

Heinrich Zimmermann, *Account of the Third Voyage of Captain Cook* (1781)

Abstract

Heinrich Zimmermann (1741–1805) was one of the few Germans who participated in James Cook's voyages of discovery. As a sailor in the third voyage (1776 to 1779), he kept a journal that later became the basis for his account *Reise um die Welt*, which was translated into English and later published as *Account of the Third Voyage of Captain Cook*. Although sailors on Cook's voyages were supposed to hand their journals over to the Admiralty upon return, Zimmermann managed to conceal his notes and published them afterwards. In the preface, Zimmermann justifies his unauthorized publication by downplaying his authorial talents and apologizing for his spelling mistakes. After his voyage and the successful publication of his travelogue, Zimmermann was invited to lead an Austrian government-sponsored expedition to explore fur trading possibilities along the northwest coast of North America; he also served as ship's master on several voyages of the Austrian East India Company.

Source

Preface

I have long been endeavouring to decide whether I should be doing a wrong in making public the observations made by me during our voyage. Then it occurred to me that it was the duty of the crew to give up their papers: that Great Britain, having been at great expense in fitting out and keeping up with this exploring expedition, alone had the right to publish the observations of her navigators; that we had been paid for our services, and that we were therefore bound to yield up to England any notes which we might have kept during our voyage.

To all these scruples I have a few remarks to make, and I wish to set forth the reasons which have nevertheless moved me to write down my personal observations.

Is it likely that this incomplete record, which comes from the pen of a simple sailor, will ever be compared with the properly accredited narratives to be published in England? And can it prejudice them in any way? Is it not more likely that it is I who will have cause to fear that my book will be unsaleable, will be ignored and neglected, because the world is awaiting the more complete, the more correct narratives written by those who were able to see more than I? Therefore I alone will suffer.

Would the publication of my book be likely to forestall in any way those accredited accounts to be published at some future date in England? To this I can reply with the assurance that much that is new, much that I have not touched upon, and of which I have not even thought, will be presented in those narratives, that they will be much more important, and, that the information given therein will still be fresh.

And is it not perhaps something new, something which may not be expected of England, when a plain sailor describes these events to the public in his own way? Will it not perhaps be an entirely different mode of expression which he will choose? And can his path cross that of more experienced observers?

Besides, I was under no contract to sell my memory, and, if I have retained memories of all that I have seen, why should I not have the right to tell my story in my own way, to relate it to others, or to write it down and have it

printed? It is impossible for a traveler to forget what he has seen, and never to speak of it or to write about it. It was these convictions, confirmed by the advice of friends, which decided me to publish this book.

I think, therefore, that I shall be exonerated from all blame by right-thinking people and by the English themselves, whose friendship I should be unwilling to forfeit.

Further, I should like to say a few words regarding possible mistakes which may have occurred in this narrative in the spelling of new and little-known names. My education has not been such that I am in a position to recognize mistakes, or to seek for information in books, and thus there will certainly be errors. If the matter to be dealt with were not of such importance as to merit attention, then I should not have the right to send this my book out into the world with so little preparation. May it therefore be received with indulgence by all right-thinking people; and to such I commend it.

Source of English translation: *Zimmermann's Account of the Third Voyage of Captain Cook, 1776-1780*. [*Reise um die Welt, mit Capitain Cook*, 1781] Alexander Turnbull Library, Bulletin No. 2. Wellington: W.A.G. Skinner, government printer, 1926, preface, not paginated. Available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0314274>

Source of original German text: Heinrich Zimmermann, *Reise um die Welt, mit Capitain Cook*. Mannheim: C. F. Schwan, 1781, Vorrede, not paginated. Available online at: https://archive.org/details/cihm_44926

Recommended Citation: Heinrich Zimmermann, Account of the Third Voyage of Captain Cook (1781), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-166>> [July 09, 2025].