

# Omai's Things

Harriet Guest

In 1789, Hester Thrale Piozzi received news of Omai's death, and heard reports of the part his possessions played in the fighting between the Islanders of Raiatea and Huahine. Writing to a friend, she recalled that 'poor Omai ... was no small favourite of mine', and added, more sardonically: 'Two Islands quarrelling for the Possession of a German Organ and Puppet Show—Omai's best and most valuable Effects as I remember—would make an Excellent Subject for a mock Heroic Poem ...'.<sup>1</sup> Her sentimental recollection of Omai, whom she had entertained during his stay in London, rapidly hardens into disdain, as he and the Islanders in general become infected with the littleness and triviality of the European toys she believes they value so highly.

The possessions with which Omai returned to the South Pacific, most of which seem to have been chosen for him and not by him, included the things Piozzi mentions—a barrel organ, and a collection of miniature figures (of soldiers, animals, coaches and so forth), which it was imagined he could use in his attempts to describe European life.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Omai was endowed with an assortment of fireworks, portraits of the king and queen and, perhaps, of Cook; an illustrated Bible; a jack-in-a-box; handkerchiefs printed

with the map of England and Wales; two drums; and a suit of armour. Joseph Banks presented him with an

Item	Cost
Taylor's Bill	66-10-0
Linnen Drapers Bill	20-0-0
Hoovers	5-16-0
Shoemakers	7-7-0
Hatters	3-5-6
A Box for his Clothes	0-6-6
Two Buttons	4-0-0
Two Prints of King & Queen	2-11-6
Tailors Bill	19-8-4
Seaman's Bill	20-7-7
Wine Merchant's Bill	12-4-0
Two Toys	3-7-6
Books	18-2-4
<b>Total</b>	<b>182-8-3</b>
Omai's Bills	46-16-3
Two sets of ladies' clothes	22-4-0

Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), Papers 1745–1820  
An account of the bills for Omai  
manuscript list, 22.5 x 18.5 cm

electrical machine. As if to confirm him in, or at least remind him of European ways of life, he was provided with cooking and eating utensils, iron tools and a few bits of furniture, as well as linen clothes for himself and for gifts—and he had other trading goods. He was also endowed with some livestock and poultry, and seeds for a garden. Before Cook's ships departed he acquired



Valentine Green, engraver (1739–1813)  
after Johann Zoffany (1733–1810)  
*John Montagu, Earl of Sandwich, Viscount Hinchingbrook,  
First Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty*  
London: Valentine Green, 30 August 1774  
mezzotint; plate mark 50.4 x 35.3 cm

a compass, globes, sea charts and maps, as well as some guns, powder and shot. When a site had been selected, the ships' carpenters built Omai a European-style house designed 'to contain his valuables, which would by no means have been secure in one of his own country'.<sup>3</sup>

An account of Omai published in 1774, during his stay in England, praised him as an exemplary hero of philosophical curiosity, venturing beyond familiar seas 'resolved to die, or know the truth for himself'.<sup>4</sup> For most commentators, however, whatever might on his arrival have seemed heroic or admirable about Omai, was rapidly tainted, primarily as a result of his association with Joseph Banks and his friends (who were responsible for looking after him). David Samwell, the surgeon to the third voyage, thought that Omai initially seemed willing and able to learn, but Banks' circle 'have made him more of the fine Gentlemen than anything else', and taught him 'nothing ... but to play at cards, at which he is very expert'.<sup>5</sup> William Bligh lamented that Omai had 'been led into Idleness and Dissipation as soon as he arrived in Europe'.<sup>6</sup>

Those who lamented the nature of the education Omai received during his stay in England saw confirmation of its frivolity and wastefulness in the apparently random repertoire of his possessions. George Forster complained that Omai had been returned without knowledge, skills, or 'articles of real use' to his people or to himself.<sup>7</sup> The 'editor' of the satirical poem, *Omiab's Farewell* (1776), remarked that 'OMIAH is now returning to his native isle, fraught by royal order with squibs, crackers, and a various assortment of fireworks, to show to the wild untutored Indian the great superiority of an enlightened Christian prince'.<sup>8</sup> The satirist points to what is clearly and repeatedly implied in accounts of Omai—the sense that the failure

to return him, freighted with either some religious instruction or some useful knowledge, both belittles him and reveals inadequacies in British culture; shortcomings that might hinder British imperial ambition.

Omai seems to have hoped that his extraordinary experiences would improve his status at home, but the accounts of Europeans who accompanied him, or who visited the Islands subsequently, do not indicate any change in his position.<sup>9</sup> On his return to the Islands in the *Bounty*, Bligh heard that Omai's firepower had briefly increased his consequence, but that he had not 'gained any possessions or ... higher rank than we left him in'.<sup>10</sup> Omai's European acquisitions, however, did possess a prestige distinct from that of their owner. The missionary William Ellis reported, nearly half a century later, that: 'The spot where Mai's house stood is still called Beritani, or Britain, by the inhabitants of Huahine', and parts of Omai's armour were displayed on a house built on the spot. Ellis added that, 'a few of the trinkets, such as a jack-in-a-box ... were preserved with care by one of the principal chiefs, who ... considered them great curiosities, and exhibited them, as a mark of his condescension, to particular favourites'.<sup>11</sup> Most accounts of Omai's return suggest that he was largely ignored or even unrecognised until 'knowledge of his riches' had been spread, but his possessions seemed to have been imbued with lasting value because of their exotic British associations.<sup>12</sup>

