

Preface

Ben Silverstein and Crystal McKinnon

They saw smoke, they saw fires on the mainland. We were here. We've always been here.

— Norelle Watson, Gooreng Gooreng¹

Before we knew how COVID-19 would transform the ways we live and relate to one another or how people around the world would rise together in outrage over police brutality, violence and racism under the Black Lives Matter movement, it seemed that 2020 would be marked by commemoration of the 250th anniversary of James Cook's arrival in Australia. It would be a year of ceremonies and festivals, new statues and new books, of public history in multiple guises. We were even promised a 're-enactment' of the *Endeavour's* circumnavigation of Australia, pushing this history further and further into the mythic realm.

What remained, once our lives were confined by the pandemic, were a series of exhibitions moved online but also still staged in public institutions. These re-narrate what has been described as 'one of the nation's origin stories' by embracing, rather than seeking to resolve, the contestation that attends memories and histories of 1770.² In *Endeavour Voyage: The Untold Stories of Cook and the First Australians*, for instance, the National Museum of Australia (NMA) offered us a view from the shore, representing seven locations along the east coast to try to tell more fully a national story of what happened in 1770. The State Library of New South Wales exhibition *Eight Days in Kamay*, by contrast, was more locally focused, taking us into the eight days the crew of the *Endeavour* spent in what is now Sydney.

Perhaps it was the circumstance of 2020, and the memory of the catastrophic bushfires of the previous summer, but I (Ben) was drawn to the part of the *Eight Days in Kamay* exhibition that emphasised sailors' visions of smoke. Smoke was

¹ Quoted in Coates, 'Below Deck', 13.

² Coates, 'Below Deck', 10; Coyne, 'Unfinished Business', 180.

a frequent referent, a preoccupation of those on board the *Endeavour* not least as they observed the shore at or near Kamay. On 21 April 1770, Cook wrote in his journal that: 'In the PM we saw the smook of fire in several places a certain sign that the Country is inhabited'. Joseph Banks commented on fire and smoke most days as they travelled along the coast, and on 28 April described a 'small smoak arising from a very barren place directed our glasses that way and we soon saw about 10 people, who on our approach left the fire and retired to a little eminence where they could conveniently see the ship'.³ For both these observers, fire was associated with people.

But Monero/Yuin Elder Aileen Blackburn reminds us that:

Smoke was more than proof that the land was inhabited. We used dularn [fire] and doombook [smoke] to warn of a bad omen that was repeated from point to point along the coast. It was our responsibility to send the message on, light the fires, and make sure everyone was well-informed.⁴

The smoke was communication, as those on the shore observed the ship on the sea and shared knowledge with their neighbours. As the *Endeavour* travelled north along the east coast of Australia, Gweagal knowledge holder Shayne Williams tells us, Cook:

noticed that there was columns of smoke all the way along the coastline. We call them [bundameri], smoke. And even Banks, who I think wrote in his own journal that it seems they were being tracked or followed and, in fact, that's what we was doing, we was actually tracking them all the way along the coastline ...

People from the south would bring in these message sticks as well. As well as smoke signals there was message sticks being brought all along the coast as well. Or letter sticks, as my great uncle says, describes it, and to warn people that they was on their way.⁵

We see this too in Alison Page's beautifully evocative film *The Message*, a collaborative production that screened as part of the NMA exhibition.⁶ These representations position that fire as evidence of connection and communication, but also of discovery: Aboriginal people saw Cook before he saw them. Claims to priority are contested.

3 'We Saw Them Coming', Eight Days in Kamay exhibition, State Library of NSW, 2020, accessed 18 January 2021, www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/eight-days-in-kamay/chapter-1-we-saw-them-coming/3.

4 Quoted in 'Ship and Shore: Navigating the Exhibition', 63.

5 Shayne Williams, 'We Saw Them Coming', Eight Days in Kamay exhibition, State Library of NSW, 2020, accessed 18 January 2021, www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/eight-days-in-kamay/chapter-1-we-saw-them-coming/2.

6 Page and Lachajczak, 'The Message'.

We want to dwell briefly on the meaning of fire and smoke and the different senses in which that smoke was understood. The men of the *Endeavour* observed fire from the shores too; on his third day at Kamay, Banks noted that just after sunrise some Aboriginal people lit fires in the woods, describing with some uncertainty what may have been an attempt to ‘harass the strangers into leaving’.⁷ But, for Banks, the nature of the fires he saw usually spoke to the nature of the people who produced them. On 22 April 1770, he had written that he had not observed ‘those large fires’ made ‘in order to clear the ground for cultivation; we thence concluded not much in favour of our future friends’.⁸ The apparent absence of those fires connoted, to Banks, the absence of land management, the lack of agriculture and a marker of primitivity.

But these observations speak more to Banks’s failure or incapacity to communicate and elicit knowledge than they reveal the nature of Aboriginal uses of fire. For we know that Aboriginal people used and, in many cases, continue to use fire deliberately across Country. Some of this was fire as communication, as those on board the *Endeavour* witnessed in 1770. But other fires would presumably have been instances of what is now often described as ‘cultural burning’: a tool of a broader land management practice.⁹ In this sense, as Victor Steffenson tells us, burning involves practising Indigenous knowledge systems. Lighting fires requires knowing how to read the Country, identifying what needs to burn and how. And that burning, then, is the application of Aboriginal fire knowledge to the landscape to ‘maintain the health of animals and plants’. Fire keeps Country healthy.¹⁰

Those on board the *Endeavour* were unable or unwilling to see the fires they observed as evidence of that land management, keeping Country healthy and ensuring a nurturing, rather than hostile, landscape. This is an ideological correlate of the presumption of terra nullius, believing in an unmanaged as well as an unowned or non-sovereign country. For this reason, among many others, perhaps it is time to move on from Cook, to find new stories. Starting with the *Endeavour* can lead us to historical questions like that implicit in Banks’s judgement: do Aboriginal people practise agriculture? We might rather ask how Indigenous knowledges and sovereignties may contribute to the health of Country and people, how they might lick at the edges of colonising thinking and, perhaps, drive it out.

