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## Assorted Bastards of Australian History

Paul Daley

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The image of explorer James Cook, sculpted in stone or cast in bronze, is probably the most ubiquitous representation of any historical figure in the Australian consciousness and landscape. Certainly, it's hard to think of any long dead person pivotal to Australian history and all of its contests whose image is more recognised or recognisable.

Cook looms as large in Australian statuary as he does in nomenclature and, perhaps especially, psyche. To those who still deify him as the explorer at the vanguard of white-hatted colonial Enlightenment he remains the Neil Armstrong of his day – he who sailed where dragons be to bring English light and civility to the oldest continuous civilisation on the planet. To others of this continent, he is a sinister bogey man and a monster, the doorman who ushered in later colonisation with all its extreme violence, dispossession and ills with his east coast arrival in 1770 – in which his first act (just saying) was to personally shoot two Gweagal men at Kamai.

Cook's stylised head – the regal nose and broad lips, that chiselled chin and firm jaw framed by the flowing hair, often peaked by the triangular admiralty commander's hat – is as ubiquitous in our cultural, natural and urban landscape as he is in our white history books and Black oral histories. In 2013 Aboriginal sculptor Jason Wing reinforced this point with his bronze bust *Captain James Crook*, the statue's head covered like that of a cat burglar or bank robber with a balaclava. The head of Cook – *Crook* – is instantly recognisable even though it is obscured.

Indigenous Australians and many others have drawn offence from white Australia's deification of Cook as continental discoverer since governor Thomas Brisbane's 1822 dedication of the first plaque to the great navigator (who the Hawaiians had long since chopped into pieces and fed to the fish) on the cliffs close to where the Endeavour anchored at Kamay. Other white men (and women) personally killed more Aboriginal people than Cook or his crew. Yet for Indigenous people Cook – his name, his image, the contested history of him – is perhaps the most despised and offensive cultural shorthand for dispossession and oppression.

In early 2021 a person – *or persons* (as the cops said) – used a stencil and paint to impose an image of Cook's unmistakable noggin onto the memorial dedicated to Tasmanian Nuenonne woman, Truganini, on Bruny Island, south-east Tasmania. As an exercise in Exocet-targeted offence against Indigenous sensibilities, this act of vandalism could hardly have been more



'Crook' – Cook bust with balaclava – by Jason Wing (National Gallery of Australia)

pointed. Truganini, wrongly cast in nineteenth and twentieth-century white Australian history and anthropology as the 'last of the Tasmanians', is actually a profound embodiment of Indigenous endurance and survival. She lived through the virtual apocalypse that descended on her people and never lost her agency, except perhaps in death when the Tasmanian Museum put her skeletal remains on display and later traded copies of various of her bones across the globe including with New York's Museum of Natural History which, in return, sent the skull of a tyrannosaurus.

The modest monument on Bruny – vandalised several times previously – makes no grand claims about Truganini's life (of the sort to which she is entitled) simply noting:

THIS MEMORIAL  
IS DEDICATED TO  
THE MEMORY OF  
TRUGANINI  
1812-1876

Compare this to the more than 100 official and unofficial Cook statues and memorials across Australia – not least the most famous (or infamous) one that has stood in Sydney's Hyde Park since 1874. It bears the inscription, 'Discovered this territory 1770'.

Since at least the early twentieth century Indigenous rights activists had rightly viewed with mirth and contempt this giant bronze image of Cook and its discovery assertion. Their objections, if ever they were made publicly, would have fallen on deaf ears (as they still mostly do today) given that the colonists fallaciously believed they were witnessing the extinction of the Eora just as they were the passing of Truganini's Nuenonne, and that the continent was (given the apparent absence of 'civilised' agriculture and archaeology of ancient monumental buildings) already effectively unsettled in 1770.

Indigenous activism has long focussed on this most distinctive of Cook statues, not least during the bicentenary of 1988 when the replica tall ships sailed into the harbour amid the Invasion Day mass Aboriginal protests around Sydney. It is testimony to the enduring potency of American cultural

imperialism, however, that it was only really in mid 2017 that the statue became a matter of public/political controversy when the television personality Stan Grant wrote something about how understandably offensive he found it.

He did so off the back of an unrelated controversy in the United States about Donald Trump's defence of Confederate statues.

Other writers and many prominent Indigenous people had long been critiquing the white blindfold nature of monuments, statuary and nomenclature.

