

Maria Neale

Strangers on the Shore

Early coastal contacts in Australia

Edited by Peter Veth, Peter Sutton and Margo Neale

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

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13. The encounter between Captain Cook and Indigenous people at Botany Bay in 1770 reconsidered

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Captain Cook's arrival at Botany Bay in 1770 is an iconic episode in the story of Australia (Carter 1987:1–2; Healy 1997:19–30; Nugent 2005:7–9). Botany Bay (so-named by Cook) was the voyagers' first landfall on the east coast of New Holland. As the *first* landfall of the maritime expedition credited by the new arrivals with 'discovering' the continent's east coast, the event of Captain Cook making his first landing at Botany Bay was subsequently ascribed the status of a foundational moment in Australia's history. As historian Graeme Davison (2000:57) reminds us, settler societies such as America, Australia and New Zealand 'acquired historical significance, firstly, as the destination of the voyagers who founded them'. While Cook was himself no founder of colonies, in the story of Australia the esteemed British navigator has nonetheless been considered a founding forefather by virtue of first discovering and taking possession of territory that was afterwards occupied by the British when a penal settlement was established at Sydney Cove in 1788.

The manner in which Cook first stepped ashore at the place he later named Botany Bay had some elements to it that could be easily massaged into a story about British beginnings in the continent. As Captain Cook approached the shore in company with 30 or 40 of his men in two longboats, two local Indigenous men came onto the beach and, according to Cook, 'seemed resolved to oppose our landing' (Cook 1955:305). When attempts to speak with them and to appease them with gifts failed, and when the two local men's resolve did not dissipate at all, Cook took recourse to his gun. He writes (1955:305):

I fired a musket between the two which had no other effect than to make them retire back where bundles of thier darts lay, and one of them took up

a stone and threw it at us which caused my firing a second Musquet load with small shott, and altho some of the shott struck the man yet it had no other effect than to make him lay hold of a Shield or target to defend himself. Emmidiatly after this we landed which we had no sooner done than they throw'd two darts at us, this obliged me to fire a third shott soon after which they both made off.

The first landing involved what appears to have been a contest between two opposing sides. It included what Cook describes as 'opposition' from locals to his landing. He responds with a show of his own force. This force is much stronger than the locals have at their disposal, and thus the way becomes clear for Cook and company to step ashore, without any injury to themselves or escalation of violence.

This opening episode in Cook's encounter with the local Indigenous people at Botany Bay, which ended with Cook and his men occupying the beach and the two local men eventually retreating from the scene, was transformed, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, into a symbolic story about British presence and Aboriginal absence in the 'imagined community' of the nation. The subsequent symbolic weight given to the act of Cook's first landing in its popular representation in the Australian imagination has served to mask much about what happened at Botany Bay over the course of the eight days the *Endeavour* was actually anchored there. The use of this particular past as a founding myth has reduced to caricatures not only Captain Cook, but also the local Indigenous people who were on the shore. On the one hand, Cook is typically represented as a visionary — a man with future colonies at the forefront of his mind, who deals decisively and heroically with the local people he comes into contact with. On the other hand, the two Indigenous 'warriors' on the beach have been depicted either as brave men — who heroically resisted the incursion of the sailors but ultimately failed because of the primitiveness of their weaponry which was no match for the superior force of firearms — or as cowardly men, because, despite demonstrating some initial resistance to the approach of the sailors to shore, they eventually retreated from the scene when the strangers had disembarked from their boats. Their retreat has been commonly interpreted as defeat or surrender, which in past popular depictions served to underscore a story about the 'rightfulness' of British possession of the territory.

