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## Recent Museum Exhibitions and Authorized Heritage Discourses about James Cook: “Shared History” and “The Performance of Privilege”

John Mullen

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### Abstract

The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cook’s travels has been the occasion for the organization of a series of museum exhibitions whose declared aim is to develop a deeper understanding of his role and the world he lived in. Given the changing political atmosphere of the early twenty-first century, where a traditional colonial gaze is ever less acceptable, these exhibitions have declared in different ways their curators’ intentions to include voices, agency and opinions from the peoples who were the victims of the aftermath of Cook’s scouting activities. This paper looks at three examples and questions the limits both of these intentions and of the practical effects of this new approach. Is “shared history” being built and defended, or are conscious or unconscious (post) colonial priorities still a major aspect of these events?

James Cook, commemoration, museology, First Nations, colonial gaze, British Museum

John Mullen is Professor of British Studies at Rouen University in France. He has published two books on popular song in the First World War, as well as a number of pieces of work in connection with the historiography of the First World War, and on commemorative activities and ideologies in the twenty-first century.

For the 250th anniversary of Cook’s expeditions, a large number of events are being organized around the world, often with public funding. These events are generally situated in a space of tension between commemoration and celebration, and also between history and heritage. They are part of heritage activity in that they tend to communicate a vision of who “we” and “our civilisations” were 250 years ago. Scholars, in particular Laurajane Smith of

the National University of Australia, have analysed heritage as not a series of objects and places, but as an activity, a performance, and a performance which often includes some and excludes others.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I shall look at just one aspect of the anniversary - museum exhibitions, and I shall explore some of these tensions.

The stated intentions, and often the real intentions of a number of institutional actors are to build up a “shared history” between dominant and dominated peoples involved in these encounters. However, partly due to the facts of domination, conscious and unconscious, and partly due to the persistence of material and symbolic injustice inflicted upon indigenous peoples, the performance of privilege remains very much present in authorized heritage events, even so long after Cook’s death.

I wish to introduce two elements of context before examining three museum exhibitions. Firstly, we must note that commemorations causing controversy, and leading to attempts to compensate in the interests of a claimed shared history, is not a new phenomenon. Let us look at two British examples. In plate 1, we see a statue erected in honour of the British soldiers in World War One who were executed for desertion, cowardice, sleeping at their post or other such crimes. Scholars working on the cases have shown convincingly that the most important factor which decided whether a convicted soldier was actually executed or whether he was reprieved was the immediate state of the war in the region and the perceived need to “strengthen morale”.<sup>2</sup> In short, the soldiers were executed *pour encourager les autres*.<sup>3</sup> This fact, and also the different views prevailing today concerning “shell shock” or post-traumatic stress disorder, encouraged the very long campaign run by relatives of the executed, demanding a posthumous pardon; for many years, the Ministry of Defence insisted that such a pardon was impossible. This monument was erected in 2001, 83 years after the end of the war, at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire – that is, at a site run by the military establishment. A few years later, 306 soldiers were officially pardoned. This pardon helped to make the huge celebrations of the centenary of the First World War a touch more inclusive: those who at the time were seen as an enemy within were now to be forgiven and reintegrated into a national community re-energized by a shared history.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, London, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Corns and John Hughes-Wilson, *John, Blindfold and Alone – British Military Executions in the Great War*, London, Cassell, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> An expression coined by Voltaire in his fable, *Candide*, in reaction to the British execution of Admiral Byng in 1757, for incompetence.



**1 The « Shot at Dawn » memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum.**

**Photo: Noisette. Copyright Creative Commons (free to use if attributed).**

For a second example, let us look at plate 2, a plaque in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, in Oxford. It commemorates local martyrs, Catholic and Protestant, executed by the other side between 1530 and 1680. It was unveiled, in this leading Anglican church, in 2008, that is to say 330 years after the events commemorated. It is clear that the move towards shared history can take some time! In the 21st century, when tensions between Catholics and Protestants in England are incommensurably milder,<sup>4</sup> this symbol of shared history has become possible.

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<sup>4</sup>But see Claire Gheeraert-Graffeuille and Géraldine Vaughan (Eds), *Anti-Catholicism in Britain and Ireland, 1600-2000: Practices, Representations and Ideas*, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, forthcoming.



## 2 Memorial plaque to Catholic and Protestant martyrs, University Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Oxford.

**Photograph: Kaisu Thai. Copyright Creative Commons (Public domain).**

I give the two examples for context, though they are not fully comparable to the subject of this paper. This is firstly because the painful history of colonization and racism in the Pacific is far more present today than are the pasts referred to in these two cases. In Australia today, to take just the example of one country, there are Aboriginal people alive who were taken from their families by police in the campaigns to forcibly assimilate or eliminate Aboriginal communities, during the events now known as the “stolen generation”.<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal communities, who have had certain land rights officially recognized, are still often in conflict with plans to use their land for mining, and discrimination against Aboriginals is still widespread.<sup>6</sup>

The second reason that tensions and debate about the commemoration of Cook are present at a higher temperature than for the two other British examples I mentioned, is the flourishing of

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis, see Quentin Beresford, Paul Omaji, *Our state of mind : racial planning and the stolen generations*, South Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> It is quite impossible to summarize in a paragraph the history of racism against Aboriginal people, but if one symbolic fact might stand for this history, it might be that the first university in Australia was founded in 1850, while the first ever Aboriginal person to obtain a university degree in Australia graduated in 1966.

an immense current of thought and practice, in particular in New Zealand and in Australia, which aims now at rethinking or contesting the colonial legacy in the Pacific, and at considering possibilities for restorative justice on both symbolic and material levels.

