

THE CONGRESS-CAPTAIN: COOK FALSEHOOD

One of the most persistent falsehoods relating to the Continental Congress declares that Congress ordered the capture of Captain James Cook, the great English discoverer, during the War for American Independence.

During the past year, a professor in the University of Washington at work on an extensive study of world travel came upon the falsehood. Deeming it fresh evidence of an interesting event in history and wholly different from the usually accepted statements, he started to use it. What he believed was new evidence was found in the following paragraph from an anonymous work on travels:

"The discoverers here received information of the public events which had occurred in Europe since the commencement of their voyage; and, in consequence of the war which had arisen between Great Britain and France, they prepared their vessels for meeting the enemy. Fortunately their precautions were rendered unnecessary by the generous conduct of their adversaries. In March, 1779, the Court of Versailles issued orders to the captains of their ships, stating the objects of the expedition, and the advantages which would result from it to all nations, and directing that Cook should be treated as the commander of a neutral or allied power. This measure, so honourable to French character, was, we are informed by the Marquis de Condorcet, adopted on the advice of the enlightened Turgot. Benjamin Franklin, then in Paris as the plenipotentiary of the United States, addressed to the officers of the American navy an earnest recommendation to spare the ships of 'that most celebrated discoverer Captain Cook;' but the noble feelings which dictated this letter found no response in Congress, who instantly issued orders that especial care should be taken to seize our voyagers. The same mean policy was pursued by the government of Spain."—*An Historical Account of the Circumnavigation of the Globe, and of The Progress of Discovery in the Pacific Ocean, From the Voyage of Magellan to the Death of Cook*. 2nd Ed., Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale Court; and Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., London, 1837. pp. 471-472.)

There are abundant reasons why the appearance of this falsehood among literary workers in the Pacific Northwest should receive prompt attention and refutation. Captain Cook's three voyages of discovery throughout the Pacific Ocean earned for him

immortal fame. Moreover, in 1778 he was at work in this very region where the falsehood has just reappeared. He then discovered and named Cape Flattery, spent a month at Nootka Sound, and explored the shores of Alaska, the name of Cook Inlet being one of the fine monuments to his memory. Hawaii recently celebrated with elaborate ceremonies the sesquicentennial of his discoveries there. International boundaries long ago disappeared in the matter of appraising and approving the great work of Captain Cook.

At the outset it was quite clear that the offensive statement at the close of the above quotation emanated from the *Life of Captain Cook* by Andrew Kippis, an English dissenting minister and author, whose life span was from March 28, 1725 to October 8, 1795. If he did not originate the falsehood complained of, he at least, through his book (published in 1788) gave it wide publicity and persistence. This fact is shown by the many subsequent editions of his book and quotations from it, as well as by the immediate denial of the falsehood at the time of the book's first publication.

In order to ascertain any possible source from which the first story could have originated, it was determined to have a search made in the records of the Continental Congress for the dates involved. An appeal was sent to Dr. J. Franklin Jameson, Professor of American History in the Library of Congress and formerly Director of the Department of Historical Research in the Carnegie Institution of Washington. His reply contains information and citations sufficient for a complete denial of the falsehood and also a surprise in showing that others had been seeking the same information for similar uses.

Some ten years ago the Department of Terrestrial Magnetism of the Carnegie Institution of Washington asked for information about the Continental Congress and Captain Cook. The Department of Historical Research furnished what information could be found and it was published in full in the journal called *Terrestrial Magnetism* for September 1918, Volume XXIII., beginning at page 143. A brief summary of that article was published in the *Year Book*, No. 17 (1918), pages 262-263. Those dependable publications by the Carnegie Institution of Washington are now available for any student of this event in history. For those who love the name and fame of Captain James Cook it is well to reproduce here some of the information thus collected and saved.

In the *List of the Benjamin Franklin Papers in the Library of Congress*, page 66, is found under date of March 10, 1779, the fol-

lowing entry: "Franklyn to all captains of United States armed vessels. Safe conduct for Capt. Cook. Autographed drafts signed." There is a notation here that his letter to the captains is printed in John Bigelow's edition of *Franklin's Works*, Volume VI., page 321. In that same volume (*List of the Benjamin Franklin Papers in the Library of Congress*), page 199, there is mention of a draft, written by Franklin, of a letter to some unknown American publisher, apparently in 1789, thus described: "Refutation of calumny of Americans in Dr. Kippis's *Life of Cook*; David Henry's refutation; English authorities' recognition of Franklin's action." Such citations are ample to show how instant was the refutation of the story published by Andrew Kippis in his *Life of Captain Cook*.

