

**ABORIGINAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION  
PRESENTS**



**What Cook Represents**  
*reflections on the man and his presence in  
Australia*

by

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# What Cook Represents

## reflections on the man and his presence in Australia

This year's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Lieutenant James Cook's arrival at Botany Bay on April 29<sup>th</sup> 1770 will, as a result of the Covid19 pandemic, be much more muted than had been anticipated.

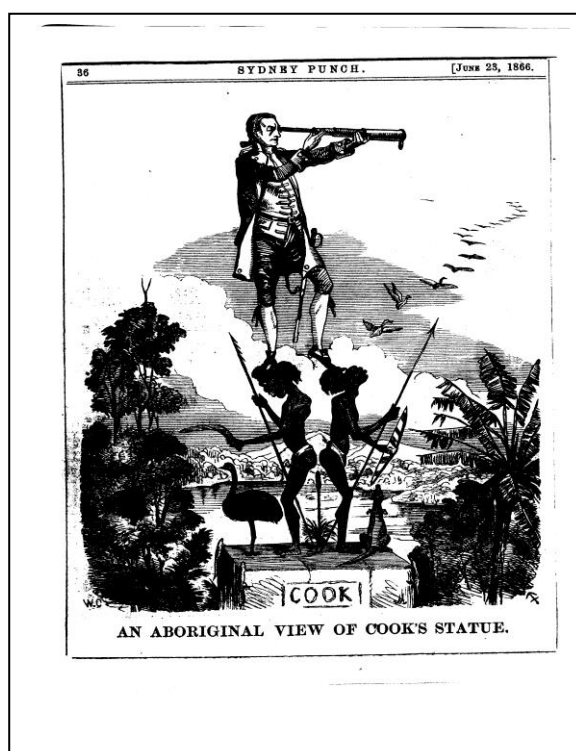
For some that will be a blessing. But it might also mean an opportunity to contest what Cook has come to represent in Australian history might be lost. And that would be a pity because the myth of Cook is long due not just for an overhaul, but for consignment to the junk yard of history.

Back in 1970, when the *Great Australian Silence* still enveloped Australian history and very few historians or teachers dared venture to *the other side of the frontier*,<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal people (and their non-Aboriginal supporters) protested throughout Australia, not just at Botany Bay, and voiced their views on what Cook meant to them. Indeed, those 1970 protests about Cook should be seen as a significant milestone in the development of the contemporary Aboriginal political movement for they raised a whole range of issues not just about Cook but about the impacting on Aboriginal people of the history of contact he began.

But those protests were nor the first occasion that what Cook represents to Aboriginal Australia was presented to the general public.

In fact, the very first example that I can find of a challenge to his place in Australian history, and particularly of what he means to Aboriginal people, dates back to this cartoon in the Sydney Punch magazine of June 1864.

The cartoonist clearly realised two things about Cook. Firstly, that this man, though rightly acknowledged as one of the world's great navigators, was capable of huge mistakes. His failure to see Sydney Harbour, for instance, puzzled and frustrated the first settlers who ended up at Botany Bay 18 years later.



Even more important, this 19<sup>th</sup> Century cartoonist realized that Cook quite deliberately failed to see the obvious --- or accurately report that the country he was credited with *discovering* was in fact already occupied, thank you very much. Moreover, the cartoonist clearly recognized that Cook's reputation, and Australia itself for that matter, was built on a deceit - deliberately ignoring the Aboriginal presence and blithely walking right over the people and their rights.

Both Cook's reputation and the nation he is said to have fathered were built on the pretence that Aboriginal people and their rights could be ignored.

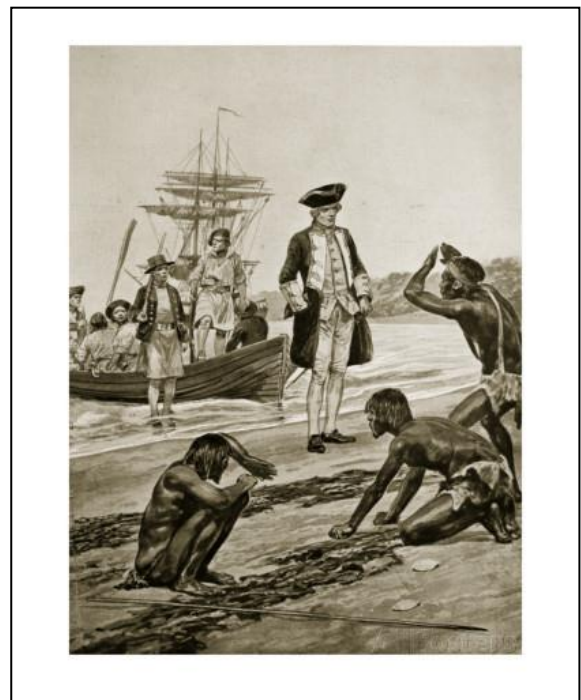
To my shame, I have been extremely remiss in never doing the research to determine who this cartoonist was. He deserves some recognition for his insight way back then ---- hopefully some young person reading this article will look into that so that my slackness can be addressed and hopefully forgiven.

