



# CAPTAIN COOK LANDING SCULPTURES

Sydney, Australia  
-34.004667, 151.217556



Image Courtesy of James Dugdale

## Executive Summary

Captain James Cook's landing site at Kamay Botany Bay has been a focus of public debate, contestation, commemoration, celebration, and mourning in Australia since the 1860s. The recent controversies over the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Cook's landing presented a new opportunity for multi-stakeholder discussions to take place, focusing on ways this site could recognise its contested historical legacy through local empowerment and artistic intervention.

## Introduction

In 2018, Malcolm Turnbull, the Prime Minister of Australia (2015-2018), announced a 'draft master plan' for the redevelopment of the Kamay Botany Bay National Park that included a memorial commemorating the 250th anniversary of the landing of James Cook in Australia, in April 1770. The plans were immediately met with backlash on social media and triggered a renewed call to rename, or 'change the date,' of Australia Day, which marks the establishment of the first European settlement in January 1778.

## Background

### *British Landing and Colonialism*

On April 29 1770, Lieutenant James Cook, on a scientific mission for the British Navy, anchored the *HMS Endeavour* in, what he would later name, Botany Bay. There he encountered members of an Aboriginal tribe known as the Gweagal.<sup>1</sup> Cook is credited as the first Englishman to explore the coast of eastern Australia; however, January 26<sup>th</sup> is celebrated as Australia Day, marking Captain Arthur Phillip's establishment of the first European settlement in Australia on 26 January 1778. After British colonisation, Indigenous Australians were decimated by diseases such as smallpox and influenza and were brutalised by violent conflict, massacres, and starvation. It is estimated that in some parts of the country, over 90% of Aboriginal people died as a result of colonisation.<sup>2</sup>

From the late 1800s, James Cook was increasingly mythologised as the founder of British Australia, as identified by Russel Ward in his pioneering text, 'The Australian Legend.'<sup>3</sup> Traditional re-enactments of James Cook landing at Botany Bay were mirrored by re-enactments of the arrival of Captain Phillip. These re-enactments necessitated Aboriginal participation, which was often coerced. The NAIDOC *Survival* brochure describes a 1938 re-enactment to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Captain Phillip's arrival with the First Fleet and the initial group of colonisers:

To make it look 'authentic,' they wanted Aboriginal people to participate in the role-play for the public ... Participation was not voluntary, with the Aboriginal men's rations being at risk of being cut should they refuse to participate. They were also imprisoned at Redfern Police Barracks before and after the re-enactment.<sup>4</sup>

Following a 1938 call by William Cooper, founder of the Australian Aborigines' League (AAL) in Melbourne, January 26 was re-identified by Aboriginal people as the "Day of Mourning". Nevertheless, re-enactments continued. In 1970, on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Captain Cook's landing, a re-enactment took place with Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, and Princess Anne in attendance.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the history of Captain James Cook, See: Maria Nugent., *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005); Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook was Here* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> Neville G. Butlin, *Our Original Aggression: Aboriginal Populations of Southeastern Australia 1788-1850*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958)

<sup>4</sup> NAIDOC, "Survival, Perth 2012," *NAIDOC Perth*, 2012.

Across the Bay, Aboriginal protestors threw wreaths into the water, hoping that they would drift into the royal party's view.<sup>5</sup>

*Survival*, a brochure issued by the National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) in 2012, documents the protests of Aboriginal people against the invasion by the British and the way the invasion has been commemorated on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January. This campaign to change the name of Australia Day has now gained international momentum. Amnesty International argues that:

Australia Day should be for all Australians. But for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 26 January is a painful day that marks the start of colonisation. Let's #ChangeTheDate so all Australians can celebrate together.<sup>6</sup>

## History of the Contestation

### *Announcement and Criticism of the 250th Anniversary Plans*

On Saturday, 28 April 2018, the Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, announced a plan to build a \$3 million commemorative memorial at the site of Captain Cook's arrival. This formed part of a \$50 million redevelopment of Kamay Botany Bay National Park<sup>7</sup>, intended to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European landfall in Australia. 'It was a momentous occasion in our history,' Turnbull said following a tour of the site.<sup>8</sup>

Consultation on the 'master plan' and 'management plan' was designed to occur simultaneously, from 28 April 2019 to 3 August 2019, to ensure the community could comment on both planning processes at the same time. The feedback was intended to be used to inform the final planning with an interpretive model that could celebrate the founding of modern-day Australia, whilst also commemorating and recognising the losses and injustices suffered by Indigenous Australians. However, the Turnbull announcement of a master plan for Botany Bay received a fierce and immediate response from news outlets, as well as on social media.<sup>9</sup>