In more recent times, this interpretation of the landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay in 1770 has been undergoing revision. In the last few years, there is evidence that the encounter between the locals and the strangers is being recast more as a 'meeting' and less as a clash or contest between two cultures. This is most evident at the very place where the first landing occurred, which is now a part of Botany Bay National Park. The area is in the process of being renovated in ways that are aimed at updating and recasting the story that has long been told there about Cook's landing and the British birth of the nation. Most noteworthy in this regard

is the recent informal adoption of the name 'Meeting Place Precinct' by the site's managers to replace 'Captain Cook's Landing Place Reserve', which is what it has been known as officially for over a century and unofficially for much longer. The re-inscription of the site as a 'meeting place', as opposed to a 'landing place', is suggestive of the reinterpretation of this famous historical event in a more even-handed way. No longer told exclusively from the point of view of those making the landing, the concept of 'meeting' aims to even out the ways in which the two groups present at this historical moment are represented. The recasting of the arrival of Captain Cook at Botany Bay in 1770 as an original cross-cultural meeting from which the nation sprang is suggestive of a new foundational myth, woven from the same event but better suited to current times. As Davison (2000:57) observes: 'National commemorations use the events of history but the stories they tell are determined more by the politics of the present than the ideals of the past'. But is it accurate to say that a 'meeting' took place at Botany Bay in 1770? Soon after sailing from Botany Bay, Cook (1955:312) recorded in his journal his regret that 'we could know but very little of their customs as we were never able to form any connections with them'.

In this essay, I return to the encounter between Cook's expedition and local Indigenous people at Botany Bay in 1770 to re-examine the first landing (the most well-known episode in the entire encounter) as well as what happened in the days that followed it. The eight-day encounter intrigues me precisely because its popular representations as either a contest on the one hand, or as a meeting on the other, are both wide of the mark. I am interested in stripping away these popular interpretations of this iconic historical event in order to consider more fully what transpired between local and stranger on these shores during a week and one day in late April, early May 1770. What is revealed, not surprisingly, is an encounter that is far more equivocal than one might expect it to be, given its famous opening scene, and its foundational mythology.

A failure?

The anthropologist Nicholas Thomas has recently drawn attention to the failure at the heart of Cook's encounter at Botany Bay. Discussing Cook's decision to call the place Botany Bay in recognition of the large collection of plants that the naturalists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander had acquired there, Thomas (2003:114) writes: 'It is not surprising that the science [the place-name] commemorated dealt with plants rather than people. What name could better have expressed the failure of communication that took place here?'. Unlike many of Cook's other encounters in the Pacific, including those that had occurred earlier on his first voyage, and even those which were as or more violent, the one at Botany Bay did not lead to an exchange of things, or of words. Only a handful of images of the locals were produced as the result of this encounter, and the art historian Bernard Smith blames this anomaly on the

absence of close interaction: 'The main reason for this paucity of visual material is that Cook and his company had difficulty in making contact of a kind stable and amicable enough to permit detailed drawings to be produced' (Smith 1985:21). Portraits require posers.

The failure of communication between voyagers and locals at Botany Bay in 1770 has commonly been explained by reference to the predisposition of the locals rather than to the imperatives or shortcomings of Cook and his men. The locals have been characterised as possessing a natural propensity to keep their distance from strangers, or as always and automatically opposed to strangers who stepped on their shores. There is something of this at play, but it is not the whole story. In this chapter, I seek to contribute to an understanding of why Cook was unable to form any connection with the local Indigenous people at Botany Bay by considering how his own actions and those of his men influenced this state of affairs. I look to his and Banks' records of the eight days in Botany Bay for clues. In addition, I reconsider what those records tell us about the local people's actions and reactions, filtering my interpretation through later ethnographic literature about Indigenous protocols for meetings between strangers (cf. Hallam 1983; Mulvaney 1989:1-7; Sutton, this volume). This approach serves to challenge and refine longstanding and popular representations of the locals' actions as either straightforward but ultimately ineffectual resistance, or as a stubborn and static refusal to countenance strangers in their country. It also challenges the popular perception that Cook was completely confident while at Botany Bay, and that his encounter was wholly successful. The distance between local and stranger that was never bridged was for Cook a source of disappointment and regret. But at least some of the burden of responsibility for it lies in his own decisions and actions, including the way that he *chose* to make his first approach. His initial 'success' in dealing with the locals in that opening scene at Botany Bay contributed something to his ultimate 'failure' in forming a connection with them.