The suit of armour had been given to Omai by the Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, who had it made for him by the artificers of the Tower of London. Sandwich had been at pains to impress Omai during his stay in England. Omai had visited Sandwich's country house, Hinchingsbrooke, in Huntingdonshire, where the Islander was reported to have been 'entertained in the most magnificent manner, and where

the neighbouring gentlemen vied with each other in varying his diversions, in order to raise his ideas of the splendor and gaiety of this country'.<sup>13</sup> Sandwich also entertained Omai with a tour of the dockyard at Chatham. Omai was taken on board HMS *Victory*, and the newspapers offered the gratifying report that 'his



*Omai's Public Entry on His First Landing at Otabeite, in Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean on Discovery*  
London: Printed for E. Newbery, 1781

joy was amazing at seeing so large a ship'.<sup>14</sup> Clothed in Sandwich's final gesture of generosity, Omai seems briefly to be possessed by his things—to become British, like the spot where Ellis later saw the armour hanging. The Britishness he acquires is not, perhaps, the kind his patrons had intended.

In the unauthorised *Journal* of John Rickman, the only text in which Omai's return seems to make much of a splash, he is represented in a parodic impersonation of British imperial identity. Rickman writes of the astonishment of the Islanders when Cook and Omai ride out on horseback:

Omai, to excite their admiration the more, was dressed cap-a-pee in a suit of armour ... and was mounted and caparisoned with his sword and pike, like St. George going to kill the dragon, whom he exactly represented; only that Omai had pistols in his holsters, of which the poor saint knew not the use. Omai, however, made good use of his arms, and when the crowd became clamorous, and troublesome, he every now and then pulled out a pistol and fired it among them, which never failed to send them scampering away.<sup>15</sup>

A central feature of Cook's characterisation as a distinctively modern hero was the notion of his humanity, manifested notably in his reputed reluctance to use firearms: 'Not a gun ... was ever wantonly or unnecessarily fired by his order'.<sup>16</sup> Samwell concluded gloomily that Omai seemed incapable of profiting from the situation his European possessions placed him in: 'notwithstanding the admonitions he had to the contrary, he employed much of his time in acting the part of a merry Andrew, parading about in ludicrous Masks & different Dresses to the great admiration of the Rabble'.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hester Thrale Piozzi to Samuel Lysons, 8 July 1789, in Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (eds), *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784–1821 (formerly Mrs. Thrale)*. 6 vols. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989, vol. 1, p. 298. Thrale seems to have heard a version of the report from the *Lady Penrhyn*. See E.H. McCormick, *Omai: Pacific Envoy* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 267.
- <sup>2</sup> The astronomer William Bayly commented on Omai's outfitting for his return that 'Omi [sic] being a man of pleasure neglected to inspect into his own Affairs but left it entirely to other people'. Those other people, Bayly thought, 'used him exceeding ill'. See J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery. Volume 3: The Voyage of the Resolution and the Discovery, 1776–1780*. 2 parts. (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1967, part 1, p. 193n2.)
- <sup>3</sup> William Ellis, *An Authentic Narrative of a Voyage Performed by Captain Cook and Captain Clerke, in His Majesty's Ships Resolution and Discovery*. 2 vols. London: Robinson, 1782, vol. 1, p. 147. See McCormick, op. cit., pp. 180, 255.
- <sup>4</sup> Apyrexia, 'Genuine Account of Omiah', *London Magazine*, August, 1774.
- <sup>5</sup> Beaglehole, op. cit., part 2, pp. 1514–15.
- <sup>6</sup> Douglas Oliver, *Return to Tabiti: Bligh's Second Breadfruit Voyage*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, p. 227.
- <sup>7</sup> George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World, Performed in His Britannic Majesty's Ships the Resolution and Adventure, in the Years 1772, 1773, 1774 and 1775*. London: Printed for G. White, J. Robson, P. Elmsly and G. Robinson, 1777, quoted in McCormick, op. cit., pp. 297, 299.
- <sup>8</sup> *Omiah's Farewell: Inscribed to the Ladies of London*. London: Kearsley, 1776, Preface, p. iv.
- <sup>9</sup> See Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 82.
- <sup>10</sup> Oliver, op. cit., p. 228.
- <sup>11</sup> William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches* (1829), quoted in McCormick, op. cit., p. 293.

- <sup>12</sup> Beaglehole, op. cit., part 1, p. 193. The Europeans only seem to see the degree of interest and sentiment, which they had clearly expected to be widespread in the reunion of Omai with his sister. See Cook's account (Beaglehole, op. cit.), part 1, pp. 192–193, 213, and Samwell's journal (Beaglehole, op. cit.), part 2, pp. 1052–53. On value created by association, see Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), ch. 3.
- <sup>13</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, Historical Chronicle for 1 September 1774. See McCormick, op. cit., p. 180.

- <sup>14</sup> *The General Evening Post*, London, 10–13 June, 1775.
- <sup>15</sup> [John Rickman], *Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean on Discovery: Performed in the years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779 ...* London: Printed for E. Newbery, 1781, pp. 133–134. National Library of Australia (NK 5094).
- <sup>16</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, review of *A Voyage Towards the South Pole*, 1777. See also Bernard Smith, 'Cook's Posthumous Reputation', in *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 227.
- <sup>17</sup> Beaglehole, op. cit., part 2, p. 1062.



[Samples of tapa cloth mounted in a book entitled: *Patterns of South Sea Cloth*] 1769–1779? album of Tapa cloth samples, 5 x 9.8 cm or smaller



John Hamilton Mortimer (1741–1779), [*Captain James Cook, Sir Joseph Banks, Lord Sandwich, and Two Others*] 1771?  
oil on canvas; 120 x 166 cm