

Lieutenant Phillips, Lieutenant Price,
and the death of Captain Cook
Dunedin Club, May 29, 2016

On a hot night in Texas, Professor Lance Bertelsen suggested to me over a margarita that Lieutenant Price of the marines, a character in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, was Lieutenant Molesworth Phillips of the royal marines. Phillips sailed with Captain Cook on his last voyage, married Susan Burney, sister to the celebrated novelist Fanny Burney, and ill-treated her. I think Lance is right.

The ferocity of Jane Austen's satire on Lieutenant Price is unique in her published work. As his daughter Fanny bursts out with devastating frankness, . . . he was more negligent of his family, his habits were worse, and his manners coarser, than she had been prepared for. He did not want abilities; but he had no curiosity, and no information beyond his profession; he read only the newspaper and the navy-list; he talked only of the dock-yard, the harbour, Spithead, and the Mother-bank; he swore and he drank, he was dirty and gross. (389)

Like the “negligent” Lieutenant Price, Phillips abandoned his family to make models: His workshop at once intimated that its occupant was not abundantly gifted with the organ of order. Plates, dishes, knives, forks, candlesticks, coats, hats, and mathematical instruments, lay in one confused mass, enveloped with its portion of dust. To attempt any thing like arrangement, was at once sacrilege in the estimation of the Colonel. To summon his attendant he usually approached the stairs, and rang a small hand bell, accompanying it with his deep-toned voice, with the words: “Ahoy! Ahoy! All hands ahoy!” His liquors, and tankards of ale he always drew up from the window of his room to avoid intrusion, and in returning the empty pewter he would regularly take too sure an aim at the potboy's head. Then came a concert of “curses” and every association but amity.ⁱ

Mr. Price arrives likewise in a volley of oaths, smelling of spirits (380), and shouting out orders in naval lingo: “Devil take these young dogs! How they are singing out! Ay, Sam's voice louder than all the rest! That boy is fit for a boatswain. Holla—you there—Sam—stop your confounded pipe, or I shall be after you” (383).

The disorder and filth at the Phillipses have their squalid counterparts at the Prices. Fanny recoils from a room where the “stifling, sickly glare” of the sun serves only to “bring forth stains and dirt that might otherwise have slept”:

She sat in a blaze of oppressive heat, in a cloud of moving dust; and her eyes could only wander from the walls marked by her father’s head, to the table cut and knotted by her brothers, where stood the tea-board never thoroughly cleaned, the cups and saucers wiped in streaks, the milk a mixture of motes floating in thin blue, and the bread and butter growing every minute more greasy than even Rebecca’s hands had first produced it. (439)

Mr. Price is a “lounger” (403), and a “Mrs. Lefroy” used the same disparaging epithet when she said that Phillips “was always ... lounging.” As Scott Ashley puts it, Phillips was a “hail-fellow well-met sort of man, who lazed about the British Museum, playing cards, making models, and casually abusing his wife.”ⁱⁱ

Phillips was investigated in 1806 for performing no sea time in recent years. Twice in “the last War he paid money to a Brother Officer to embark for him,” and “has been a complete shuffler from all Duties.”ⁱⁱⁱ To Austen, whose brothers exerted themselves tirelessly in their naval duties, such “shuffling” might have completed her disdain of Lieutenant Phillips.

I suggest that Jane Austen attacked Lieutenant Phillips because of his abuse of Susan Burney, his role in the fatal outcome at Hawaii, his damaging of Cook’s reputation to save his own, and the fable being bruited about that he was the man who killed the man who killed Captain Cook.

For *Mansfield Park*, I suggest that Austen worked up inside information about the Burneys sent by her relative Mrs. Cooke, friend and neighbour to Fanny and Susan—it can hardly be a coincidence that the sisters of both Fanny Burney and Fanny Price were named Susan. From 1769, the Cookes lived at Great Bookham, Surrey, where from 1793 to 1797, Fanny Burney and her husband General d’Arblay resided across the road from Mrs. Cookes.

Mrs. Cooke had been a neighbor to Susan Burney Phillips from 1784 to September 1796, when a reluctant Susan left for Ireland and her tyrannical husband. In 1795, with Phillips away, Susan had looked after seven-month-old Alexander.^{iv} Kind Mrs. Cooke must often have popped over to give advice.

Dr. Charles Burney was initially enthusiastic about Susan marrying the hero of the hour, but became more cautious on finding that his son-in-law was poorer than he

claimed. Fanny called it a “wild—romantic—imprudent” marriage (*EJL*, 4:263, 285). Similarly in *Mansfield Park*, the “very imprudent marriage” of Frances Ward to Lieutenant Price results in a “large and still increasing family, an husband disabled for active service, but not the less equal to company and good liquor, and a very small income to supply their wants” (4–5). Mrs. Price married “in the common phrase, to disoblige her family,” writes Austen, and “by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly” (3–4).