The second element of context to my reflections on recent exhibitions is the weight of the tsunami of hagiography concerning Cook which has been built up over the last 250 years. In Australia in particular, Cook remains a key part of national foundational mythology, no doubt considered preferable as a founding father cum free spirit to the prison colony governors of the nineteenth century. In Britain and elsewhere in Europe he has been lauded as the enlightenment adventurer and bringer of civilisation, but also as being that most modern of heroes, the disruptive entrepreneur. Coming from a modest background, changing the world and dying in harness, Cook has been a perfect storytale figure. His story has been available to public consciousness in a myriad of ways, of which I can mention only a few.



**3 Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney. Photo: John Mullen**

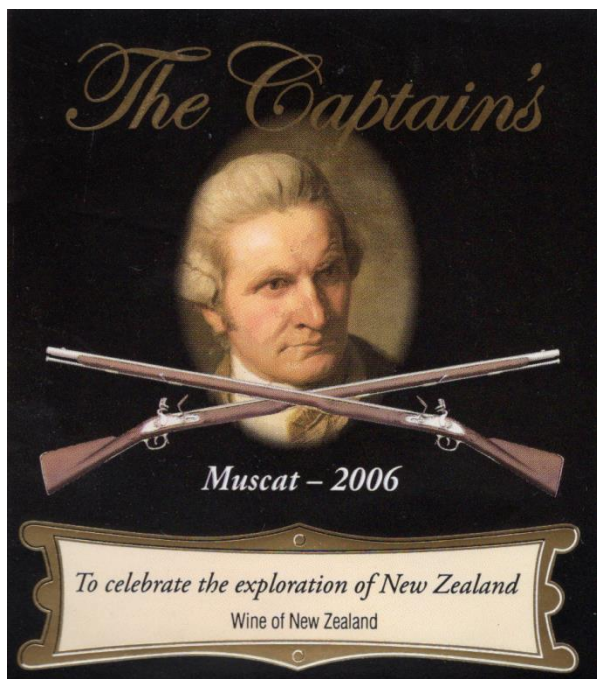
In the centre of Sydney's emblematic Hyde Park, only 200 metres from the Anzac memorial, a huge statue of Cook gazes triumphantly down at passers-by. In Whitby or London, and even in Rouen in France, statues and busts are displayed in public spaces. In Canberra, Queen Elizabeth inaugurated a memorial fountain on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cook's visit.



**4 Cook memorial fountain, Canberra. Photo: Bidgee.**

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Cook's face can be seen on banknotes, coins and stamps, on cigarette cards, matchboxes, wine labels, fridge magnets or Pokemon cards. His name is given to restaurants and universities, while fans can see his desk preserved in a museum in Canberra and see his parents' cottage in a park in Melbourne, after it was lovingly transported from Yorkshire brick by brick, in the 1930s.



**5 Wine label in honour of Cook.**

**Photo: Ian Boreham. Reproduced with permission.**





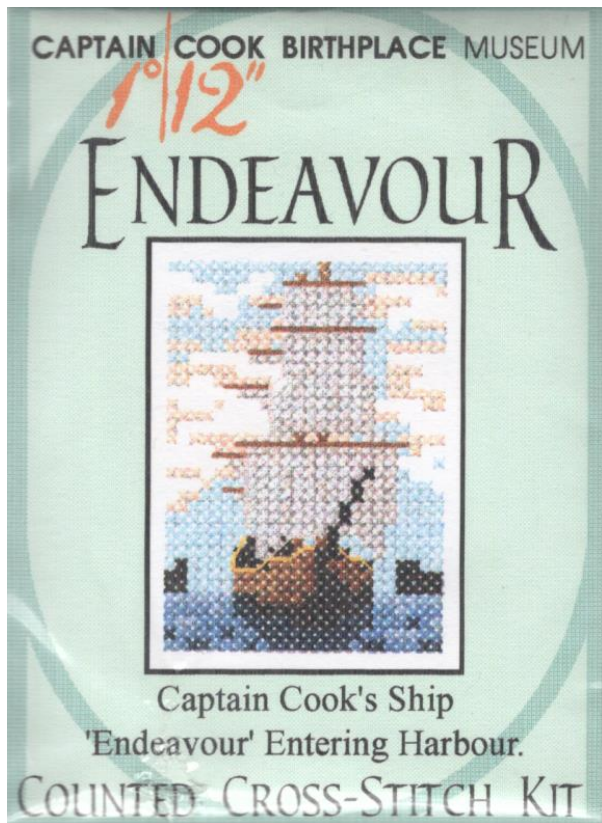
**6 Captain Cook's Cottage in Melbourne. Photo: John Mullen**