On the same day as the master plan was unveiled, a social media campaign was launched on 'change.org,' protesting the building of yet another memorial to James Cook entitled: 'No New Captain Cook Memorial'.<sup>10</sup> By June 2020, over 105,000 people had signed the petition. Led by major national news outlets, the media release was widely interpreted in the media as an announcement of a new statue of Captain Cook, although this would later prove not to be the case. While the notion of the meeting of two cultures was included in the original press interview with reference to 'a

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Gapps, "Commemoration and contestation at Kurnell," *Australian National Maritime Museum*, May 11, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International, "Change the Date Australia Day: It's time to change the date," January 16, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> In 2000, the Botany Bay National Park was renamed the Kamay Botany Bay National Park, with Kamay (pronounced Gamay) being the word that Aboriginal people gave to James Cook when he asked the name of the place.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Sas, "Botany Bay site's \$50 million redevelopment, including James Cook statue, set to transform historic site," *ABC News*, 28 April 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Tracy Ireland, "How Captain Cook became a contested national symbol," *Conversation*, May 11, 2018; Tracy Ireland, *Cooking the Books: contested colonial commemorations in Australia* (International Public History, 2018)

<sup>10</sup> Graham Houghton, "No New Captain Cook Memorial." *change.org*, 2018.

strong Indigenous element',<sup>11</sup> this message was quickly subsumed by the more contentious idea of 'yet another memorial to Captain Cook.'<sup>12</sup>

### *The Australia Day Debate and the Selection of Monuments*

The major issue, however, related to national identity, and here the divisions were stark. In a sense, the contestation was predated in the national consciousness through vandalism of Captain Cook statues in Melbourne<sup>13</sup> and Sydney<sup>14</sup> earlier in 2018, as part of ongoing protests against designating the 26<sup>th</sup> of January as the date for Australia Day.<sup>15</sup> This contestation called for Australia Day to be renamed as 'Survival Day' or 'Invasion Day',<sup>16</sup> on top of ongoing campaigns to change the date of Australia Day from the 26<sup>th</sup> of January.<sup>17</sup> On 21 January 2019, the ruling Liberal Party made its position clear in a tweet stating: 'The Government is taking action to protect Australia Day from activists ... As Australians, we have much to celebrate.'<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 1:** "Canoes Sculpture" Image Courtesy of James Dugdale

The centrepiece of the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations was the \$50m master plan for Botany Bay,

<sup>11</sup> Nick Sas, "Botany Bay site's \$50 million redevelopment, including James Cook statue, set to transform historic site," *ABC News*, April 29, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tilly Graovac, "Protestors vandalise Captain Cook state ahead of Australia Day," *Nine News*, January 25, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Knaus, "No pride in genocide: vandals deface Captain Cook statue in Sydney's Hyde park," *Guardian*, August 26, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Knaus, "Captain Cook statue: Sydney refers 'discovery' claim to Indigenous board," *Guardian*, August 23, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Kate Darian-Smith, "Australia Day, Invasion Day, Survival Day: a long history of celebration and contestation," *Conversation*, January 26, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, "Change the Date Australia Day: It's time to change the date," January 16, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Darian-Smith, "Australia Day, Invasion Day, Survival Day: a long history of celebration and contestation," *Conversation*, January 26, 2017.

which was finalised in March 2019 following the public input campaign and targeted stakeholder engagement. The final plan provided for 'a new visitor building with space for a museum-grade exhibition area,' a 'revegetated bush landscape and new interpretation materials,' as well as 'precinct conservation and restoration works.'<sup>19</sup> The master plan also provided for the creation of a memorial for the Indigenous peoples.

Of the numerous designs submitted, two finalists were selected in March 2019. The memorial that was ultimately chosen was designed by Julie Squires and Gweagal artist Theresa Ardler of Think OTS.<sup>20</sup> It proposed four sculptural installations that are designed to represent both the views from the ship and from shore at the time of the first contact between British and Indigenous cultures. These proposed installations consisted of a hump-backed whale and baby (cover image), sculptures of a Gweagal family group, a stringybark canoe (Figure 1) and a traditional outdoor cultural learning place. The proposal outlined the rationale behind these monuments, stating:

Our installations aim to provide a legacy for future generations to reflect and hear the stories of this important place by providing a balance to the existing monuments. We do this by making visible the invisible' - the spirit and culture of the Gweagal People.<sup>21</sup>

This design, as well as the second finalist designs by Alison Page and Nik Lachaczak, did not include a statue of James Cook. It is not clear if this would always have been the case or if this was in response to the controversy. It could well be that both factors influenced decisions on the short-listed designs.



