Ethnographic Perspective: Georg Forster, *A Voyage Round the World* (1777)

Abstract

From 1772 to 1775, Georg Forster (1754–1794) accompanied his father Johann Reinhold Forster (1729–1798) on Captain James Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, during which both father and son collected natural and ethnographic information about the places they visited, especially Polynesia. Georg published his account in London (in English) in 1777 and produced his own German translation shortly thereafter. The work was very well received and became an important model for travel writing. The following excerpt includes one of the very few references to Germans in the whole account. Georg Forster's relative lack of attention to the category "German" is significant, especially given his ethnographic interests and his own place as a German on an "English" expedition.

Source

CHAP. VII.

Second stay at the Cape of Good Hope. – Run from thence to the Islands of St. Helena and Ascension.

[…]

We passed through the northern part of the bay, between Robben Island[1] and the main. This island is a barren, sandy spot, where many murderers and other miscreants are confined by order of the Dutch India Company. Among them however there are some unhappy victims to the merciless ambition of these merchants. We need only to mention the king of Maduré, who, deprived of his possessions, and driven to the greatest horrors of despair, here lingers out a burthensome life, in the despicable condition of a common slave.[2]

— — — *escape who can,*

When man's great foe assumes the shape of man.

CUMBERLAND

On the 28th, in the morning, a man was found concealed in the hold, and proper enquiry being made, it was discovered that one of the quarter-masters had conducted him thither some days before, and shared his daily allowance with him. His good nature was punished with a dozen lashes, and another dozen applied on the stranger's back as a welcome. He was a native of his majesty's German dominions, who having been kidnapped into the Dutch East India service, had applied to Captain Cook to take him under his protection. But it being deemed improper to protect all his majesty's subjects alike, he had been reduced to the necessity of coming on board by stealth, in order to escape from a service to which he had been unjustly forced. He soon proved to be one of the most industrious men in the whole ship, and gave our crew a good idea of their Hanoverian fellow-subjects.

[…]

NOTES

[1] This is called Pinguin Island in English charts.

[2] I forbear to repeat the horrid story of this unfortunate monarch, which reflects indelible dishonor on his inhuman tormentors. It is indeed very fully and feelingly related in a book little known, intitled a Voyage to the East Indies, in 1747 and 1748, containing an account of St. Helena, Java, Batavia, the Dutch Government, and of China; interspersed with anecdotes, and illustrated with copper-plates, 8vo. London, 1762.

Source: George Forster, *A Voyage around the World in his Britannic Majesty's Sloop, Resolution, commanded by Capt. James Cook, during the years 1772,3,4, and 5*. Vol. II. London, 1777, pp. 548, 556–57. Available online at: https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_E9RaAAAAcAAJ/page/n3

Recommended Citation: Ethnographic Perspective: Georg Forster, A Voyage Round the World (1777), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-290> [September 13, 2026].