His story is celebrated in numerous paintings, his name given to ships, and hospitals, and the name of his ships was even given to space shuttles at the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**7 The Space Shuttle Endeavour.**

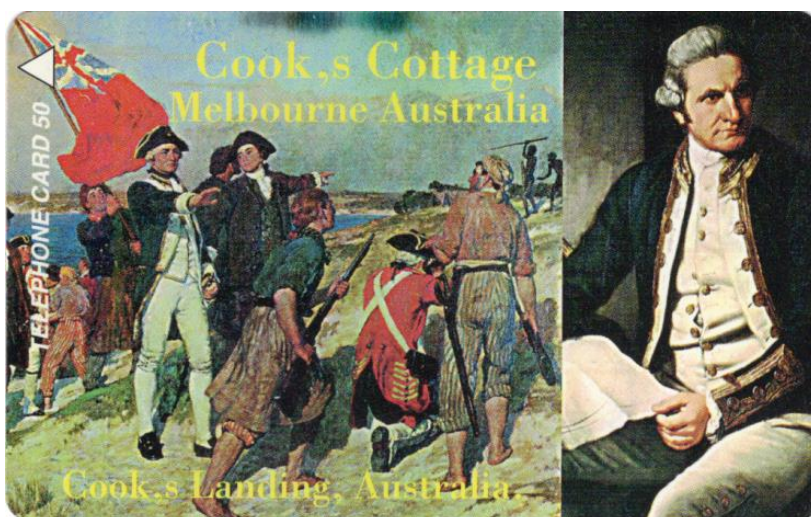
**Photo: NASA, Public Domain.**



**8** Cross-stitch pattern of Cook's ship Endeavour.

**Photo: Ian Boreham. Reproduced with permission.**

His story has been illustrated by models and board games, and even in cross-stitch kits and children's songs.



**9** Telephone card in honour of Cook.

**Photo: Ian Boreham. Reproduced with permission.**

Captain Cook was a British sailor  
One day he left his home and sailed away  
And he sailed and he sailed and he sailed till he came to Australia  
And he named the place he landed “Botany bay”.  
Captain Cook took a look, and he said to his men  
“I think I’d better draw some maps so we find this place again!”<sup>7</sup>

All this is what the visitor, the journalist or the curator may be vaguely conscious of before encountering or intervening in the museum exhibitions I shall speak of. For today’s paper I have chosen to look at three museum exhibitions: two in London and one in Australia.

### **Exhibition 1**

**British Library: *James Cook, the Voyages***  
**April 2018 - August 2018 Entrance fee: £14**  
**(and catalogue, 224 pages)**

### **Exhibition 2**

**British Museum: *Reimagining Captain Cook: Pacific Perspectives***  
**November 2018 to August 2019. Free entrance**  
**(and catalogue, 64 pages)**

### **Exhibition 3**

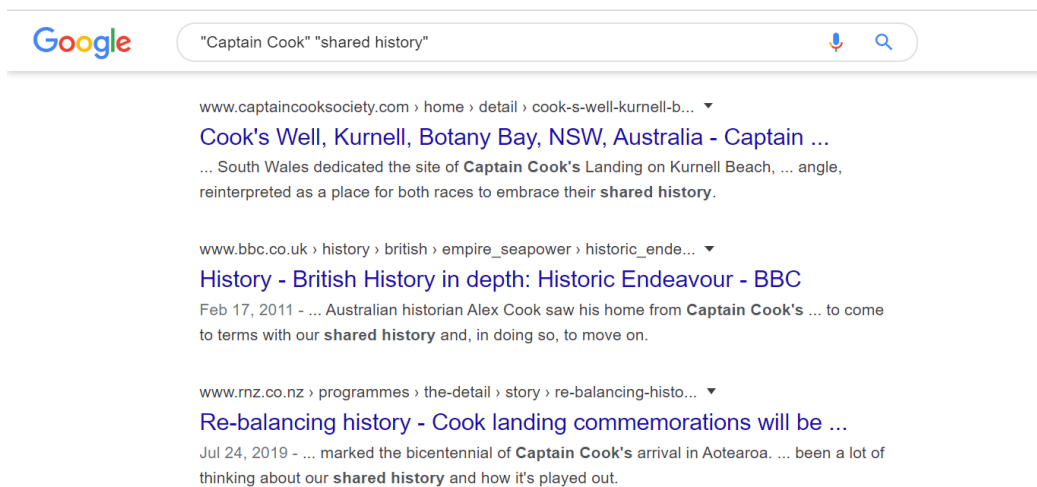
**National Library of Australia: *Cook and the Pacific***  
**September 2018 to February 2019**  
**Free entrance**  
**(and catalogue 182 pages)**

All three of these exhibitions attempted to include perspectives and voices from indigenous peoples. In Australia, this attempt was openly announced as a perspective or hope of “shared history” between indigenous Aboriginal and white populations. In London, it was presented

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<sup>7</sup> Don Spencer, *Australia for Kids*, ABC Kids 1989. The album was nominated in 1990 for the ARIA prize for best children’s album. The song can be heard on YouTube here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egLsc96CZ2E> . For aficionados, there are (at least) two other songs about Cook : Song for Captain Cook, by Phil Garland, available here : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyTjsf\\_ncuk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyTjsf_ncuk) and « Invader Captain Cook » by Angus Rabbitt available here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfICkCOAX8A> . Consulted 22/02/2020.

as a move away from a colonialist national narrative and as a recognition of physical and symbolic injustice from the past.



