



**HAL**  
open science

# Recent Museum Exhibitions and Authorized Heritage Discourses about James Cook: "Shared history" and "the Performance of Privilege"

John Mullen

► **To cite this version:**

John Mullen. Recent Museum Exhibitions and Authorized Heritage Discourses about James Cook: "Shared history" and "the Performance of Privilege". Captain Cook after 250 Years: Re-Exploring the Voyages of James Cook, Sorbonne-Université, Feb 2020, Paris, France. hal-02554371

**HAL Id: hal-02554371**

**<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02554371v1>**

Submitted on 23 Jun 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Recent Museum exhibitions and Authorized Heritage Discourses about James Cook: “Shared history” and “the performance of privilege”

**John Mullen**

**Intervention in** Colloque “Captain Cook after 250 Years: Re-Exploring the Voyages of James Cook”, Sorbonne-Université, 7-8 Février 2020



You can see here the title of my talk. **Recent Museum exhibitions and Authorized Heritage Discourses about James Cook: “Shared history” and “the performance of privilege”**;

Notice the conjunction “and” which allows a wide range of possible articulations.

So: two elements of context, then three exhibitions.

Now, commemorations causing controversy and leading to attempts to compensate in the interests of a claimed shared history is not a new phenomenon. I have two British examples here:

- World war one and the shot at dawn.

**Slide: shot at dawn**



- You see here the Shot at Dawn Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. It commemorates the 309 British Army and Commonwealth soldiers executed after court-martial for desertion and other capital offences during World War I.
- The monument was unveiled 83 years after the end of world war one, in 2001 and was part of an eventually successful campaign which led to the posthumous pardoning of 306 soldiers shot for cowardice, desertion and so on.
- Including what had been seen as “the enemy within” in a shared history of the great war.

### Slide: reformation plaque



For a second example let us look at this plaque, in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford. It commemorates martyrs, catholic and protestant, executed by the other side between 1530 and 1680.

As you can see from the fact that this plaque was unveiled in 2008, the move towards shared history can take ... some time.

The two examples are for context. They are not really comparable to our subject today, both because the painful history of colonization and racism in the Pacific is more present today than are the pasts referred to in these two cases, and also because of the weight of the 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 considering possibilities for restorative justice on both symbolic and material levels.

The second element of context to my reflection on some exhibitions is the weight of the tsunami of hagiography which has been built up over the last 250 years.

In Australia in particular, Cook remains a key part of national foundational mythology, 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, available to public consciousness variously via his