Meetings between strangers

As archaeologists Sylvia Hallam and John Mulvaney both observe, throughout Indigenous Australia meetings between strangers were governed by protocol. Mulvaney (1989:2, 3) explains that in such encounters 'rituals of diplomacy governed different situations, but speed was never a priority' and 'it all required much time and debate'. On the basis of her analysis of descriptions of meetings between Indigenous people and strangers on the west coast of the continent, ones that occurred before 1770 and ones that came afterwards, Hallam (1983:134) states that 'meetings between different Australian communities were, before the coming of Europeans (and remain for Aboriginal Australians), highly structured affairs, with elements of ceremonial preparedness for conflict, formal peacemaking, reciprocal exchange of gifts, and sometimes actual conflict and resolution of conflict'. Using as an archetype a meeting between two Aboriginal groups recorded by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in 1901 at Alice Springs,

Hallam (1983:136) notes that 'a meeting is an event, a stage event' and 'the entire proceedings are formalized, ritualized, ceremonious — a staged drama'.

But not all meetings could be as expertly planned, staged and dramatised as the one Spencer and Gillen witnessed, and all the more so when they involved participants who did not share knowledge of protocols. 'The European intruders must have caused bewilderment and consternation', writes Hallam (1983:134), 'by totally inappropriate actions and sequences of actions'. Their method of initial approach was often awry, insufficiently nonchalant and unassuming. They did not wait patiently at a distance until invited in, but often approached boldly with a lack of 'restraint in movement and speech the Aboriginal code required' (Hallam 1983:142). But while non-Indigenous outsiders blundered in, the local people they encountered typically continued to behave in ways that conformed to the 'proper rules regulating meetings between groups' (Hallam 1983:142). In her examination of more fragmentary accounts of early chance and unprecedented encounters with maritime explorers, Hallam shows local people following the sequence of behaviours they would have used in the presence of any group of uninvited and unauthorised Indigenous intruders. This included variously 'avoiding, ignoring and repulsing', which Hallam (1983:150) explains are 'the Aboriginal reactions which form a repeating pattern, and sometimes a sequence, in these encounters. The final movement is retreat'. Avoidance, nonchalance, repulsion, retreat. All were to be found, as will be illustrated below, repeated and sequenced, in the encounter between Cook's expedition and the local Indigenous people at Botany Bay in 1770.

The first landing

There was something performative about the manner in which the two local men, who came onto the beach as Captain Cook and his men approached the shore in two longboats, addressed the advancing strangers. That it was two men, one young and one old, who came forward as the strangers approached suggests that protocols were being followed. That they shouted at the strangers, and displayed their weapons by shaking them above their heads but did not initially use them, is in keeping with what is known about meetings of this kind at other places at other times. Cook no doubt suspected that what he was witnessing as he approached the shore was stylised opposition, but he was taking no risks. The memory of the shockingly violent incident during his first landfall in New Zealand seven months earlier remained fresh in his mind.¹ On this, his first voyage to the Pacific, Cook had already begun to learn the lesson that there was always 'a fine line between dramatised and actual threat' (Thomas 2005:1).

If the behaviour of the two men on the beach as the first landing was made is interpreted as part of the locals' protocol for dealing with the arrival of strangers in their territory, and as such constitutes an invitation of sorts to the strangers to enter into a 'staged event' that will help to facilitate right relations being established, then the onus for the failure of communication that ensued over the course of the encounter shifts to Cook. By deciding to make his way

onto the beach by firing some shots, had the possibility for forming a connection become radically reduced, if not made completely impossible, for Cook? Was the opening scene of this encounter the only chance for the 'staged event' to be performed which would help to bring the strangers into local people's territory on local people's terms? Was it at the moment when shots were fired that the possibility for 'meeting', or 'connection', foreclosed? The historian Greg Denning (1980:21) has an apposite line in his book *Islands and Beaches* where, in relation to Captain Cook's encounters in the Marquesas during his second voyage, he notes that Cook 'foreshortened the cultural lesson with a musket-ball'. Had the same happened here? Did this drastic first meeting cancel out future meetings? If this were the case, then given that he had sailed with instructions to form a connection with the natives he encountered, Cook must have retrospectively rued his decision to make a hasty landing using his gun as a calling card. But the situation was not so clear-cut.