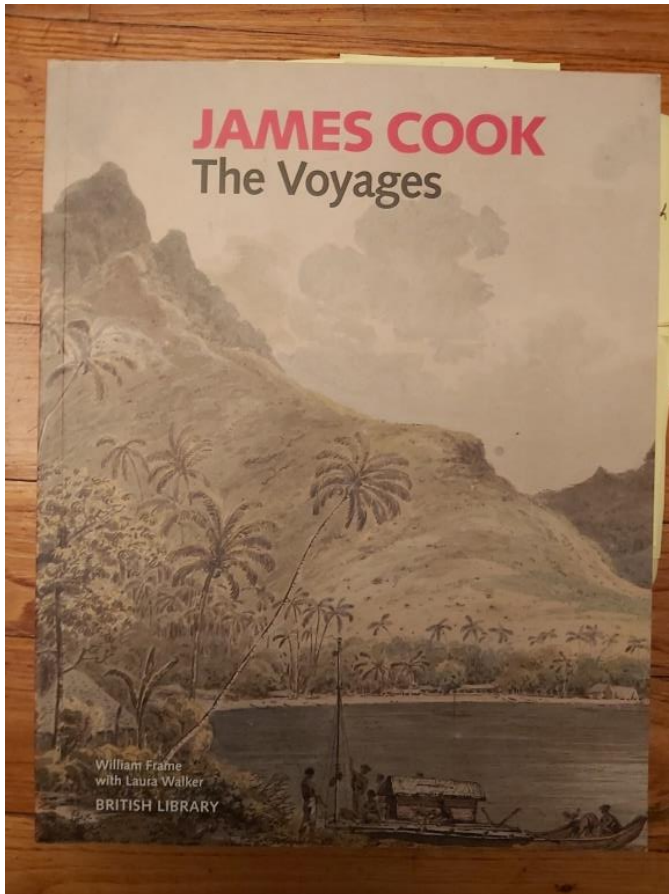
The screenshot shows a Google search interface with the query "Captain Cook" "shared history". Three search results are displayed:

- [www.captaincooksociety.com](http://www.captaincooksociety.com) › home › detail › cook-s-well-kurnell-b...  
**Cook's Well, Kurnell, Botany Bay, NSW, Australia - Captain ...**  
... South Wales dedicated the site of **Captain Cook's** Landing on Kurnell Beach, ... angle, reinterpreted as a place for both races to embrace their **shared history**.
- [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) › history › british › empire\_seapower › historic\_ende...  
**History - British History in depth: Historic Endeavour - BBC**  
Feb 17, 2011 - ... Australian historian Alex Cook saw his home from **Captain Cook's** ... to come to terms with our **shared history** and, in doing so, to move on.
- [www.mnz.co.nz](http://www.mnz.co.nz) › programmes › the-detail › story › re-balancing-histo...  
**Re-balancing history - Cook landing commemorations will be ...**  
Jul 24, 2019 - ... marked the bicentennial of **Captain Cook's** arrival in Aotearoa. ... been a lot of thinking about our **shared history** and how it's played out.

## 10 The idea of "shared history" present around the world. Screenshot: John Mullen

### *The British Library exhibition*

The first exhibition, at the British Library in London, appears initially as a fairly classical presentation of Cook's travels. A chronological approach is taken, from Cook's youth and naval training, through the three expeditions to his death in Hawaii.



### 11 Catalogue from British Library exhibition.

Photo: John Mullen

In the catalogue, Fox's well-known heroic painting, *The Landing of Captain Cook in Botany Bay*, stands opposite the first page of the introduction, and the opening paragraphs do not mention First Nations. This traditionalist impression rapidly gains nuance as early as the second page of the catalogue, which is illustrated by Daniel Boyd's straightforwardly oppositional, anticolonialist rendering of the Fox painting. Boyd's version presents the same characters in identical attitudes, but a skull and crossbones is added to the British flag, Cook sports a pirate eye patch, and the painting is entitled "We call them pirates out here".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The work, as well as a video interview with the artist, can be found at the following address : <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2006.25/>. Consulted 22/02/2020.



**12 Emmanuel Phillips Fox: The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay.**

**Image: public domain.**

The biographies of Cook, Banks etc. in the exhibition remain arguably hagiographic, certainly traditional, and the ethnographic tales about First Nations are also, even if the peoples are named. For dozens of pages there appear to be few or no indigenous voices present or quoted. Nevertheless, the account of the first encounter in New Zealand includes the information that “It is believed that the dead man was Te Maro, a chief of the Ngati Oneone”. This is the sort of information which might easily have been omitted fifty years earlier.