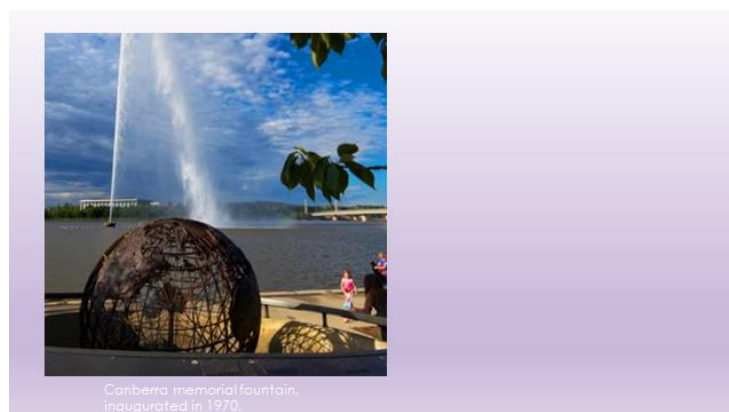
### Slide: Statues in Sydney



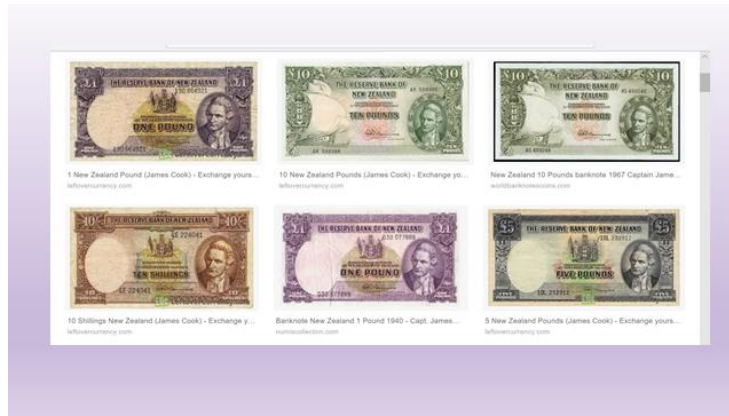
### Slide: Or Whitby or London



### Slide: His fountain in Canberra



### Slide: His face On banknotes



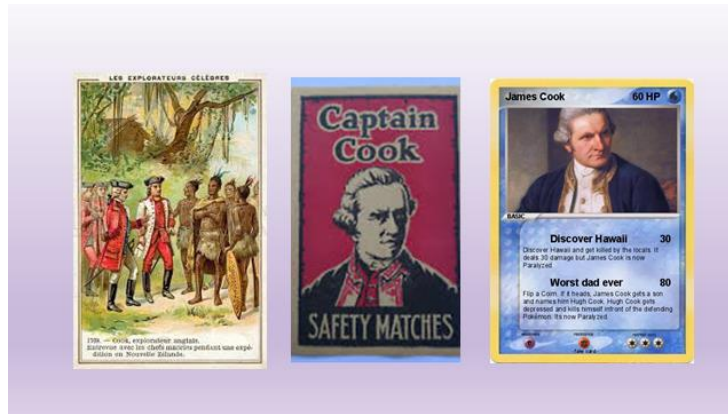
Slide: Or On postage stamps



Slide: Or On coins



Slide: Or on Cigarette cards, matchboxes, Pokemon cards



Slide: His name given to Restaurants and universities



Slide: His desk preserved in Canberra and his cottage preserved in Melbourne



Slide: His story celebrated in paintings





Zoffany's painting of 1795



Baker's painting of 1860

Slide: His name given to ships



Slide: Or the names of his ships given to space shuttles

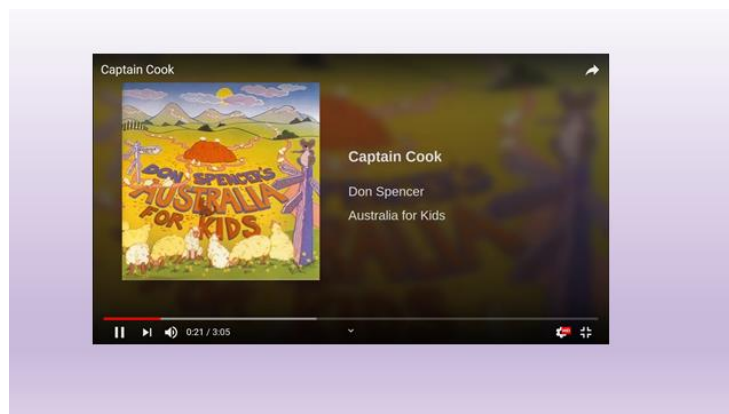


Space shuttles  
Discovery and  
Endeavour

Slide: His story illustrated by models or board games



Slide: or children's songs



All this is what the visitor, the journalist or the curator is vaguely conscious of before encountering the museum exhibitions I shall speak of.

For today's paper then, I chose 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  
 catalogue (224 pages) and website

Exhibition 2 British museum : Reimagining Captain Cook: Pacific Perspectives  
 November 2018 to August 2019. Free entrance  
 (And Catalogue, 64 pages)

Exhibition 3 Cook and the Pacific  
 National Library of Australia September 2018 to February 2019  
 Free entrance  
 (and catalogue 182 pages)

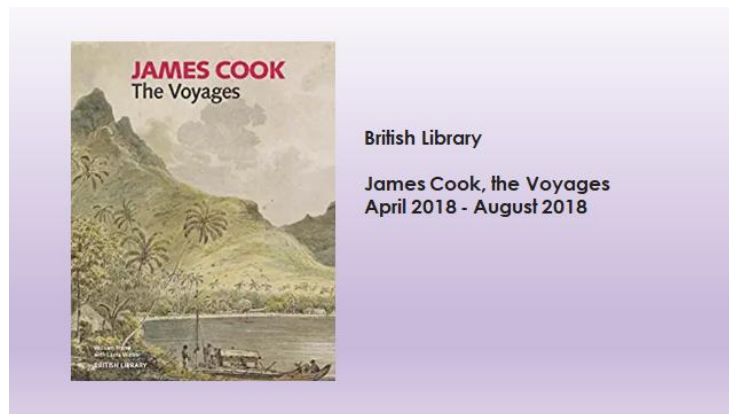


**Exhibition 1**  
 British Library, London : James Cook, the Voyages,  
 April 2018 - August 2018. Entrance fee: £14  
 (and catalogue, 224 pages)

**Exhibition 2**  
 British Museum, London : Reimagining Captain Cook:  
 Pacific Perspectives  
 November 1918 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 announced as a move away from a colonialist national narrative and as a recognition of physical and symbolic injustice from the past.