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The idea that Cook introduced *civilization* to Australia is the other big issue about his place in Australian history that must be contested. Though this idea is not now asserted as insensitively and offensively as it once was, it remains deeply entrenched in the communal memory and the popular understanding of Australian history, still nurtured through his representation in public art and even in school resources.

This might not now be done as offensively as it once was --- as in this particularly ugly and offensive example from an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian history text illustrating benighted Aboriginal people gratefully welcoming Cook upon his arrival in Tasmania.<sup>2</sup>

Though there is neither time nor space to consider other instances of the depiction of Cook as the bringer of civilization to poor, miserable savages, examples abound. They can be seen in the stained glass windows and memorials of such esteemed institutions as the Sydney Town Hall, the University of Sydney and its colleges, and some wealthy private schools. And they remain implicit in many school resources.<sup>3</sup>



Moreover, this view of Cook as the father figure of Australian civilization is still cherished by many leaders of Australian society, a series of Prime Ministers and others falling over themselves to assert his George Washington-like importance to our national identity.

For instance, in 2000 John Howard pressured the National Portrait Gallery to greatly exceed its budget to purchase a quite ordinary portrait of Cook for the national collection --- the Commonwealth's *gift* to celebrate the centenary of Federation.<sup>4</sup>

In August 2017 then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was said by some to have *fallen off the cliff of reason* with his outraged Trump-like response to the spray painting of Cook's statue in Sydney's Hyde Park. Turnbull was furious that the slogans *Change the Date* and *No Pride in Genocide* had been painted on the statue and claimed this was part of *a deeply disturbing and totalitarian campaign to not just challenge our history but to deny it and obliterate it*.<sup>5</sup> This was a rare occasion when Turnbull was supported by his predecessor, Tony Abbott.

In April 2018 Turnbull and the then Treasurer, Scott Morrison, again affirmed their view of Cook's significance in Australian history when they allocated \$50 million dollars for the redevelopment of the Cook monuments at Botany Bay. Morrison justified this by claiming that, with Cook's arrival the *next chapter of Australia's ancient story began being written and that's the most modern part of that story ... it's taken us to the incredible country we are today*.<sup>6</sup>

Then, having replaced Turnbull as Prime Minister, in January 2019 Morrison, announced additional grants of \$5.45 million to support the 2020 Cooktown Festival and an additional \$6.7 million grant to the Australian National Maritime Museum to support a 2020 circumnavigation of Australia by the museum's replica of the Endeavour. Explaining this he said the Government wanted Australians to better understand Cook and his legacy as the voyage of the Endeavour *is the reason Australia is what it is today*.<sup>7</sup>

With support for Cook at such levels teachers need to be aware that attitudes to the *great man* remain very much part of the politics of the contemporary curriculum. To challenge the conventional view of the *great man* still requires some courage by the classroom teacher.

But most of all it requires some knowledge. So let's finish this article by reflecting on the nature of the *civilisation* that Cook introduced to Australia, 250 years ago.

In doing this I hope to find some common ground with the current Prime Minister who, when announcing his government's support for the now largely abandoned anniversary celebrations, not only declared that Cook's *Endeavour* voyage is the reason Australia is what it is today but also said that *it's important we take the opportunity to reflect on it.*<sup>8</sup>

However, my reflections on Cook always begin by contemplating the lie I was told (probably unintentionally) by the good nun who first introduced me to Cook when I was in First Class back in 1954. She introduced him to me and my classmates by showing us the iconic Emanuel Phillips Fox painting, *The Landing of Captain James Cook at Botany Bay, 1770.*



*Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770*  
(E. Phillips Fox, 2002. National Gallery of Victoria; Gilbee Bequest)

I can still remember the lie --- the nun pointing out how Cook was raising his hand to tell his crew not to shoot at the two Aboriginal men in the distance. It was not till 20 years later, when I got the opportunity to read Cook's journals, that I learned he actually gave the orders to shoot, not once, but three times. And when he was at Cooktown in Queensland this act of violence was repeated --- Cook himself taking part in hot pursuit of Aboriginal people and firing several times himself.

So, rather than coming in peace, Cook came with violence --- the first to introduce the sound of gunfire to Australia's east coast.