The “taking possession” ceremonies are presented as being of doubtful validity, and the catalogue does include summaries of some Maori oral history accounts of Cook’s visits, in particular that of Te Horeat, who saw the visit as a child and recounted it as a very old man in 1852. In the section presenting the second journey, space is given to the stories of named First Nation people who were in contact with Cook. For example, the story of Tu, a Tahitian chief, and that of Hitihiti, a navigator and memorizer of oral cartography, who travelled on Cook’s ship for a while, before leaving the ship to stay on the island of Ra’iatea.



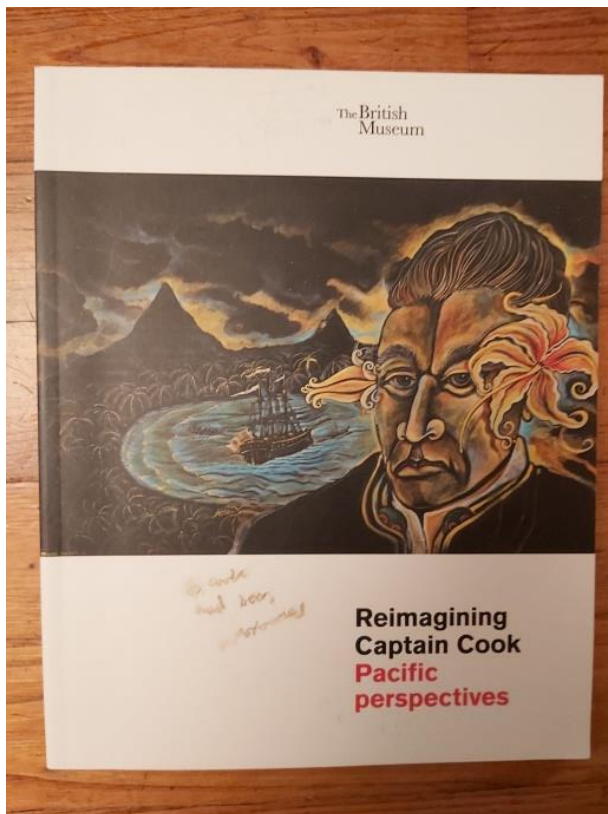
**13 O Hedideen or Hitihiti. Engraving 1777 after Hodges.**

**Copyright Creative Commons (free non-commercial use)**

In short in this exhibition we see First nation voices included. The exhibition ends with a series of video interviews demonstrating contrasting and even contradictory opinions on Cook's legacy.

*Exhibition two – reimagining Captain Cook*





#### **14 Catalogue for British Museum exhibition.**

**Photo: John Mullen**

The second exhibition was, unlike the first, a fairly small, free exhibition, situated in the middle of the free permanent collection of the institution. Whether museums organize paying or free initiatives is important in that the audience is not the same: generally, far more people see a free exhibition, though they may not study it with as much attention.

The title, “Pacific Perspectives”, suggested the display might put indigenous voices at its centre. At the entrance, the presence of posters from previous London exhibitions underlined its intention to be different. Nevertheless, the now rejected, straightforwardly colonial gaze from the previous exhibitions is not explained, analysed or deconstructed – it is only present as an unfortunate ghost from the past.

The museum adds to the interesting objects Cook and his crew collected by showing a dozen examples of twenty-first century art by indigenous artists on the subject of Cook. In addition, the historical articles include two of Tupaia’s drawings: the overall intention is to ensure there is a significant percentage of indigenous agency and voice. Furthermore, a number of

these artistic productions were not just to be displayed for the duration of the exhibition, but were bought by the British Museum to add to their collection, clearly a signal of them being taken seriously.

I will only refer to one example, by Steve Gibbs, entitled *Name Changer*.<sup>9</sup> In this piece one can see Cook's ship displayed upside down, a fairly clear contestation of the hero worship often attached to the gentleman. The work takes up the question of the classic colonial practice of naming of places by Cook. The work's title is a basic reminder of something often downplayed – that Cook's activity was not really naming, but name changing: the places already had names. The specific example Gibbs refers to is the place that Cook decided to call "Poverty Bay" because it did not give him and his crew what they were looking for at that time. Such a negative name, which has remained until this day, constitutes a form of symbolic violence. This has been recently recognized in part, since in February last year, in 2019, the bay was officially given the dual name "Turanganui a Kiwa/ Poverty Bay. In Gibbs' painting, the local place names in indigenous languages are commemorated in the centre of the picture. The overall impression is of patient and harmonious contestation of Cook's legacy.

The British Museum exhibition was well received in many reviews, and the attempt to include indigenous expression as a move towards "shared history" was welcomed. Yet the performance of domination was also clearly identified by some. Some critics considered superficial the inclusion of indigenous voices. Others pointed out contradictions in connection with the British Museum's wider resistance to the return to their original communities of indigenous artefacts, in particular those whose acquisition is considered to be illegitimate. One critic, Liza Oliver, speaks of the museum's "wilful blind spots" and concludes:

Without the museum addressing this question directly, the exhibition's employment of contemporary indigenous voices could be read as instrumental, using them to create a veneer of institutional awakening and self-critique when in reality there is very little of either.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The work can be seen online here <https://www.tribune.com/dal-mondo/2019/05/mostra-captain-cook-british-museum-londra/attachment/steve-gibbs-name-changer-aotearoa-new-zealand-2016-courtesy-of-the-artist-image-the-trustees-of-the-british-museum/> Consulted 22/02/2020.