Critics the world over would be willing to accept such statements by Benjamin Franklin but there is a witness, equally good and direct, in the person of Charles Thomson, who served as Secretary of Congress from the beginning of the First Continental Congress to 1789 when the new Constitution went into effect. "He was the soul of that political body," said Abbe Robin, chaplain of Rochambeau. Rev. Ashbel Green, in his autobiography, says that it was common to say that a statement was "as true as if Charles Thomson's name was to it." The Delaware Tribe of Indians adopted Thomson into their Tribe and gave him a name meaning "man of truth."

The New York Historical Society's *Collections* for the year 1878, pages 254-256, contains the draft of a letter by this truthful and well equipped Secretary Charles Thomson, dated March 9, 1795, after he had ceased to be Secretary. He quoted from a letter from Dr. Jeremy Belknap who had himself quoted the objectionable statement from the Kippis book. The Thomson letter goes on to say:

"Though on reading these remarks I could not hesitate a moment in contradicting them, because Congress never did express a disapprobation of the *directions issued by Doct. Franklin*, nor did they ever direct 'that especial care should be taken to seize Capt. Cook if an opportunity of doing it occurred,' yet I thought it might not be improper to pause and try to find from what source this misrepresentation sprung. Was it an inference drawn from subsequent proceedings of congress? It is true that on the 2d day of May, 1780, Congress passed a new form of commissions for private vessels of war, and new instructions to the Captains or Commanders of the said private armed vessels, in which the ships or vessels, together with their cargoes, belonging to any inhabitant or inhabit-

ants of Bermuda, and other ships and vessels bringing persons with an intention to reside within the United States, are expressly exempted from capture, and no notice is taken of Captain Cook. But at that time of passing these Acts Congress had no information of the directions issued by Doct. F. From March, 1779, to that time they only received from him two Letters, one dated 30 Sept. 1779, which was rec'd and read the 23 Feb'y, 1780, and the other dated 4 Oct., 1779, which was rec'd and read 4 March, 1780, neither of which mentioned any thing of these directions. It may be seen by reference to those letters now in the Secretary of State's office.

"This circumstance not being known publicly, and no notice being taken of Capt. Cook, an inference might be drawn that Congress had reversed the orders which their Ambassador had given; in fact they had not in view nor knew any thing of them. But there is nothing in the commission or instructions, nor in any Act of Congress, which will warrant the assertion. With regard to Doct. Kippis' note of his having obtained the account from Sir Joseph Banks, as S. J. could not have given it from his own knowledge, that it was directed by Congress that especial care should be taken to seize Capt. Cook if an opportunity of doing it occurred, some other source must be looked from which this has come. Sir Jos. Banks could have had no personal knowledge of this; he must have had information from others. And all this proceeded from a false notion that 'it would be injurious to the U.S. for the English to obtain a knowledge of the opposite coast of America.' I am therefore led to conclude that this has arisen from misinformation, or from some of those spurious pieces which were fabricated and published within the enemies lines as Acts and Resolves of Congress, with an intent to vilify Congress or to answer some hostile purpose."

Here is clear testimony by one who gained complete praise for his faithful work as Secretary of Congress throughout the entire time involved by the claims in the falsehood. The last sentence indicates that during the Revolution lies and exaggerations were circulated as a part of warfare. In the recent World War the name propaganda was used for similar work. It is likely that Secretary Thomson has there hinted at the real origin of the Kippis story.

Dr. Jameson says he was helped in gathering the citations and quotations by Dr. Edmund Cody Burnett, a member of the staff of the Department of Historical Research, Carnegie Institution of Washington. Dr. Jameson says that Dr. Burnett "knows more about the Continental Congress and its doings than anyone else does

or ever did." Dr. Burnett has lately been working again through all the proceedings of the Continental Congress for 1780. He has assured Dr. Jameson "that no action on their part relating to action of naval vessels respecting Captain Cook is in existence."

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