

East Coast Encounter

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There is a gulf between the ship and the shore, myths and misunderstandings strewn on the wind, so many opportunities and so much humanity lost in translation. The contrast in perceptions of Lt. James Cook's 1770 voyage in the *Endeavour* along the eastern coastline remains as strong as ever after almost two and a half centuries: hero or villain, discoverer of the Great South Land or dispossessor of the oldest continuous human society?

In 2010 a group of artists, songwriters, historians and film-makers began the *East Coast Encounter* project to explore Cook's voyage through Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. Sitting around a campfire at Kalkarindji in the Northern Territory where the Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari had led the struggle in the sixties to regain control of the land claimed by Cook in 1770, some of us traded stories about just how far the exploits of this lowly born English sea captain had travelled. From Yuin country on the south coast of New South Wales, around Cape York and across northern Australia, the man and the myth have fused into a powerful legend, full of meaning still for Aboriginal people. Queensland artist, Peter Hudson, believed that with open hearts our merry little band could paint some different pictures through encounters of our own.

Over a period of four years, the *East Coast Encounter* group journeyed far and listened to many Aboriginal stories that cast Cook's four months and four landings in Australia in a different light. These stories will be presented in a multi media art exhibition opening in May at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney. An *East Coast Encounter* booklet and a DVD will be a valuable education resource combining the talents of some of Australia's finest artists, brought together by curator, John Waldron and Professor Lisa Chandler of the University of the Sunshine Coast.

In the *East Coast Encounter* book, historian John Maynard, grandson of the freedom fighter Fred Maynard, illuminates how in the eyes of many Aboriginal people Cook is not the heroic 'discoverer' but 'represents white Australia in all of its guises including invasion, occupation, dispossession and the conductor of a symphony of violence.

Sharing this view, the oldest Aboriginal artist in our group, Gordon Syron, is without doubt among the fiercest painters of the pattern of confusion, cruelty and pain symbolised by Cook's first landing at Botany Bay. Syron reminds us that Cook and his men fired their muskets and wounded two of the first Aboriginal men they encountered close up. The Englishmen stole valuable fishing and hunting spears vital to the Gweagal clan's survival and then in their patronising way, left beads with the children staring at them from the humpies.

Wandering the sandy shore where Cook and his men spent their first eight days on Aboriginal land, all of the artists seemed to share Gordon Syron's melancholy. Despite the extraordinary beauty of its waters, Sydney is strangely haunted by the past, the obliteration of so much Aboriginal life barely acknowledged. Where is the great institution of Aboriginal Art and Culture in this gateway city?

As the jumbo jets lumbered in over our heads, Reg Mombassa worked with charcoal sketching the industrial structures on the docks that loom like aliens over Kamay as it is still known to the First People. *Close Encounters of the First Kind*, one of the Reg Mombassa paintings in the exhibition, depicts an alien invasion and *Jim Cook Mugshot* describes Cook as a criminal, "executed for armed robbery by the people of the South Pacific – Feb 14th 1779". Botany Bay stirs up many strong feelings. The New Zealand born Archibald Prize winner Euan Macleod painted the movement of ghostly figures across this scene of first encounters. Where Cook had observed stingrays, we watched women in flowing burquas and Muslim men fishing on the rocks. Adam Hill composed digital images, warping time and capturing the disconnection of our diverse, contemporary society from an ancient truth.

Here in Australia is the world's longest surviving unbroken story of human knowledge. The world's oldest multi-lingual, multi-cultural society offers us a genuine foundation. *Solid Rock*, the songman Shane Howard would sing, as we travelled on together, a sense of place built on an Indigenous concept, a Custodianship of the land and all of its creatures, a shared responsibility that defines what it is to be *here* and what unites us, no matter which boat we arrived on. This is the truth our artists are seeking to express, the wonder of the land and all of its people.