<sup>10</sup> Liza Oliver, CAA REVIEWS, <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/3596#.XIEJJihKjUF> Consulted 22/02/2020.

The tension around questions of acquisition and return are to be seen in connection with the centre point of the exhibition, which was the chief mourner's costume (Heva Tupapau) from Tahiti.

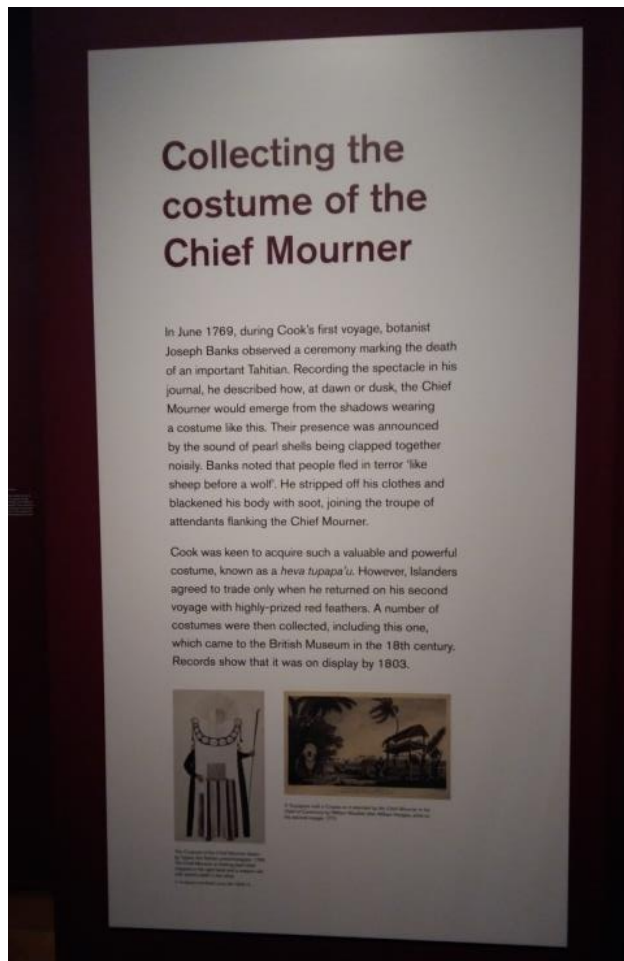


**15 Chief mourner's costume acquired by Cook.**

**Photo: John Mullen**

The text on the left of the costume explains how Cook came to possess such a magnificent object. He had been keen to acquire one when he first visited Tahiti, but the locals refused to part with it. On his second visit, he was able to exchange highly prized red parrot feathers for the costume. We see that the British Museum is keen to point out the legitimacy of their possession of the object, within a general context of the debate about restitution. The British

museum is very much involved in this controversy, as can be seen by the article on the museum blog in 2019 showing the history and provenance of objects it possesses.<sup>11</sup>



## 16 The explanation of the costume's provenance.

**Photo: John Mullen**

This careful pedagogy led some critics to ironize about objects which were absent from the exhibition. In particular, the shield, known as the Gweagal shield, taken at Botany Bay during a violent encounter, which is in the British museum collection, did not find a place within the exhibition. The bark shield has a bullet hole in it which comes from the initial encounter. The shield is considered a centrally important object in the museum's collection, to such an extent that it was included in the renowned BBC Radio series "A History of the World in 100 Objects".<sup>12</sup> Its omission from the exhibition is likely to be linked to the fact that its acquisition was fairly clearly illegitimate. Indeed, descendants of the original owner of the

<sup>11</sup> <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/collecting-histories/> Consulted 22/02/2020.

<sup>12</sup> The shield is discussed in this episode of the series : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b00vy3zr> Consulted 20/02/2020.

shield are campaigning for it to be returned to them, as can be seen in the newspaper article in plate 17.

## Indigenous Australians demand return of shield taken by Captain Cook

Rodney Kelly, descendant of warrior Cooman, meets British Museum staff to discuss Gweagal Shield 'stolen' in 1770



17 Article in *The Guardian*, 8 November 2016, on the controversy.

Screenshot: John Mullen

Even the key curating decision taken by the exhibition, that of using twenty-first century artworks from First Nation artists may be seen as involving less First Nation agency as First Nation illustration. As one reviewer laments:

The impressions of indigenous cultures and First Nation peoples, in the form of contemporary artworks, remain subordinate to the narrative of Western enlightenment in which exhaustively written testimonies, the inventory and the actual relic, are considered pre-eminent guarantors of datum. Ultimately, artworks are enlisted to legitimise, rather than destabilise, the authority of Western visitors, who were supposedly engaged in an honest quest for knowledge and seeking détente.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Canberra exhibition*

