that he, unlike Forster, consciously made judgments about which Pacific Islander culture should be tolerated and which should be condemned based solely on their affinity to European war culture. Similarly, returning to the passages from Hildebrand Bowman that were analyzed previously, Bowman evaluates New Zealander war culture (and engages in cultural discrimination) using anthropological theory; his narrative reflects the imperialist notion that there are levels of Pacific Islander violence that can and cannot be assimilated to or accepted in European thought. Hildebrand Bowman, along with Hodge’s artistic portrayal of Forster and Cook’s accounts, demonstrates how the manipulated narrative of Pacific Islander warfare and the categorization of the exotic through stadial theory, once again, permeated the Western consciousness in the eighteenth century and served as propaganda devices for colonialism. However, the novel also highlights the methods that colonizers like Cook used to conflate their own European identities with the ideal of romantic empire.

**Conclusion**

By performing a close reading of *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* alongside analyses of artwork from the Cook voyages, my research demonstrates how this novel, when situated within the context of early European discourse on civilization, can be read as a historical study of the colonialist imagination and its polarization of Pacific Islander-European aggression. Furthermore, the novel illustrates how Western sensationalism created myths about violent
Pacific Islander behaviors, human social progression, and Cook as a symbol of heroic
civilization. To underline the novel’s value to a twenty-first-century audience, I assert that
Hildebrand Bowman’s commentary on eighteenth-century mythmaking helps modern readers
identify the appeals that imperialist propaganda has historically made and makes currently.
Hildebrand Bowman exposes the mechanisms of racist othering and the myth of the noble
colonizer that were established by accounts of the Cook voyages and that persist today. In a time
when Cook and his expeditions are still regarded in textbooks and children’s books as symbols
of civilized progress, it is important now, more than ever, to dismantle the legacy of glorified
imperialism. Taking a critical look at colonialist texts like The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman is
the first step in replacing European perceptions of violent Pacific encounters with a more
objective representation of Western and non-Western contact in Oceania.
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