Acts of theft accompanied Cook's acts of violence. After the two men resisting his landing at Botany Bay had withdrawn when at least one was wounded Cook and his men then seized all the spears, some 40-50 in all, that he found around their campsite. This was initially justified by Banks' suggestion that the spears may have had poison tips. But though this was almost immediately disproved

and it became obvious that the spears were mainly fashioned for fishing, there was no thought of returning them to their rightful owners.

Nor throughout the week they remained at Botany bay did Cook or his crew seek permission or approval to despoil the land and water of their resources --- they just presumed it was their right to take large catches of fish and oysters from the Bay, as much water as they wanted from the wells they dug, and whatever plants that Banks and Solander wanted for their collections.

This was presumptuous indeed for someone intruding, uninvited and unwelcome on land that was clearly owned by others. But there was a lack of care --- extending even on a couple of occasions to taking the cooked meals that Aboriginal people had prepared but left in fright when the British barged into their campsites.

Of course, these presumptuous acts of petty theft pale into insignificance compared to the big act of theft that Cook committed on Possession Island on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1770 when he presumed to claim the entire eastern half of Australia on behalf of the Crown.

It is important to recognize the premeditation involved in this act of theft.

From the time he arrived off the east coast, even before landing at Botany Bay, Cook had been laying the groundwork for this theft by anglicizing the names of prominent points along the coast. Though he could see people or signs of human occupation everywhere, he had no interest in what they called these places for to acknowledge their names would have been to acknowledge their ownership.

In claiming possession Cook styled himself as the *first European discoverer* of these lands. But he also, acknowledged the Dutch navigators who had preceded him to other parts of the country. His use of the adjective *European* implicitly acknowledged the prior presence of Aboriginal people. But more significant was the more explicit assumption that (despite his deleting the actual words from his journal) the first *Europeans* in the land had an entitlement to it:

*. . . . on the Western side I can make no new discovery the honour of which belongs to the Dutch Navigators ~~and as such they may lay claim to it as their property~~ but the Eastern Coast from the Latitude of 38° South down to this place I am confident was never seen or viseted by any European before <sup>us</sup> and ~~therefore by the same Rule belongs to great Brittan.~~<sup>9</sup>*

Despite acknowledging the prior Aboriginal presence Cook's act of annexation blatantly ignored their rights. He could not ignore their presence as he had recorded it all along the coast. Even on Possession Island he saw more indigenous people who, from his description, may have been Torres Strait Islanders.

But, as always, his report on these indigenous people was essentially dismissive highlighting what he perceived as their timidity, their nakedness and the simplicity of their artefacts. In doing so he frames the British visitors and their culture as the standard against which the *other* is to be judged - the authority rather than the uninvited guest. As well, he places the onus on the indigenous people to establish the cross-cultural relationship and quite disingenuously concludes that, by refusing to accept this responsibility, they ceded authority and sovereignty and *left us in peaceable possession*:

*we saw a number of People upon this Island arm'd in the same - manner as all the others we have seen except one man who had a bow and a bundle of Arrows the first we have seen on this coast. from the appearance of these People we expected they would have opposed our landing but as we approached the Shore they all made off and left us in peaceable possession of as much of the Island as served our purpose. . . . Between 7 and 8 oClock in the Morning we saw several naked people, all or most of them women, down upon the beach picking <sup>up</sup> Shells, &C<sup>a</sup> they had not a single rag of any kind of Cloathing upon them and both these and those we saw yesterday were in every respect the Same sort of people we have seen every where upon the Coast; two or three of the Men we saw Yesterday had on pretty large breast plates which we supposed were made of Pearl Oysters Shells this was a thing as well as the Bow and Arrows we had not seen before — <sup>10</sup>*

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Finally, let me finish this reflection on Cook with some sympathy for him as a man. For, in spite of all that he introduced to Australia, he was certainly not totally responsible for his actions. Instead he should be seen as an agent of imperialism, a man inextricably bound up in the politics of his time and uncritically advancing the imperial interests of his country.



This view of him as an agent of imperialism has recently been admitted by conservative commentators like Keith Windschuttle who has described him as:

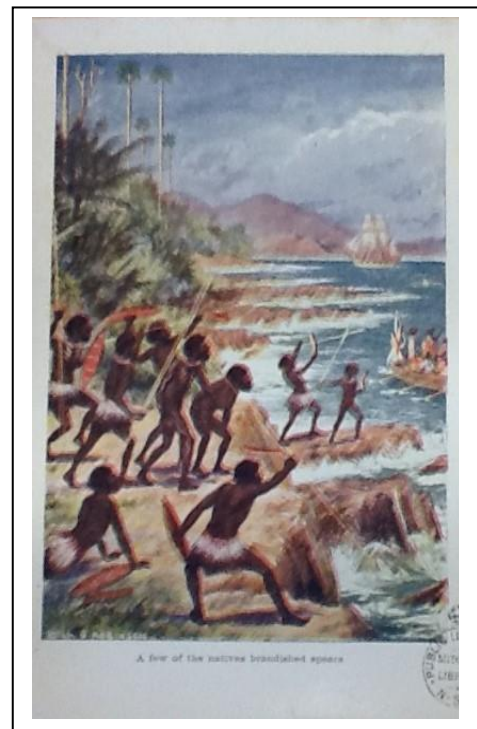
*. . . . a loyal English patriot who was not above preparing charts, log books and journals which, with the approval of the British Admiralty, provided misinformation to deceive the navigators of foreign powers. Cook was a player in what Rudyard Kipling later called the “Great Game” of spying and deception in the geopolitical rivalry among the European powers for maritime supremacy. Cook’s discovery of the Australian continent’s east coast, and the information he kept secret about it, were critical maneuvers in this rivalry.<sup>11</sup>*

Unfortunately, school resources continue to largely ignore this role of Cook as an agent of empire and his *discovery* of Australia continues to be represented either as part of the advance of scientific knowledge or the result of a great discovery adventure. If there is any hint of his role in advancing the British empire and the impact of that on indigenous people this is represented as the advance of civilisation and the introduction of a Pax Britannia to savages rather than the seizure of lands by force.

Such simplistic views of Cook need to be contested in Australian classrooms and 2020 is a great opportunity to do this.

If today’s teachers don’t take up this challenge they will continue to promote the fairy tale story of Cook that was fed to our parents, grandparents and great grandparents.

And those fairy tales were instrumental in the negative discourse that poisoned the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians for generations --- the idea of a country waiting to be brought to civilisation, occupied by just *a few of the natives brandishing spears* till the great man came in peace.



*A few of the natives brandished spears*  
**William B. Robinson (1906)**  
 Illustration in John Lang, *The Story of Captain Cook* (T.C. and C.E Jack, London, 1906)



## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Reynold's landmark history, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, was not published till 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Cook briefly visited Tasmania in 1777 during his final great voyage of discovery. The illustration was done by Richard Caton Woodville III and the history text in which it was used as an illustration was *The coming of the British to Australia, 1788 to 1829 with fifty-five illustrations and a preface by the Right Hon. the Marquis of Linlithgow* written by Ida Lee (Mrs Charles Bruce Marriott) and published by Longmans in London in 1906.

<sup>3</sup> For recent examples of this representation of this representation of Cook in school texts see my review, *I Think We Need to Talk About James in the K-10 National History Curriculum* (NSW Aboriginal Studies Association, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> The asking price for the John Webber portrait was \$5.3 million and the total annual budget of the NPG for purchases was a mere \$100,000. Two private individuals, Robert Oatley and John Schaeffer, each contributed \$1.25 million. The Government provided the remaining \$2.8 million. Jeanette Howard, the PM's wife, was on the Board of the gallery at the time as its Chief Patron.

<sup>5</sup> Turnbull's quite astounding response comparing this contestation of history with Stalinist Russia probably helped undermined his image as a sophisticated contemporary leader. See Christopher Knaus, *No Pride in Genocide; vandals deface Captain Cook statue in Sydney's Hyde Park*. The Guardian, August 26<sup>th</sup> 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/aug/26/captain-cook-statue-and-two-others-in-sydneys-hyde-park-attacked-by-vandals>

<sup>6</sup> Geoff Chambers, *\$50 million for Botany Bay Memorial to Captain James Cook*. The Australian, April 28<sup>th</sup> 2018

<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth Government Media Release, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2019 - <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/honouring-captain-james-cooks-voyage>. The Cooktown Festival is an annual event held since 1960 that includes an

historical re-enactment of Cook's stay there while repairing the Endeavour in 1770.

<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Commonwealth Government Media Release, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2019, Accessible at: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/honouring-captain-james-cooks-voyage>

<sup>9</sup> Cook, 1768-1771; Journal entry 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1770. <http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17700506.html>

<sup>10</sup> Cook, 1768-1771; Journal entry 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1770.

<http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17700506.html>

<sup>11</sup> Keith Windschuttle, *Captain Cook and the Great Game*, Quadrant Online, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020,

<https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2018/09/captain-cook-great-game/> See also John Howard's suggestion that *strategic rivalry between Britain and other colonial powers so dominated Admiralty thinking and planning that previously accepted 'errors' on the part of Cook were deliberate fabrications designed to advance Britannia* --- Howard's Foreword, page 7 in *Lying for the Admiralty* (Margaret Cameron-Ash, 2018)

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