

## CAPTAIN COOK *was here*

Over eight days and eight nights in late April of 1770, Captain Cook and the men of the *Endeavour* made their first extended landfall on the east coast of New Holland. The ensuing events and interactions between the voyagers and the indigenous inhabitants were marked by drama and intrigue, courage and fear.

But the story does not end with the *Endeavour* sailing away. The original encounter on land between the British mariners and the first Australians has been one of Australia's founding legends. Bringing together first-hand historical accounts, oral narratives, surviving objects and artefacts plus much of the artwork produced during Cook's time on shore, Maria Nugent takes a challenging new look at the impact of Cook's arrival on the land and on its people.

*Captain Cook Was Here* reconnects with the stories that all Australians – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – have told through their art, history and folklore.

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Indigenous readers are respectfully advised that some people mentioned in writing or depicted in photographs in the following pages have passed away.

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## PROLOGUE

*C*aptain Cook was here. That's common knowledge among many, if not most, Australians. But what did he do while he was here? Charted and named the eastern coastline, certainly. Explored and described parts of the country, definitely. Got his ship stuck on the coral, famously. Claimed the entire east coast for his King in England, controversially. But is that all?

Much of this book is taken up with a detailed account of the days that Cook and company spent at and around the place he eventually called Botany Bay, which is situated a short distance south of the present-day metropolis of Sydney. This was the expedition's very first landfall on the east coast of the Australian continent. The men on the *Endeavour* came ashore at this place with expectations as yet untested by experience. Here they encountered up close for the first time the country and its people, both of which they had been observing at a distance across water for over a week as the *Endeavour* sailed northwards after falling in with the coastline at the place that Cook called Point Hicks.

Their stay at this bay lasted eight days and eight nights. It began early one Saturday morning in the last week of April 1770 and ended early on a Sunday morning at the start of May. One week and one day. It's time enough to get acquainted with a place and the people who live there.

Cook's acquaintance with the local people, his and his companions' interactions with them, and their various awkward attempts 'to form a connection with the natives' as Cook describes it in his journal, is the main thread in the eight-day story that I present in these pages. Interacting with and trying to interact with the local people in this place occupies a fair portion of the voyagers' written accounts, particularly those penned by Cook himself but also those by others who accompanied him, Joseph Banks included. The topic shares the pages of their journals with details about the changeability of the weather, the everyday employments of the crew, the varying size of the daily hauls of fish, and the singularities of the country.

Yet despite the voyagers' obvious interest in the locals and the effort they expended in seeking to meet with them, the theme has been largely downplayed in Australian histories of Captain Cook. Cook's interactions with the locals have been, by and large, of only passing or secondary interest. Australian historians and writers have generally preferred to concentrate on Cook's voyaging, or his map-making, or the imperial context within which he lived. Or they have focused instead on the botany that Joseph Banks collected during this landfall, turning his flower-hunting into the most important thing to have happened upon this shore. The voyagers' interactions and relations with the locals have often been little more than a footnote, mentioned but dismissed as unimportant or non-existent or, if examined at all, largely misconstrued.

This inattention is a peculiarly Australian phenomenon, not evident in the historical and other scholarship produced in other places that Cook visited on his voyages, such as New Zealand and Hawai'i. Some would argue that this is because the encounters on the Australian east coast were by comparison few and not as sustained or as close as they were in other parts of the Pacific, but that's really no reason to give them short shrift.

The one encounter that most people in Australia have at least an inkling about is the strained standoff on the beach at Botany Bay, when Cook and his men attempted to make their first landing and some local men came down to the shore to warn or ward them off. The story is often told, because for much of the twentieth century – and still in some quarters – it's considered one of the nation's foundational moments, but despite this, or because of it, the incident itself is little understood. Mythologising has obscured other interpretations of it, and blocked from view all the other interactions that took place over the days and nights that followed.