The glamor soon wore off. By 1787, the marriage was falling apart, and by 1795 it had nearly collapsed. Phillips insisted that she live with him in Ireland, dislocated the two-year-old Norbury’s shoulder with his violent play, separated her from the son she adored, never repaid borrowed money, and kept the family in ignorance of his wife’s ill-health.^v Phillips turned to gambling, drinking, and womanizing, openly carried on an affair with his second cousin Jane Brabazon, and essentially abandoned Susan, who died on January 6, 1800.^{vi} Fanny would hold him in “unalterable horror,” and regard him as her sister’s murderer.^{vii} Mrs. Cooke must have witnessed Phillips’s ill-treatment of her friend, and her indignation on Susan’s behalf may color Austen’s creation of Mr. Price.

Austen might also have known that on that fatal day in Hawaii, Phillips’s marines fired without orders, he abandoned Cook, and was probably drunk and disorganized.

James Cook was literally a household name among the Austens, for William Bayly, who had sailed with Cook, instructed the young Francis Austen in Cook’s scheme of navigation at the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth.^{viii} Bayly always treated his outstanding student “with the most flattering marks of attention.”^{ix} The fourteen-year-old Francis was posted to the *Perseverance*, where he became “a decided favourite” of Captain Isaac Smith, Bayly’s shipmate, and a first cousin of Mrs. James Cook. Smith sailed twice round the world with Cook, who said that he had “been bred to the Sea under my Care.”^x Although Bayly was not present at Cook’s death, he wrote an account based on what he knew.^{xi} Jane must therefore have known a great deal about the celebrated explorer and his lieutenant of marines, Molesworth Phillips.

Phillips provided the only eye-witness account of his captain’s death to Cook’s successor Charles Clerke, who copied it into his journal before he died. Other crewmembers supplied James King with “a series of partisan, self-interested accounts,^{xii}

which he shaped for the third volume. King's manuscript was edited by Dr. John Douglas, and vetted by Lord Sandwich, first Lord of the Admiralty.

On February 14, 1779, Cook, Phillips, and others had landed to force the return of a stolen cutter. Thousands of hostile warriors surrounded them, one of the marines was knocked down, and somebody fired—Phillips asserted that Cook fired first, and called on the marines to fire. The boats off-shore also opened fire, and Cook held up his hand either to call a cease-fire, or to wave in the launch. But Midshipman Watts claimed that Cook, “perceiving this [brisk fire] done without Orders turned to the Boats waved his hand & ordered with much warmth an immediate cessation, in the mean time the marines with the same undisciplined infatuation [extravagantly foolish or unreasoning passion] begun a fire also & the Attack on both sides became general.”

Here, said King, “the accounts that were given now begin to differ,” for “It is said by some that he now orderd the Marines to fire & which was followed by the boats; others that the boats fir'd first.” He continued just as evasively, “Be it as it may, the Captⁿ called to them to cease fying & to come in with the boats, intending to embark as fast as Possible this humanity perhaps provd fatal to him.”^{xiii} That remark about Cook's humanity would influence all future assessments of him. But if King was still quoting Phillips's report to Clerke, it was Phillips who first suggested that Cook died because of his own self-sacrificing humanity, not because of any other person's cowardice or ineptitude. Lieutenant Phillips, for example.

The reputations of both men depend upon these crucial ten minutes. Was Cook's death caused by anger, or by humanity? Or, as Bertelsen suggests, was he trying to stop the men in the boats from firing on the marines, who were stuck onshore between the Hawaiians and the boats?^{xiv}

Even as some of the marines were drowning, third lieutenant John Williamson ordered his crew to row away from the beach.^{xv} He would state—improbably—that he had mistaken the signal. Cook, who could not swim, was left alone, then clubbed, stabbed, knocked into the water, hauled away, dismembered, and partially eaten.^{xvi}

Williamson was undoubtedly culpable. But Cook's first biographer Andrew Kipps blanked out Williamson's name, calling him merely “—, the Lt, who commanded in the launch.”^{xvii} So did James King in the *Voyage*—Bertelsen reveals that Williamson and King had powerful friends, including the Duchess of Devonshire.