### Exhibition one :

Exhibition 1 British Library : James Cook, the Voyages

At first sight this seemed a very classical presentation of Cook’s travels. A chronological approach was taken.

### Slide : Fox



In the catalogue, Fox's well known heroic painting **THE LANDING OF CAPTAIN COOK IN BOTANY BAY** is opposite the first page of the introduction, and the first paragraphs do not mention first nations.

This 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.

Slide : Boyd



The biography of Cook, Banks etc remain arguably hagiographic, certainly traditional, and the ethnographic tales of First Nations also remain generally traditional, even if the peoples are named. For dozens of pages there appear to be little or no indigenous voices present or quoted.

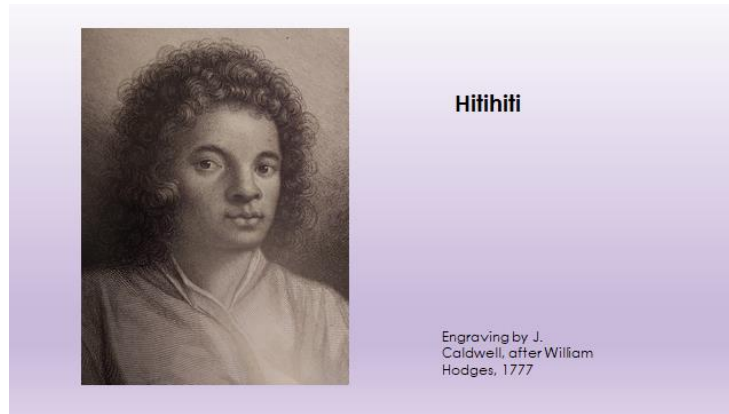
Nevertheless, the account of the first encounter in New Zealand includes the information that “It is believed that the dead man was Te Maro, a chief of the Ngati Oneone”.

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 there are, in the catalogue, summaries of 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 recounting 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.

Slide: hitihiti



In short in this first 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.



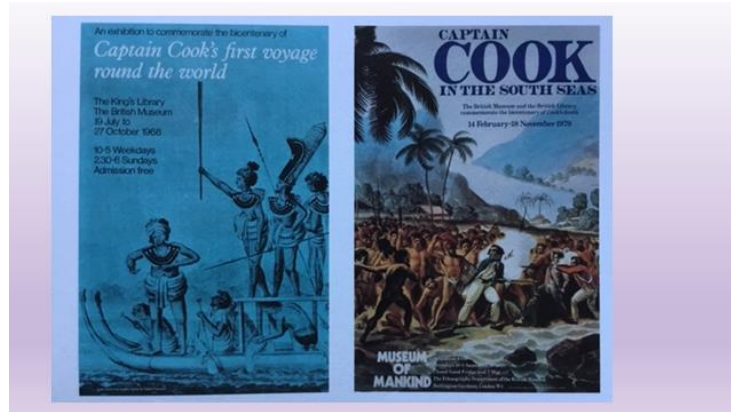
## Exhibition two – reimagining Captain Cook

The second exhibition was, unlike the first, a fairly small, free exhibition (the first exhibition was not free).

The title “Pacific Perspectives” suggested it would put indigenous voices at its centre.

At the start of the exhibition, the display of posters from previous London exhibitions underlines its intention to be different. But the now rejected, straightforwardly colonial gaze from the previous exhibitions is not analyzed or deconstructed – only present as an unfortunate ghost from the past.

Slide: previous exhibitions



The museum adds to the “interesting objects Cook and his crew collected” by exhibiting a dozen examples of Contemporary art by indigenous artists concerning Cook. The historical articles including two of Tupaia’s drawings, the 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 only have time to look at one, this one by Steve Gibbs. one from Steve Gibbs. First of all you can see Cook’s ship being shown upside down, a fairly clear contestation of the hero worship often attached to the gentleman.

Secondly, it takes up the question of the classic colonial practice of renaming of places by Cook. The artist looks at the bay which Cook named “Poverty Bay” . Many aboriginals object to such a name being applied to their home.

On this artwork, the local names in indigenous languages are commemorated in the centre of the picture.

Nevertheless this is still the name of the place today, although in February last year, in 2019 the bay was officially given the dual name “Turanganui a Kiwa/ Poverty Bay.