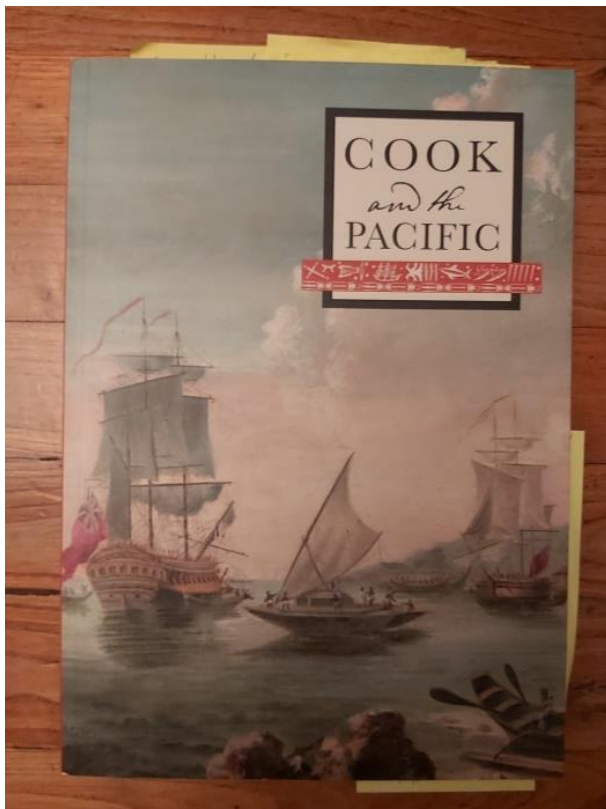
The third exhibition took place in Canberra. The political context in Australia is strikingly different from that in the UK. Cook had been for a very long time a national hero. At the time of the bicentenary of his visit, fifty years ago, newspapers had traced day by day the precise

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Stooke, in *Third Text*, <http://thirdtext.org/stooke-cook-britishmuseum> Consulted 22/02/2020.

place where Cook had been exactly 200 years previously. Queen Elizabeth gave a celebratory tour, spending more than forty days in Australia. Many towns organized a re-enactment of Cook's arrival, with bit parts for "real Aboriginals", while large numbers of towns held "pageants of progress". Wilkinson, the razor blade company, sold replicas of Cook's sword.

The Liberal premier of New South Wales, Bob Askin, declared in 1969 that "Cook's discovery tilled the ground for the seeds of settlement for Governor Phillip. From these seeds comes a great and free nation — predominantly British".<sup>14</sup> Fifty years later, the political atmosphere is radically different. Indeed, knowing a number of left-wing activists who live in Canberra, I asked around to try to find one of them who had seen the exhibition, and was met with general incredulity, since, for them, the central characteristic of the exhibition was a celebration of Cook, which they did not want to support.

The exhibition, at the National Library was a very large one. It was free, and saw 80 000 visitors including 4 000 schoolchildren (the population of Canberra is 360 000).



**18 Catalogue of National Library of Australia exhibition.**

**Photo: John Mullen**

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<sup>14</sup> ABC 24/01/2019.

With over a million euros of funding from the government and a foreword to the catalogue written by Mitch Fifield, the Minister of the Arts, it seems fair to count the exhibition and its catalogue as Authorized Heritage Discourse, in the term invented by pioneering researcher Laurajane Smith. We again see a number of elements which appear to be in tension. The exhibition begins with a “welcome to country” in which a local Aboriginal representative welcomes the visitor and invites them to acknowledge the Aboriginal people on whose land the exhibition is taking place.<sup>15</sup>

The minister’s foreword to the catalogue is barely 250 words long and remarkably lacking in content. It declares principally that “The exhibition will allow audiences to debate, question and explore the man and the myth” and will “contribute to the national conversation about what Cook means to Australia, including how he was perceived at the time, how Indigenous people responded and how he is remembered today”.

This ministerial piece is followed by a one-page foreword from the director-general of the National Library, Dr Marie-Louise Ayres, who attempts to reconcile some of the tensions. Firstly she underlines her concern about Indigenous voices. “In developing this exhibition, the library has reached out to First Nation communities” she writes, explaining that “by listening respectfully to many voices, we hope to enhance and build our own understanding of the Cook collections”. Her objective, she says, is “to reflect both our admiration for Cook as scientist, navigator and leader, and our recognition that the lives of communities around the Pacific were changed forever after his journeys”.

The presence of voices highly critical of Cook’s project is quickly evident. The first long essay in the catalogue is by John Maynard, director of an indigenous research studies centre, and its title shows a determination not to understate opposition to any Cook hagiography : the

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<sup>15</sup> For people unfamiliar with this ceremony, this is what the website “Creative Spirits” which introduces Aboriginal culture, writes [This ceremony is to] **recognise the unique position** of Aboriginal people in Australian culture and history and **show respect** for Aboriginal people. [...] Incorporating a welcome or acknowledgement protocol into official meetings and events recognises Aboriginal people as the First Australians and custodians of their land. It promotes an awareness of the past and ongoing connection to place and land of Aboriginal Australians. Unlike New Zealand, Canada and the United States, Australia has no treaty with its Aboriginal people. A Welcome to or Acknowledgement of Country doesn’t replace a treaty, native title or land rights, but they’re a small gesture of recognition of the association with land and place of the First Australians, and their history.