Phillips stated that he himself either jumped out again to save another marine,^{xviii} or dived from the pinnace and swam to the launch, where he accused Williamson of cowardice.^{xix} He also claimed that he had “recoverd himself on his knees & shot [his assailant] dead.”^{xx} Cook, he implied, made errors of judgment by firing first, then by hesitating too long on the shore. But in the official *Voyage*, King deleted the vital information that the marines and the boats had all fired “without waiting for orders.” Thus the officers blamed Cook to protect themselves. As Scott Ashley remarks, “To return to England under the suspicion of having been in any way responsible for the death of the country’s most famous mariner,” was “unlikely to be of advantage when it came to seeking the favours of the Admiralty.”^{xxi}

At that fatal moment, Phillips may have been as drunk as Mr. Price, for he was wearing Cook’s powderhorn, “on that day filled with Whisky”—between six and eight in the morning.^{xxii} William Bligh, master of the *Resolution*, would accuse the marines under Phillips’s command of abject and outright cowardice. As he scribbled, “The Marines fired & ran which occasioned all that followed for had they fixed their bayonets & not run, so frightened as they were, they might have drove all before them.”^{xxiii} The whole affair, he said, “did not last 10 minutes, nor was their a spark of courage or conduct shown in the whole busyness.”^{xxiv}

As Cook’s biographer John Beaglehole explains, the marines were inexperienced and “undisciplined,” for the young Phillips, without being trained himself, “could hardly train others, and the marines on this voyage cut no glorious figure.”^{xxv} Phillips, he writes, “had his hour of excitement, his moments of swelling glory, but his great luck was to make a friend of James Burney, and to be enshrined in a sentence of Charles Lamb’s.” Although Cook’s celebrity brushed off on Phillips, his lieutenant’s aggressive conduct, lack of leadership, and possible drunkenness during those crucial ten minutes surely contributed to the disaster.

Bligh wrote contemptuously of Phillips, “This person, who was never of any real service the whole Voyage, or did any thing but eat and Sleep, was a great Croney of C[aptain] King’s, and he has taken care not to forget, altho’ it is very laughable to those who knew the Characters.”^{xxvi} Captain Clerke would single out Phillips for “his Gallantry and attention” in saving a marine, but his information came from Phillips. Bligh retorted that the so-called drowning marine “was close to the Boat & swam nearly as well as the Lieut,” who was “only near him.”^{xxvii} The story of Phillips killing his assailant was also a “most infamous lie,” he said, citing “the Lieutenants

opinion, who told me that as soon as the Musquets were discharged they ran to the Boats, having no time to reload, & was stabd in the back when unable to make any resistance.”^{xxxviii} Thus it appears that the marines on-shore fired without orders, and being unable to re-load, all ran down to the boats. Though Phillips was attacked in the back as he ran, he managed to shoot his assailant—not Cook’s. But by 1849, a Christopher Keest could write confidently that he had in his possession “Phillips Gun which avenged the death of their Commander,”^{xxxix} a claim that reaches even into *Burke’s Peerage*.^{xxx}

The tale of Phillips rescuing a marine also grew, for third lieutenant James Burney, another “great Croney” to Phillips, would claim that the wounded Phillips jumped out of the boat and swam back to shore to bring a stranded marine safe off,^{xxxi} rather than one already in the water. Even though James must have witnessed Phillips’s ill-treatment of his sister Susan when he himself lived nearby, he stayed loyal to his shipmate, and desired in his will that Phillips should attend him to the grave. Fanny Burney and her sisters were hurt that he had selected “the hard-hearted, & impenitent Author of our first dread Family calamity,” but in 1832, Phillips was buried, as requested, in the grave of his friend, Admiral James Burney.^{xxxii} Thus though radically conflicting reports exist about Phillips’s actions in Hawaii, what is certain is that the loyalty of King and James Burney towards their old croney led to his moment of glory, his rise to lieutenant-colonel, his award of a pension,^{xxxiii} and his disastrous marriage to Susan Burney.

Artists also disagreed about whether Phillips had shot his own assailant, or— even better—had shot Cook’s. Most influential was John Webber’s *Death of Captain Cook* of 1782, where Cook stretches out his hand for a humanitarian cease-fire, rather than waving in the launch. Here Phillips fires his musket from a sitting position at the man about to stab James Cook.^{xxxiv} Whether Phillips’s cronies claimed that he killed Cook’s assailant rather than his own, whether he altered the tale himself, or whether Webber’s image carried the day, Austen may have known that the tale of Phillips killing the man who killed Cook had grown in the telling.

Cook’s high status among the Austens suggests that they probably endorsed representations of him as a “a Victim to his own Humanity,” a self-sacrificing, benevolent civilizer bringing benefits to “th’uncultur’d shore,” including “antarctic [New] Zealand’s drear domain”:

While Cook is loved for savage lives he saved,

See Cortez odious for a world enslaved!