As Wiradjuri writer Anita Heiss once asked through her fictional character Mary, in a question to a teacher, ‘How can Captain Cook have discovered Australia when my people were already here?’¹ James Cook, we should all agree, did not ‘discover’ Australia. The first Australians had been living here for 60,000 years or more, longer than anyone really knows. Aboriginal people have oral history, art and archaeological evidence to establish conclusively that they had made contact with Macassans, had at least sighted the Dutch and possibly others who in the 15th and 16th centuries mapped the northern, western and part of the southern Australian coastlines. Cook’s unquestionable contribution to Australian history, after observing the Transit of Venus in Tahiti and spending over six months sailing around New Zealand, was to map the remaining eastern coastline of ‘New Holland’, and then, in a stunning act of dispossession, lay claim to half of the continent for England’s King George III.

Aboriginal people had no way of knowing that after defeat in the American Revolution (1775-1783) England would need new lands and a new penal colony. Cook’s secret orders in 1770: ‘with the consent of the natives to take possession of convenient situations in the country’ were more or less ignored because throughout this voyage the English crew managed only the most limited exchanges with the few Aboriginal people they directly engaged with and they certainly did not negotiate, let alone sign treaties with those they described as ‘Indians’.

At Indian Head, as Cook named the looming headland on K’gari (Fraser Island), Aboriginal people had been following his ship for a long time. From that distant encounter comes one of the great treasures of this period of Australian history presented in the *East Coast Encounter* exhibition. A Butchulla descendant, Gemma Cronin, on behalf of her people, has shared with us a poetic translation of a surviving song beautifully describing the *Endeavour* tacking like a sand crab – strangers ‘travelling with a cloud’. The song concludes: ‘Tin’gera dan’da gung’mungalum minya? The sea carries this ship here, why?’

Songwriter, Neil Murray, also turned to poetry to express the encounter between two worldviews – strikingly different ways of seeing and being. Murray and Shane Howard have written songs and music that can travel with the art exhibition as it tours many places along the east coast in the years ahead.

All of the artists tried to re-imagine the view from the ship and from the shore. Cook could recognise the majesty of the Great Barrier Reef, writing in his journal ‘a reef such as one speaks of here is Scarcely known in Europe. It is a Wall of Coral Rock rising almost perpendicular out of the infathomable ocean’.ⁱⁱ Yet the great navigator had only a superficial grasp of the Aboriginal mastery of their environment and gave himself little chance of enlightenment because his usual method of diplomacy was to reach for the musket. Cook did not understand traditional law, how the land held the people and social customs regulated the harvesting of food and game.

The profound misunderstanding at Endeavour River could have ended in tragedy after Cook again opened fire on Aboriginal people who were angry at the crew for not sharing some of the many turtles they had taken aboard. It was the skilful diplomacy of the Guugu Yimithirr in laying down their spears that produced the only temporary reconciliation on the east coast voyage. The local people feel rightful pride that they had demonstrated an ability to settle a dangerous confrontation. Cook sailed away but others soon would follow. The contest for land and Aboriginal survival soon would begin in earnest.

At Possession Island, off the northernmost tip of Cape York, a group of us clambered ashore from our small boat. Kuku Midigi artist Arone Meeks immediately filled his canvas with an effusion of nature’s richness, blue coral sea, white sandy beach and the gleam of wetlands. Peter Hudson and Euan Macleod crouched in the shade painting the feelings evoked here as much as the landscape. It was here, marked only by a small concrete monument, that James Cook planted the British Flag and changed everything. All you hear now is the cry of the birds. Aboriginal people were cleared off this island many decades ago. It could have been called Dispossession Island.

As James Cook sailed off home through the Torres Strait Islands he wrote perhaps the most telling words in his journal, *“from what I have seen of the natives of New Holland they may appear to be the most wretched people on earth but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans...They live in a tranquillity which is not disturbed by the inequality of condition . The earth and the sea furnishes them with all things necessary for life.”*