Approach followed by retreat

Within the voyagers' logs and published journal accounts there is ample evidence that for the first few days of the Botany Bay encounter the locals continued to address the strangers in ways consistent with what had happened during the initial landing. For instance, in the two days immediately after the landing, the locals boldly approached the strangers, stood their ground and retreated on at least a further two occasions. On one occasion, a group of between 15 and 18 local men came up to some of the voyagers in the late afternoon at the place the voyagers referred to as the watering place on the southern shore. The local men were described as coming up boldly to within about a hundred yards of the strangers, and making a stand (Banks 1962:56). Two out of the group came forward and, in response, Lieutenant Hicks and one other went to meet them. Hicks tried to entice them but, according to Banks' account, they 'did not wait for a meeting but gently retired' (Banks 1962:56). Note again the advance of two men followed by retreat. A similar incident occurred on day three. In the morning, a group of Cook's men cutting grass were approached by a group of local men. Seeing what was happening, the sailors' overseer called out to them and at his command they quickly gathered and rushed to join their companions near the watering place. In his journal, Banks (1962:56) notes that:

the haycutters coming to the main body appeared like a flight so the Indians pursued them, however but a very short way, for they never came nearer than just to shout to each other, maybe a furlong [c. 200 m].

After a short time, the local men retreated, as was their practice. All of these actions could have been attempts by the locals to expel summarily the strangers from their shore, and thus should rightly be interpreted as resistance, opposition and a form of attack. This is presumably Nicholas Thomas's view (2003:113) when he writes: 'It is clear what the Aboriginal attitude was:

they wanted absolutely nothing to do with these intruders'. Alternatively, these approaches by the locals towards the strangers could be interpreted as efforts to 'stage an event' that would ultimately serve to establish acceptable relations (temporarily) between the two groups; quell the potential for violence between them; and importantly assert the local people's existing rights to territory and resources. Had such an 'event' ensued, however bastardised in form, it might have been given that the strangers did not know what moves to make, then perhaps the failure of communication that took place here would not have been quite so great.

A turning point?

On day four, the locals continued to behave in ways that had now become predictable, but some of the strangers it would appear overstepped whatever fragile mark existed between the two groups. This was to have palpable and irredeemable effects on whatever hope Cook held for forming a connection with the locals.

As Lieutenant John Gore walked across country after a boating expedition towards the 'watering place' on the southern shore, he was 'overtaken by 22 Indians who followed him often within 20 yards, parleying but never daring to attack him tho they were all armed with lances' (Banks 1962:57-8). Cook (1955:308) tells us that 'whenever Mr Gore made a stand and faced them they stood also and notwithstanding they were all armed they never offered to attack him'. The pattern is the same: an approach, parleying or shouting supposedly to entice them to leave, but no direct attack.

Gore and his man made it back to the watering place without incident, but their prudence in dealing with the locals was not matched by the expedition's surgeon, Dr Monkhouse, and his companions. What happened next is, in my view, a critical incident in the entire encounter in terms of influencing the contours of relations between the two groups. It is as important as the first landing, when Cook fired some shots at the local men, in shaping how things would develop. In drawing this comparison between these two episodes, it is worth noting that the Monkhouse incident is the only other occasion during the encounter when the locals threw their spears in direct response to the provocation of the strangers.

This is what happened, according to Cook and Banks. Soon after Gore and his man arrived back at the watering place, Monkhouse, along with one or two others, decided to approach the group of local men, 'who', Banks (1962:58) tells us, 'remained about half a mile from our watering place'. But rather than simply approach the men, Monkhouse and his friends mocked them. According to Banks (1962:58), 'when they came pretty near them they pretended to be afraid and ran from them'. In his journal, Cook (1955:308) describes Monkhouse and the others as 'making a sham retreat'. How much were they hamming up their fear? This provocation immediately caused four of the locals to throw their 'lances', but they went beyond the men.² Monkhouse and his men stopped, and slowly collected the thrown spears, 'after which', says Banks (1962:58), '[the locals] began to retire'. The events of day four ended here.