**Figure 2:** "Whale Bones Sculpture" Image Courtesy of James Dugdale

## Decision-Making Processes

### *Governing Bodies*

<sup>19</sup> Think OTS, "Kamay 2020 Project: Commemorative Installation presentation," *Department of Planning, Industry and Environment*, October 16, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

The decision to commission the installation was made jointly by the Australian Federal Government and the State Government of New South Wales and the allocation of responsibilities is outlined in the Project Agreement for the Kamay 250th Anniversary Project.<sup>22</sup> The key decision-makers were the members of the Kamay 2020 Project Board, which was convened by the Federal Minister for the Environment, Sussan Ley, and the State Minister for Energy and The Environment, Matt Kean. The Board is comprised of local, state, and federal government representatives, local business people, and members of the local Aboriginal community – most notably, Noelene Tembury, Chairperson of the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council.

Community and stakeholder engagement for the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemorations included commissioning Context Pty Ltd to work with the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW on the rollout of a targeted community and stakeholder engagement program and a Community Reference Panel. Feedback was solicited through a variety of engagement methods, including a public exhibition, culture days on Country for the local Aboriginal community, formal and informal interviews, and presentations to the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council.<sup>23</sup> Treasurer Scott Morrison stated in defence of the plan that:

This is about a meeting of two cultures, commemorating the incredible individual that was James Cook and at the same time ... commemorating the resilience of the Indigenous Australians, not just here but all around the country ... It will be an extraordinary landmark that people will come from far and wide to see.<sup>24</sup>

### *Public Criticism Subsides*

Public outrage subsided as it became clear that the local Aboriginal community supported the project.<sup>25</sup> This became evident in numerous interviews with Noelene Tembury.<sup>26</sup> As plans for the commemoration became clearer, the project was presented in terms of a meeting of two cultures rather than as a celebration of British colonialism. This was demonstrated through a joint media release on concept designs issued on October 11, 2019, by Sussan Ley and Matt Kean:

Local Aboriginal community leaders are playing a key role on the Kamay 2020 Project Board, chaired by Bruce Baird AM, which will oversee the restoration of a precinct steeped in Aboriginal story-telling and the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians since 1770.<sup>27</sup>

Bruce Howell, an Aboriginal man on the Sutherland Shire Council Aboriginal Advisory Committee with an interest in the history of James Cook, commented that as Botany Bay is a place of the meeting of two cultures 'both sides of the 1770 story' should 'be told... warts and all, and that it be

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<sup>22</sup> The Commonwealth of Australia and New South Wales, "Project Agreement for the Kamay 250th Anniversary Project," *Press Release*, May 24, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Neeson Murcutt Architects Pty Ltd, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Nick Sas, "Botany Bay site's \$50 million redevelopment, including James Cook statue, set to transform historic site," *ABC News*, April 29, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin T. Jones, "Rough seas ahead: why the government's James Cook infatuation may further divide the nation," *Conversation*, January 23, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Rachel Eddie, "Traditional Owners back \$50m redevelopment of Captain Cook landing site with Statue," *New Daily*, April 29, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> The Hon Sussan Ley MP and The Hon Matt Kean MP, "Joint Media Release: Concept designs mark meeting of two cultures," *Australian Government*, October 11, 2019.

placed in the proper context of the times.<sup>28</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

Cook's landing site at Kamay Botany Bay has been a focus of public debate, contestation, commemoration, celebration, and mourning since the 1860s. The recent controversies over the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cook's landing were entangled in related debates about Australia Day and longer-standing contestations around whether or not the history of Australia should be seen as settlement and colonisation or violent invasion and dispossession. The major lesson that ought to be learnt by decision-makers is that controversy can be anticipated through meaningful engagement with key stakeholders. Additionally, governing authorities should communicate their intentions with the potential for controversy in mind.

In this case, the project was protected from an onslaught of criticism through the endorsement of the La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council. This case study is an example of how a new, largely non-contested memorial can be created in relation to a contested national symbol.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, by choosing to commemorate both sides of the story of colonisation, it is likely to contribute to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Having been unveiled in April 2020, the site has been met with very little criticism.<sup>30</sup> This case also shows that counter monuments can be a viable alternative to relocation, removal, erasure, especially when responding to an iconic national hero, and in so doing, foster inclusivity.

## Research contributed by James Dugdale

Last updated July 2021

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Daley, "Flawless hero or bogey man? Captain Cook still divides along black and white lines," *Guardian*, December 15, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment. "Installation of sculptures." *NSW Government*, April 29 2020

<sup>30</sup> Murray Trembath, "Bronze sculptures quietly installed for 250th anniversary of Cook's landing and meeting with Aboriginal inhabitants," *Illawarra Mercury*, April 28 2020.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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Published by IHJR-EuroClio in February 2021  
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To cite this publication:  
The Contested Histories Initiative, "Captain Cook Landing Sculptures in Australia", *Contested Histories Case Study #9* (July 2021), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.