I suggest, therefore, that Jane Austen created Lieutenant Price in *Mansfield Park* to satirize Lieutenant Molesworth Phillips for failing to save Francis Austen's mentor-by-proxy, for damaging Cook's reputation to save his own, for claiming to have shot Cook's murderer, and for ill-treating Susan Burney, soul-sister to the author she so ardently admired.

ⁱ *Recollections of the Late Colonel Molesworth Phillips*, From a Correspondent, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* 20:581 (December 15, 1832).

ⁱⁱ Scott Ashley, "How Navigators Think: The Death of Captain Cook Revisited," *Past and Present* 194 (February 2007), 115.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pollard, "Phillips, Molesworth."

^{iv} Olleson, *Susan Burney*, 44–46. In her surviving letters, Susan Burney does not mention the Cookes.

^v Hemlow, *Fanny Burney*, 276, 290–91. Norbury's dislocated shoulder may re-surface as the dislocated collar-bone of the eldest Musgrove boy (*P*, 53).

^{vi} See Doody, *op.cit.*, 282–85. Although James Burney must have witnessed Phillips's ill-treatment of Susan when he lived in nearby Mickleham, he remained loyal to his old shipmate, even expressly desiring in his will that Phillips should be only one of four persons to attend him to the grave in 1821. Fanny and her sisters were hurt that he had selected "the hard-hearted, & impenitent Author of our first dread Family calamity." In 1832, Phillips was buried, as he had requested, in the grave of his friend James Burney: see *ibid.*, 375–76.

^{vii} Hemlow, *Fanny Burney*, 291, 470.

^{viii} Southam, *Navy*, 24–25; "William Bayly," *Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1811, 184–85.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 28–29. For Bayly, see J.C. Beaglehole, *The Life of Captain James Cook* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1974), 501, 651, 683. Bayly's MS journal, now in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington (*ibid.*:clxxxix–cxc). For a transcript, see

Rupert T. Gould, "Some Unpublished Accounts of Cook's Death," *The Mariner's Mirror* 14:4 (October 1928), 301–19.

^x Southam, *Navy*, 28–29, 39–41.

^{xi} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:537n2.

^{xii} Ashley, "Navigators," 107–8.

^{xiii} *Ibid*, 3:556. Master's mate William Lanyon remarks also in his MS Log that Cook's "humanity at this time cost him his life." Quoted in Kennedy, *Death of Cook*, 78n2.

^{xiv} See Bertelsen, "Patronage and Pariah," 41.

^{xv} Samwell, *Journal*, in Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:1199.

^{xvi} See also Beaglehole, *Life of Cook*, 667–72; Kennedy, *Death of Cook*, 45–87.

^{xvii} Samwell, in Kippis, *Life of Cook*, 467–68; in Kippis, "Cook," *Biographia Britannica*, 4:233n; in Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:1199.

^{xviii} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:1478.

^{xix} Samwell, *Journal*, in Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3: 1199; Salmond, *Bligh*, 39.

^{xx} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:534–36, 557.

^{xxi} Ashley, "Navigators," 121.

^{xxii} Bertelsen, "Patronage and Pariah," 45n68; Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:clxxvin1. I am immensely grateful to Bertelsen for his initial suggestion about Mr. Price, and for other expert advice.

^{xxiii} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:557n1.

^{xxiv} *Ibid*, 3:clvn1.

^{xxv} Beaglehole, *Life of Cook*, 500; Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:lxxxiii.

^{xxvi} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:lxxxiiin2.

^{xxvii} George Mackaness, *The Life of William Bligh, R.N., F.R.S.* (Australia: Angus & Robertson, 1931), 32.

^{xxviii} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:557n2.

^{xxix} Beaglehole, *CJ*, 3:clxxvin1.

^{xxx} Burke's *Peerage, Baronetage, & Knightage*, 107th edition, 3 vols. (Wilmington, Delaware, USA: 2003), on-line.

^{xxxi} James Burney, *A Chronological History of the Discoveries in the South Sea or Pacific Ocean*, 5 vols. (London: G. Nichols, 1803), reprinted Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1967), 3:31, 32n.

^{xxxii} Hemlow, *Burney*, 470; Doody, *Frances Burney*, 375–76.

^{xxxiii} Kennedy, *Death of Cook*, 13; Beaglehole, *CJ*, 2:1468.

^{xxxiv} In Webber's watercolour version of 1780, Phillips wears a blue naval uniform, corrected in the oil painting of 1784 to the red of the marines.