Dr Monkhouse and his unnamed companions are responsible for one of those actions that change in noticeable and perhaps irredeemable ways the cadence of a contact experience. The encounter at Botany Bay up to this point was certainly not making great progress towards a connection being established. It seems certain that locals would have preferred the strangers to have never entered their territory, and wanted them above all to be gone. But up until this point in the encounter they did seem prepared to seek to communicate those wishes to the strangers, using a set of practised behaviours, but which did not include direct violence or a challenge to fight man to man. After the Monkhouse incident, the locals stop doing even this. They appear to remove themselves from the situation almost completely, except for one last act of what appears to be retribution. Two days after Dr Monkhouse had played his little game with the locals, he was the target of a spear thrown from a tree. According to Cook (1955:310):

Dr Monkhouse and another man being in the woods not far from the watering place discovered six more of the natives who at first seemed to wait his coming but as he was going up to them had a dart thrown at him out of a tree which narrowly escaped him, as soon as the fellow had thrown the dart he descended the tree and made off and with him all the rest and these were all that were met with in the course of this day.

This was no random assault; the locals had marked their man.

Absence and silence had come in the wake of Dr Monkhouse's sport with the locals on day four. Apart from the incident of the spear thrown from the tree, which did not occur until the seventh day, in the remaining four days before the *Endeavour* set sail, the locals were hardly to be seen at all, and they certainly did not present themselves to the strangers in the ways that they had consistently done over the first four days. Cook had been troubled by the displays of opposition that he and his men had experienced intermittently from the locals, but the silence that descended from day five onwards appears to have been the most unsettling experience of all. Cook's log is replete with evidence that in the face of the local people's elusiveness he became more active in seeking them out.

In the remaining days, he tries to turn the situation around. On day six, Cook notes that he and some men had in the morning gone in the 'pinnacle to the head of the bay in order to examine the country and to try to form some connections with the natives', and that later in the day he 'went thither in hopes of meeting with the people but they made off as we approached' (Cook 1955:308, 309; emphasis added). On the following day, day seven, Cook 'sent out some parties into the Country to try to form some connections with the natives' (Cook 1955:309; emphasis added). His efforts to make contact had become more pronounced, more direct, in the face of the absence of the local people, and as the days remaining before his departure

became fewer. By contrast, Banks had given up on forming an acquaintance with the locals. Writing them off as 'rank cowards', he continued with his 'botanising' without fear of trouble or distraction (Banks 1962:59).

On day eight, the day before the *Endeavour* sailed, Banks (1962:60-1) noted that 'no Indians were seen by any body during the whole day'. The next morning it sailed. That the *Endeavour* had sailed within days of the locals' decision to make themselves scarce might well have made the latter believe that they had finally succeeded in their attempts to expel the strangers from their territory. Retreat in this instance produced the outcome they desired, or so they might have thought, not knowing that Cook had arrived with the intention to leave as soon as practicable.

Conclusion

For generations now, the landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay in 1770 has been popularly represented in Australian settler historical memory as an unequivocal contest between the voyagers and the locals, in which the former always have the upper hand. But this confident image is quickly unsettled by doing little more than having a closer look at Cook's own records and those of his companion traveller, Joseph Banks, and comparing those descriptions with other accounts of meetings between strangers in Indigenous Australia. By concentrating on what passed between the two groups, and their behaviour and responses to one another, while they temporarily coexisted in the littoral landscape, the shifts in their relations over the course of the entire encounter come into view.

Cook begins by trying to control the encounter through recourse to his gun. But his desire for immediate control comes at the cost of later connection with the locals. In the end, however, it is the actions of one of his officers that are just as influential in closing down any potential for a connection to be formed. And whereas previous representations of this iconic encounter have interpreted the locals' retreat as defeat, or their avoidance as cowardice, in this re-reading these same actions have been revealed as elements in the locals' repertoire for dealing with strangers. Less signs of lack of engagement, they are evidence of intense engagement.

In their various actions, the local people reveal themselves as defenders of their territory, but in ways that do not involve direct combat or that might lead to enduring trouble for them. Even in their obvious desire for the strangers to be gone from their country, they behaved in ways that appear primarily designed to ensure that proper or tolerable relations could be temporarily established. Thought about in this way, these actions, recorded by Cook and Banks, serve as signs that reveal something about the locals' own sense of who they were and how they saw their world before it was more devastatingly disrupted beginning 18 years later.

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Notes

1. For a description and analysis of what happened during Cook's first landfall in New Zealand in October 1769, see Thomas (2003:86-91).
2. For a discussion of spear-throwing which is more ceremonial than combative, see Clendinnen (2003:110-32). See also Gibson (1999:48-9).

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