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In their words

Aborigines more popular than Captain Cook?

Professor Ann McGrath AM says Captain Cook was not always popular with the Australian public.

The crowd celebrating Australian federation in 1901, at the re-enactment of Cook's 1770 Landing, actually cheered for his opponents.

Waiting for the landing show to begin on 7 January, many in the 5,000-strong audience tired of standing in the hot sun. To amuse themselves, they drank and let off fireworks.

Then suddenly, many stormed the roped-off VIP area, grabbing the best seats. Others snatched fine foods. One man was seen gnawing at a huge turkey skeleton.

When the actor playing Captain Cook finally arrived, one spectator offered him a whisky and soda. His landing party included professional actors playing Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander, Pacific navigator Tupia and a band of men in marine uniforms.

The group that had already landed comprised 25 Aboriginal men from many different Indigenous nations, from the freshly minted states of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, they were akin to 'a federal representation of the blacks of the Australian continent.'

One reporter observed them applying clay and ochres to their torsos, arms and faces. When ready, they charged down the hill, yelling loudly, holding their spears high, ready to throw.With athletic, powerful physiques, and armed with long barbed shields, nullah-nullahs, boomerangs and woomeras, they looked spectacular in possum skins, the feathers and wings of parrots, cassowary and emu.

Professor Ann McGrath AM

The crowd including the police were so shocked by the troupe's mock charge and deafening screeches that they fled in panic. Once the audience gained its breath, however, they cheered the Aborigines.

Several newspapers later

When the Aboriginal actor struck by musket shot rolled around in a highly convincing performance of shock and agony, they gasped. After the Aboriginal men retreated, the audience wanted more.

As Cook's pompous scripted monologue progressed, it was largely inaudible, and the audience became so rowdy the main organiser threatened to halt the show. Several newspapers later described the play as a 'farce'.

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The key plotline of the play was the conflict between the landing party and the Aboriginal men. Once retreated, their part was over. However, unscripted, they returned to the stage for an encore, taking their place behind Captain Cook. Cheered again, their performance stole the show.

In the landing play, nothing was resolved. Unlike neighbouring colony New Zealand, no treaty was signed.

Several NZ dignitaries watched on including the Maori leader and first Minister for Native Affairs James Carroll (known as Timi Kara), Richard Seddon the Premier and three Maori chiefs.

What would they have thought – then or now?

After all, the 2017 National Constitutional Convention's *Statement from the Heart* was considered radical because it called for an Aboriginal parliamentary advisory group.

The Gweagal/Dharawal and other Aboriginal people who lived around La Perouse and Botany Bay were also in the audience watching.

Modern, urban and, according to one of the Maoris, speaking better English than themselves, they were not asked to perform. But they understood that, in dancing the stories of their ancestral heroes on their ground, these travellers were connecting their feet and thereby their far-flung nations with their own.

These Queensland dancers had painted their bodies with sacred clay – the same kind of white pigments recorded in Cook's journal.

In turn, the visiting troupe, cognisant of other Cook landing stories on the northern coast, would travel via modernity's train lines to take back news of the growing cult of Captain Cook.

In the landing play, as now, the audience witnessed multiple sovereignties being enacted on Australian land.

These historical performances spoke of a hopeful new federation not only of British colonies but also with Indigenous nations of long standing and of many landings.

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