**Slide : Steve Gibbs**



By Maori artist  
Steve Gibbs

The exhibition was well received in many reviews, and the attempt to include indigenous expression was welcomed. Nevertheless, some critics considered superficial the inclusion of these voices, and also pointed out the contradictions which might be apparent in connection with the British Museum's wider resistance to the return of indigenous artefacts, in particular those whose acquisition is considered to be illegitimate.

So the centre point of the exhibition was the chief mourner's costume from Tahiti



Slide: chief mourners costume

The text on the left of the costume in the exhibition explains how Cook came to possess such a magnificent object.



Explanatory text within the  
exhibition recounting how the  
costume was acquired by Cook



### Slide: collecting the costume

He had been keen to have acquire 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.

Here the British museum is keen to point out the legitimacy of their possession of the object, within a general context in which Western museums are being asked to return objects to indigenous cultures if they were illegitimately taken.

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.

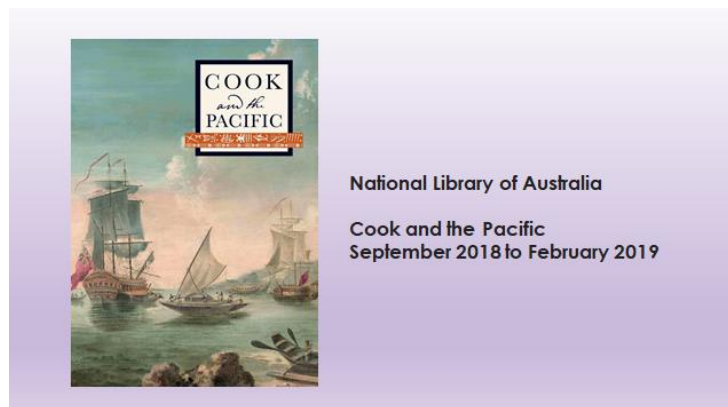
<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/collecting-histories/>



This led some critics to ironize about objects which were absent from the exhibition. In particular, this shield taken at Botany Bay during a violent encounter, which is in the British museum collection, did not find a place within the exhibition. This despite it being considered a centrally important object in the collection, to such an extent that it was included in the renowned BBC Radio series “A history of the world in 100 objects”.

We see then that the British Museum decided not to engage at this time with the debate on repatriation, but this may be only a matter of time, as the question is likely to loom larger over the next few years.

Finally, the **the Australian exhibition**



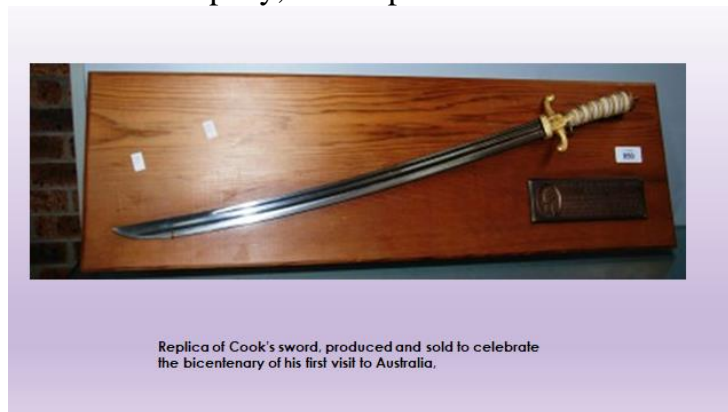
the one in the National Library of Australia in Canberra, Cook and the Pacific

The political context in Australia is naturally somewhat different. Cook had been at one point practically a national religion.

At the bicentenary, fifty years ago, the newspapers had traced day by day where Cook had been exactly 200 years previously.

For the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Queen Elizabeth gave a celebratory tour, spending more than forty days in Australia. Many towns organized a reenactment of Cook's arrival, with bit parts for « real aboriginals ». Large numbers of towns held « pageants of progress ».

Wilkinson, the razor blade company, sold replicas of Cook's sword.



Slide: 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".

( ABC 24.01.2019)

The exhibition at the National Library was a very large one. It was free, and saw 80 000 visitors including 4000 schoolchildren ( the population of Canberra is 360 000)

Displayed in the National Library, 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, I think we can fairly count the exhibition and its catalogue as Authorized Heritage Discourse, in the term invented by researcher Laurajane Smith in her pioneering work on the meaning of heritage.

We again see a number of elements which appear to be in tension.

The exhibition itself 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.

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".