And so a common misconception about Cook's first stopover on the east coast is that there was no interaction with the locals, or at least none to really speak of. But this is not so. Cook's own words and those of his companions give the lie to that. The accounts that James Cook, Joseph Banks, Sydney Parkinson, Zachary Hicks and others on the *Endeavour* give in their journals about dealings with the local people are full of surprises. Their descriptions evoke the drama, fragility, humanity, intrigue and regret of the situation. Sometimes these chroniclers provide only a cryptic comment, so condensed that it takes effort and imagination to pick away at its possible meanings. On other occasions they are more expansive, giving one detail and then another and perhaps one more, so that something of the dynamism of the experienced or witnessed incident is conveyed. Whether brief or fulsome, they all point to the sustained presence of the local people while the voyagers were in their country, and their enduring efforts to deal with these strangers from the sea.

One way to try to make sense of what the local people were doing in response to the voyagers is to sequence their actions as they are described in the various voyage journals and logs. And so, in the pages that follow is a day-by-day, episode-by-episode account of those eight days and eight nights. By tracking their interactions sequentially, showing how one incident has the capacity to trigger another or to escalate a situation for better or worse, and by treating them as actual lived experiences involving individuals situated in a particular time and place, the story of Captain Cook in Australia comes into view in a new way. This approach draws attention to the local people's creative and conscious efforts to deal in tolerable ways with this strange situation – and it presents Captain Cook in new garb. He appears in this narrative not simply as the accomplished navigator, or the one-dimensional imperial hero, but also as possessing in embryonic form an ethnographer's bent.

The local people had little choice but to confront, and engage and tolerate as best they could, the presence over days and nights of this shipload of strange men in their country and in their midst. Captain Cook was here in *their* place, the place that they called home, or whatever comparable concept they had that might be glossed today as home. Captain Cook was here in *their* country, in *their* waters, in *their* domicile, in *their* midst, in *their* presence. The location of this history is theirs.

Yet the catchcry 'Captain Cook was here' has underwritten a very different history from this local indigenous one. It's a claim that has been chorused and celebrated by generations of Australians after British



colonisation in 1788. The fact that once upon a time Captain Cook was here was sometimes used in imaginative ways to tie this antipodean place to the imperial centre. *Captain Cook was here* became a shorthand way of saying that the territory belonged to the British. *Captain Cook was here* is an opening line in histories of the Australian nation.

And so the story about what Cook did when he was actually here cannot be easily disentangled or simply stand separate from the story about the ways in which his presence in this place, his days on these shores and his descriptions of what he saw have been interpreted by historians and other storytellers and incorporated into the histories that settler Australians have since told themselves about their place in this place. Through images, through performances, through texts and through symbols, a story about settler Australians making their own meaning from the material of Captain Cook's past actions can also be found in the pages that follow.

Likewise, the story about the ways in which settler Australians have made history from Captain Cook's activities on and along the east coast cannot be easily disentangled or simply stand separate from the story about the ways in which Aboriginal Australians have also spent two centuries or more making sense about what happened when Captain Cook was here, and unmaking (or unmasking) the stories that settler Australians have told about that time. Through their storytelling, in spoken word and visual image especially, Aboriginal people across the continent, in places where Cook went and in others where he did not go, offer their own original interpretations about the encounter between the local people and Captain Cook and his men. The fact that once upon a time Captain Cook was here is a means for talking about and explaining complex and fraught histories concerning relations between Aboriginal people and 'the white people'. In their reworkings of recognisable images of Captain Cook, Aboriginal people question the plot of Australian history that begins with him, and remind their audiences about their prior and continuing claims to and presence in this place.

When it comes to the matter of Captain Cook in Australia as well as in Australian history and imagination, one might say that it's a classic case of *always beginning, never ending*. This is a story still in the process of being told, a history that is constantly in the making. There is always something new, or more, to say. There is no last word, or at least none yet said. By plaiting a narrative about the interactions between the local people and the *Endeavour's* men that took place over a week and one day in 1770 with stories about Captain Cook told by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians over two

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## PROLOGUE

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centuries or more, my intention is to show something of that open-ended quality, to reflect upon the lively and constant interplay between past and present, and to propose yet more possibilities for interpreting this particular past and its many and changing meanings.

*Captain Cook was here.*  
*Always beginning.*  
*Never ending.*