This series includes accounts, by eye-witnesses and contemporaries, of voyages by Europeans to the Americas, Asia, Australasia and the Pacific during the colonial period. Driven by the military and commercial interests of powers including Britain, France and the Netherlands, particularly the East India Companies, these expeditions brought back a wealth of information on climate, natural resources, topography, and distant civilisations. Their detailed observations provide fascinating historical data for climatologists, ecologists and anthropologists, and the accounts of the mariners’ experiences on their long and dangerous voyages are full of human interest.

During Charles Darwin's 1831–6 voyage on the Beagle, his on-board library included 'Cook's voyages' (the edition is not specified). This illustrated 1821 edition, in seven volumes, is representative of the versions available in the early nineteenth century. Volumes 3 and 4 cover Cook's second voyage (1772–5), a key objective of which was to look for a continent in the Southern Ocean. The explorers sailed to 71 degrees South, within the Antarctic Circle, encountering stormy weather and icebergs, albatrosses and storm petrels. On this voyage, the ship's naturalists were Johann Reinhold Forster and his son Georg (1754–94), who is credited here as co-author. Volume 4 describes the flora, fauna and people of the New Hebrides and New Caledonia, the uninhabited Norfolk Island, and the voyage home via Cape Horn and Tierra del Fuego. The appendix contains a vocabulary of the Tahitian language as spoken in the Society Islands.
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