Elsewhere, the history of Cook’s arrival might be a spur for new ways of remembering and relating to one another. Charlotte Ward’s article in this volume addresses this problem. In examining re-enactments of Cook’s landing in Cooktown, this article

7 Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here*, 62, 65.

8 Joseph Banks, *Endeavour Journal*, Vol. 2, SAFE/Banks Papers/Series 03.02, 371, Mitchell Library.

9 Bhiemie Williamson in Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, *Transcript of Proceedings*, Day 9 Transcript, 18 June 2020, 797.

10 Steffensen, *Fire Country*, 20, 92, 97.

traces the way local processes of engaging with history have produced a kind of truth-telling that narrates both the episodes that followed Cook's landing in 1770 and the much longer history of Guugu Yimithirr sovereignty. Through long and difficult practices of engagement, Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of Cooktown have produced something of a shared history of Cook(town), a very local instance of reconciliation that speaks in fraught ways to the national stage. The next article remains in Queensland, examining fear on the frontier through a study of homes and huts and their fortification. Deploying a multidisciplinary methodology, Heather Burke, Ray Kerkhove, Lynley A. Wallis, Cathy Keys and Bryce Barker assess the extent to which domestic architecture of the frontier included fortified features, manifesting high levels of settler anxiety. They historicise representations of these fortifications, tying these to changing national historical sensibilities and thus mapping a dialogic frontier historicity that can be read through multiple sources.

The volume then includes three fascinating articles exploring intersections between history-making, cultural production, and Aboriginal agency. In a collaborative article, Myfany Turpin, Felicity Meakins, Marie Mudgebell, Angie Tchooga and Calista Yeoh consider three performances of 'Puranguwana', a 'classical' Western Desert song that emerges from the death of Yawalyurru, a Pintupi man. Through renditions of the song, contemporary singers experience once more the tragedy of his death, performing a historicity in which remembrance and experience are intertwined. Paige Gleeson provides a biography of an image, that of Warlpiri-Anmatyerr man Gwoja Tjungurrayi, known since the 1950s as 'One Pound Jimmy'. This image, used on a postage stamp and on the two dollar coin, has been widely diffused, encapsulating his likeness within Aboriginalia. But his life, which Gleeson evokes in its rich complexity, far exceeded this representation. Gretchen Stolte's article works at similar intersections of culture and kitsch, re-framing the history of Queensland Aboriginal Creations – a body launched in 1959 by the Queensland Department of Native Affairs in order to facilitate the mass production of artefacts for tourist consumption – through the prism of agency and legacy. In so doing, she emphasises these boomerangs as works of cultural importance, dispelling presumptions of the 'taint of tourism' to blur concepts of authenticity, the market, commodity production and agency in ways that enrich our understanding of Aboriginal artwork and its production.

We end this preface with a few words about Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter is not just a moment in 2020, it is a movement. Here in Australia, this movement is best understood as a part of a long history of Aboriginal resistance to police brutality and white supremacy. Though Aboriginal people and communities have long fought for justice for deaths in custody and freedom from systemic violence, little has changed. The year 2021 marks 30 years since the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report was delivered, and the majority of its

recommendations are still yet to be implemented.¹¹ There have been more than 441 Aboriginal deaths since this royal commission, and no police officer or authority has yet been convicted for any of these Black Deaths in Custody.

The Black Lives Matter movement has brought people together in the fight for justice and to end police brutality. This movement has changed the way that we talk about policing and prisons in Australia and around the world. Now we need to turn that talk into action.

As academics, as historians, who write and research about Aboriginal history, we have a responsibility to take action to support the fights for justice for Aboriginal people and communities. This is a commitment that we have made and want to reiterate to readers as the editors of *Aboriginal History*. We stand with the families of those who have died in custody and commit ourselves to fighting with them for justice. The families of the following people are working with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service in a campaign for them all to meet with the Prime Minister this year to talk about justice: Ms Dhu, Aunty Tanya Day, Wayne Morrison, Tane Chatfield, Stanley Inman, Raymond Noel Thomas, Aunty Sherry Fisher-Tilberoo, Nathan Reynolds, Cherdeena Wynne, Warren John Cooper, David Dungay Jnr, Gareth Jackson Roe, Joyce Clarke, Christopher Drage and Trisjack Simpson. We urge readers of *Aboriginal History* to take action and support them.¹²

This is our first volume as editors of *Aboriginal History*. Though it is published in 2021, it was prepared in 2020, a year of disrupted circumstances as we worked through lockdowns, travel bans and institutional restructuring. This volume is produced thanks to the tireless work of the *Aboriginal History* board, especially including Maria Nugent and the outgoing editor Ingereth Macfarlane, as well as copyeditor Geoff Hunt, and Emily Tinker at ANU Press. We hope it continues a long tradition of interdisciplinary historically minded scholarship, valuing and foregrounding Indigenous knowledge, voices and experiences.

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