As you drive around this continent, stop and think about some of the names you'll see on creeks, roads and beaches. It's no coincidence there are so many places named Skeleton Creek in Queensland and Skull Creek in Gippsland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. There is a Murdering Gully in Victoria, a Skull Hole in Queensland and a Massacre Waterfall in central-west New South Wales. I've walked the length of a lichen-lined furrow through a field of golden native grassland on the Atherton Tableland, wondering if the howling wind might not be the spirits crying. For the place, Boonjie – which was renamed Butchers Creek with the massacre of its custodians in 1887 – is replete with distressed spirits, a descendant of the dead has assured me.

The continent, seeded with Indigenous names and stories, has been progressively renamed. Cook started this process from the sea as he navigated Endeavour up the east coast in 1770. In many places this has been done not to commemorate the deaths of First Nations people, but the very act of mass murdering them.

Leading Indigenous activists, historians Gary Foley and Tony Birch, have for decades, for example, been blazing the trail on this nomenclature question, successfully taking on major conservative institutions, not least the University of Melbourne, over their dedication of bricks and mortar to eugenicists, radical assimilationists, the thieves of ancestral remains and other assorted bastards of Australian history.

And yet suddenly, in 2017, the fuse was lit about the Cook statue in Hyde Park by Stan Grant and we had the 'statue wars'.

Things subsided. But the issue – the 'wars' – would flare up intermittently when statues of Cook and colonists who followed began to be vandalised with paint.

One of those targeted was the statue of Lachlan Macquarie, the fifth governor of New South Wales. The statue was dedicated in January 2013, an inscription associated with the monument reading, 'He was a perfect gentleman, a Christian and supreme legislator of the human heart'. This is laughable and should, given all that was known about Macquarie's bastardry by 2013, never have been put on the dedication. For if he was a gentleman, Macquarie was also a murderer – a syphilitic, calculating killer of Aboriginal men, women and children, and thief of Indigenous infants from massacre sites, as well as an early proponent of the tactic of 'terror' against the blacks around Appin, at the foot of the central highlands, whom he regarded as the enemy of his expanding civilisation.

The Cook statue in Hyde Park now attracts significant media attention. At best it belongs in a statue museum and, as fallacious as its dedication remains, it can perhaps be dismissed as a contemptible reflection of its times.

The same can't be said of the Macquarie statue. It is not a colonial statue. There is no excuse for it.

As I've written elsewhere, 'Its dramatic misrepresentation of Macquarie, given all that was already known about his humanitarian failings at the time of its casting, cannot easily be dismissed with claims that it merely reflects the prevailing sentiment of a bygone era. This statue and the words that accompany it could not be justified in 1816, let alone in 2013 or today. It is, arguably, of negligible historical or cultural value.'<sup>1</sup>

Fast forward to 2020 and the Black Lives Matter resurgence in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the United States, continuing controversy around confederate statues and symbols and the toppling of statues of slavers in the United Kingdom. Black Lives protests naturally followed in Australian capitals.

In Sydney, protestors converged on Hyde Park. Police, anticipating that Cook would be a target, moved in. Perhaps the most potent image of that protest remains the photograph of mounted police – side by side with white, right wingers – protecting the 1874 Cook statue.

As Greens MP David Shoebridge tweeted, ‘This image tells you just who @nswpolice think they are here to protect and serve #BlackLivesMatter’.

The Cook statue still stands, of course. Protected by all sorts of ongoing surveillance and patrols.

It is likely to remain in Hyde Park, just a stone’s throw from that of Macquarie... at least until Australia gets a statue museum.

This seems like a good place to return to that first ever Cook monument dedicated in 1822 by Governor Brisbane – again, not friend of this continent’s Indigenes. He waged war against them in Bathurst and killed hundreds with musket fire and poison after Macquarie retreated to London, syphilitic, alcoholic, lost. The dedication on the plaque reads:

Under the Auspices of British Science  
These Shores Were Discovered  
by  
James Cook & Joseph Banks  
The Columbus and Maecenas of Their Time  
This Spot Once Saw Them Ardent in the Pursuit of Knowledge

It would overly credit Brisbane and his lot to suggest they were somehow cognisant of an Indigenous sensibility for animated landscape – a *country* that at once encapsulates and is created by the stories of emergent men, women and their totems and the events and experiences that unfolds upon topography.

But that is what those who cast this monument unwittingly did.

For Kamay – *This Spot – saw them* arrive.

It’s one Cook memorial that is worth its weight in irony.

## Endnotes

1. Paul Daley, ‘Heroes, Monuments and History’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, Autumn, 2018.