The ministerial piece is followed by a one-page foreword from the director-general of the National Library, Dr Marie-Louise Ayres, who tries 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" ... "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 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 essay is entitled "I'm Captain Cooked!" (I think you will have followed the rhyming slang) and is accompanied by a full page photograph of this graffiti.



Slide: 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”.

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.”

He goes on to speak of the negative representation of Cook in traditional aboriginal songs.

Only once this aboriginal perspective has been presented in the catalogue, do we move on to the curators’ views in a nine-page curators essay, which includes a series of suggestions that the curators feel that Cook has been unfairly criticized .

Cook, they write “came to respect Maori during his several visits”.

The experience of the visitors to the museum also was marked by the curatorial intention of including indigenous voices. One review<sup>1</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

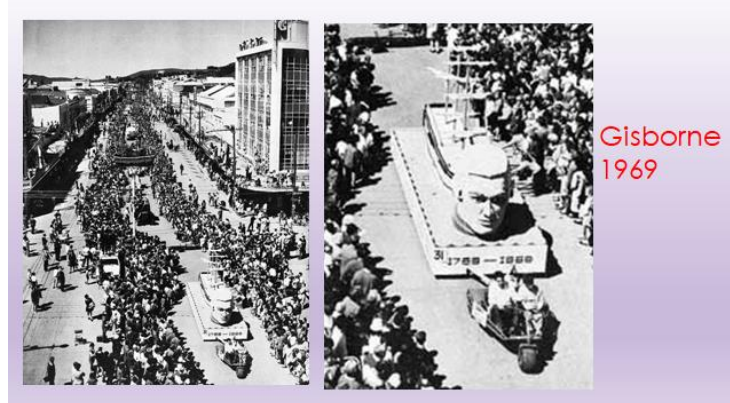
« [the exhibition] includes [aboriginal] voices and their stories. This way, they’re transformed from the dehumanised curios they often became in the era into both a part of its story and its tellers. ... Elders from multiple tribes throughout the country and the region were contacted to tell their half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

The rest of the exhibition contains other elements of First Nation voices: some anticolonialist aboriginal artworks from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for example

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.outincanberra.com.au/nla-voyage-cook-pacific/>

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.



## Conclusions

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.

(James Valentine, ABC 24 January 2019)

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 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, one might wonder whether the existence of another exhibition on Cook might not participate more to a celebration of dominant “heritage” than to an understanding 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 coverage, and celebration of Cook might remain the main visible aspect.





The poster in front of the British Library

Another 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..

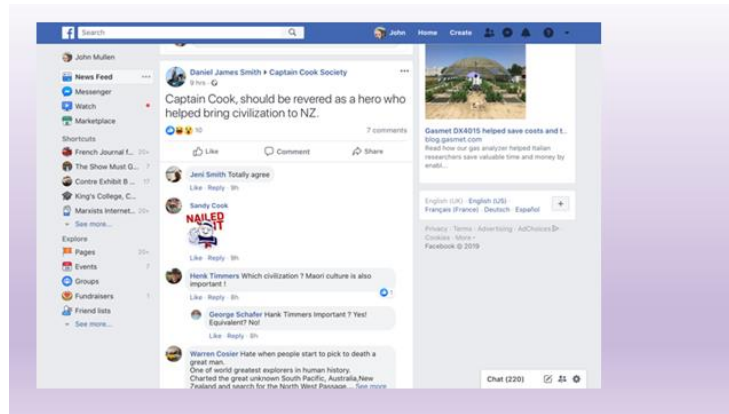
The Australian researcher on heritage, Laurajane Smith has done extensive research, interviewing thousands of visitors to heritage sites and museums in different countries about their reactions. Her main conclusions are that educational learning is nothing like as central an effect on visitors as is 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.

And indeed, some reviews of the British library exhibitions speak above all of the skills of the artists involved.

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 may have a weak effect in comparison with the overwhelming fact that it is Cook who is being celebrated.

As for the performance of privilege, it is I think relatively easy to see in this photo of a parade exactly fifty years ago to celebrate the bicentenary of Cook's visit to New Zealand, performance of privilege, in the open glorification of Captain Cook, presented here larger than life.

But in today's commemorations, this prejudiced view can still be found. You see here a contribution on the Facebook page of the respectable Captain Cook Society.



And more subtle expressions of domination remain. The museums exhibit the Cook collection, decide on which aboriginal artists should be commissioned to contribute creative works, and what kind of intervention. After all, 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, and 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 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary in fifty years time?