

David Samwell (1751–98): surgeon on the *Discovery*

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David Samwell, born in North Wales, was surgeon on the *Discovery* during the third and last voyage of Captain James Cook. Samwell wrote a biography of Cook and was a distinguished poet. He also served on several more voyages, retiring from the sea aged 45.

lasted some years, an assistant surgeon could be promoted surgeon by the captain at sea. In October 1775 Samwell appeared before the Court of the Examiners at the Surgeon's Hall and qualified with the rank of second mate third rate.⁵

In 1776 Samwell sailed with Captain James Cook on his third, and last, voyage of exploration in which he attempted to find the North West passage—the elusive route between the Atlantic and Pacific from the Pacific side. Samwell started the expedition as assistant to Mr Anderson on the *Resolution*. On 3 August 1778 Anderson died of consumption. His death was of great importance to the expedition for he had become a skilled amateur naturalist and had learnt the local Otaheite language.⁶ The following day Cook appointed Law, surgeon of the *Discovery*, to surgeon of the *Resolution* and Samwell was promoted surgeon to the *Discovery*.⁵

The major hazard of long sea voyages was scurvy but Cook's initiative had relieved Samwell of the problem of treating scurvy in his crew. In Cook's voyage of 1770 only one seaman had died of the disease. Cook was aware of the observations of Lind on scurvy in which Lind had emphasised the value of lemon juice in preventing the disease.⁷ Cook recommended a regimen of a healthy diet and discipline. Fresh lemons, oranges, and sauerkraut formed the basis of his antiscorbutic diet. After Cook reported his findings on scurvy and details of his second voyage of discovery before the Royal Society he was elected a Fellow and awarded the Copley medal.

Samwell was popular with the sailors of the *Discovery*—he was humorous and amused those below deck with his anecdotes and poems. Surprisingly as a son of the Welsh church he spoke and wrote of the “dear girls”. Williams described Samwell's exploits more graphically and wrote, “...[he] revelled in the nymphs of the South Seas laying any personable female he could...”.⁴

Samwell was a great admirer of Cook. Writing to the poet Anna Seaward in February 1781 he said: “His great Qualities I admired beyond anything I can express—I gloried in him—and my Heart bleeds to this Day whenever I think of his fate”.⁸

On Sunday 14 February 1779 Samwell had witnessed the death of James Cook at Kealakekua. The winter closing, and his ships in need of repair, Cook had sailed from the Arctic to the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii. In the Sandwich Islands the Indians were not as friendly as they had been formerly. They stole a large cutter (a boat belonging to a ship of war fitted for rowing and sailing and capable of carrying stores) from the *Resolution* and were responsible for a number of hostile acts, mainly theft, against the expedition. The loss of the cutter was a great

David Samwell was born on 15 October 1751. He was the son of William Samwell the vicar of Nantglyn in Denbighshire, and the grandson of the Rev Edward Samuel, a distinguished Welsh author and translator, of Llangar near Corwen in North Wales.^{1–3} For some unknown reason within a generation the name Samuel had developed into the phonetic Samwell. Little is known of Samwell's early life. He was probably educated at a local school or privately. Clearly he was born into an intellectual family and his subsequent career as a doctor and poet suggest that he was well educated. In later life his talent as a poet led to prominence in Welsh literary circles and he was a supporter of the Eisteddfod. At Eisteddfods he adopted the Bardic name of “Dafydd ddu Feddyg—Dark David the Doctor”. Samwell is described as a big man who had a fiery temperament attracting brawls in public houses and throwing pots (see fig 1).⁴

David Samwell probably studied medicine at sea.⁵ In the 18th century, for the convenience of the navy, the Surgeon's Hall conducted examinations which defined assistant surgeons (surgeon's mates) of various grades. A surgeon's mate was allowed to practise as an assistant to a ship's surgeon. A final examination led to a successful candidate becoming a surgeon with the right to individual practice at sea. Because many voyages

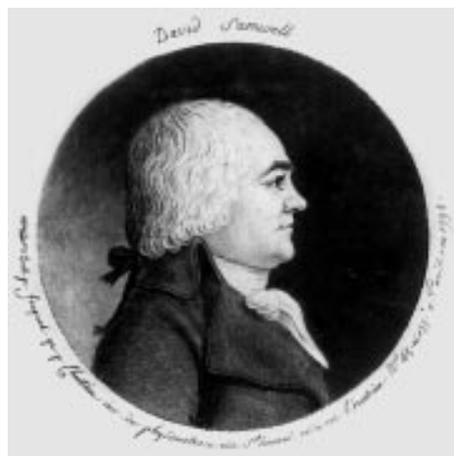


Figure 1 Portrait of David Samwell (National Library of Wales).

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inconvenience to the *Resolution* and Cook decided to go ashore to secure its release. Going ashore, abducting the head man, and keeping him until stolen goods had been returned was a measure that Cook had previously employed with success when disputes had arisen with islanders.⁶ Cook went to the house of the Chief and when the Chief emerged the crowd of about 3000 Indians became hostile. The Chief appeared to accompany Cook readily but just as they got to the water's edge the Chief's wife interfered and pleaded with the Chief not to go since he was likely to be killed. At the other end of the bay muskets had been fired and a man, a Chief of high rank, killed. The situation got quickly out of hand. Cook fired his musket and also killed a man. The crowd became incensed and as Cook was leaving the island with his men they were viciously attacked. Four of his marines were killed and Cook himself was clubbed, stabbed, and his head held under the water.⁶ Momentarily Cook appeared to escape but he was unable to swim and "... he was seen alive no more ...". Captain Cook's body was mutilated; those parts of it that were found were buried at sea. A full account of the death of Cook is found in Samwell's journal.⁸ The immediate motive for the murder of Cook was the confrontation on the beach at Kealakekua but there are other factors, which are relevant. Hitherto, the Indians thought of Cook as god, Orono. The fact that they thought of him as a god only to find him a man may have angered them. Additionally Cook may have desecrated and plundered the holy places of the temple.^{8,9} He had severely punished natives by flogging and cutting off ears.⁶ Cook himself may have become complacent—a complacency contributed to by his failing health and disappointment at failing to find the North West passage. The end result was that Britain had lost one of her greatest explorers and navigators.

In his narrative on Cook Samwell also commented on venereal disease in the Sandwich Islands. Cook took measures against the spread of the disease: no women were allowed on ship, no man with that "foul disease" could leave ship, and men were not allowed to spend the night ashore. Further any man having the disease, or suspected of having it, who lay with a woman would be severely punished. The question remains as to how venereal disease was introduced to the

islands. Both Cook and King (captain of the *Discovery*) thought "... the distemper was received from our people ..." presumably during the second Cook voyage to the South Seas. Samwell did not agree because an Indian had told him that the disease was known at Oahoo, an island which the ships of the second voyage of exploration had not visited.⁵

Samwell returned to London at the end of 1780. In 1791 he became involved in the theory that a Welshman (Madoc) had discovered America in the 12th century. Samwell composed a long poem called the Padoucan Hunt relating to Madoc's role.⁴

Samwell continued as a ship's surgeon on at least six further voyages, retiring from the sea in 1796. For part of the last year of his life he was stationed at Versailles as surgeon to the British prisoners of war. He died at his home in Fetter Lane possibly of venereal disease on 23 November 1798,⁵ and was buried in the churchyard of St Dunstan in the West.¹⁰

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