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/spirituality/welcome-to-country-acknowledgement-of-country>  
Consulted 22/02/2020.

essay is entitled “I’m Captain Cooked!” (I think readers will have followed the rhyming slang) and is accompanied by a full page photograph of a graffiti “Colonialism is cooked!”.

The essay begins “In raising the British flag on Possession Island in the Torres Strait, Cook unleashed cataclysmic consequences upon Aboriginal people of the Australian continent”. We can see, then, a different emphasis to that of the London exhibitions. Fascinatingly, John Maynard feels the need to mention a little further down. “I am an admirer of James Cook as a skilled navigator and an inspiring leader of his crews.” It is interesting to note that in discussion of many other historical figures, one reads rarely the sentence “I admire this person”. Its frequency in discourse around Cook shows how vital he can be to certain versions of national or European identity. Maynard goes on to speak of the negative representation of Cook in traditional Aboriginal songs, and he quotes other voices from First Nations on the colonial experience.

Only once this Aboriginal perspective has been presented do we move on to the curators’ views in a nine-page curators’ essay, which includes a series of suggestions that Cook has been unfairly criticized. Cook, they write “came to respect Maori during his several visits”. The attitude of Cook and his crews is presented in a tone which might well be considered generous (“The Europeans struggled to understand how their [the Aboriginals’] political and social life was organized ...”).

The experience of the visitors to the museum was also marked by the curatorial intention of including indigenous voices. One review<sup>16</sup> describes the entry to the exhibition. “You’re greeted by a selection of First Nations’ representatives, greeting you in their native tongues, and shown a huge, blown up picture of a small woodcut of the Captain.”

The review continues

[the exhibition] includes [Aboriginal] voices and their stories. This way, they’re transformed from the dehumanised curios they often became in the era into both a part of its story and its tellers. ... Elders from multiple tribes throughout the country and the region were contacted to tell their half of the story, and they greet you as you arrive.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.outincanberra.com.au/nla-voyage-cook-pacific/> Consulted 22/02/2020.



We see in this exhibition, then, an even stronger desire to move away from a purely colonial gaze, a desire shaped by the long struggle for Aboriginal visibility and rights over the last fifty years and more.



**19 The Aboriginal embassy at Canberra. Photo: John Mullen**

### *Conclusions*

As an Australian journalist pointed out recently:

Whenever our Prime Minister makes an announcement of any event to mark the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's voyage, there are two reactions and both are angry ... One is dismayed that this harbinger of colonialism should be celebrated at all. The other is that we are failing to properly appreciate this master navigator and scientist.<sup>17</sup>

If there is no reason to doubt the determination of a significant section of museum leadership to move away from a purely colonial view of Cook's activity, and to hope for "shared history" we have much reason to believe that this change of perspective is not as easy to implement, or as thorough-going as some optimistic commentators might want to think.

Firstly, as we have seen, although the "colonial gaze" perspective is now reduced and nuanced, it is not deconstructed or explained, either in the exhibitions or in the catalogues. Secondly, the disinclination to engage with debates about restitution takes away much of the bite of a "shared history" perspective.

Thirdly, one might wonder whether the very existence of yet another exhibition on Cook might not participate more in a celebration of dominant "heritage" than to an understanding

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<sup>17</sup> James Valentine, ABC 24 January 2019.

of events 250 years ago. We should remember that if tens of thousands may attend an exhibition, millions see the posters for the exhibition, the press and media coverage and so on: celebration of Cook may remain the principal visible aspect of the exhibitions. This may be one of the reasons that the 2018 exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, in contrast to the events studied here, was entitled “Oceania” – that is, it did not mention Cook in its title. Such choices may be difficult in a context where museums often need to sell tickets, and easily recognizable names of “heroes” are something of a guarantee of public interest.

A final key element is the reception of the exhibitions by visitors. Most visitors do not have the time or inclination to study the catalogues as I have done. The Australian researcher on heritage, Laurajane Smith has done extensive research, interviewing thousands of visitors to heritage sites and museums in different countries about their reactions. Her main conclusions are that educational learning is nothing like as central an effect on visitors as is often claimed. More common, she finds, is reinforcement of views already held, a search in the exhibition for what corresponds with the mental baggage which the visitor brought to the exhibition.

In particular Smith has found that curatorial discourse has a very limited capacity to interfere with reinforcement of affect, of identity and of opinions. So it may well be that the attempts of these museums to include other perspectives have a weak effect in comparison with the overwhelming fact that it is Cook who is being celebrated, and the visitors “already know” that he is a “hero”.

After all, the museums exhibit “the Cook collection”, decide on which Aboriginal artists should be commissioned to contribute creative works, and what kind of intervention they be allowed. Contemporary Aboriginal art is easier to integrate into a Cook celebration than is oppositional political text. And there are no First Nations Museums inviting European artists to contribute creative works: the curatorial voice in all the exhibitions remains a white one.

The situation then, remains in tension, and may do so for a very long time. We have plenty of time to think about what kind of exhibitions will greet the 300th anniversary, in fifty years’ time.

