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**THE LONG JOURNEY TO BRITANNIA RULE:**

**COOK'S QUEST TO FIND THE GREAT**

**SOUTHERN LAND AND ITS**

**CONSEQUENCES FOR AUSTRALIA**

## The Long Journey to Britannia Rule: Cook's Quest to Find the Great Southern Land and its Consequences for Australia

This essay looks at the great contribution made by early maritime explorers to the discovery and European settlement of Australia, and the consequences of Captain James Cook becoming the first explorer to set foot on the eastern coast of Australia and claim it for the British.

In a 2012 age of digital satellite technology and Mars exploration, the Transit of Venus passed without much fanfare. It is hard to imagine that less than two hundred and fifty years ago, when James Cook set out on his quest to find *Terra Australia Incognita*, the Transit of Venus was seen as an invaluable opportunity for expanding astronomical knowledge and therefore also marine navigational power. This voyage of Cook's was borne out of British territorial ambitions for "The Unknown Southern Land" in competition with the French and with the benefit of maps already drawn by Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch explorers. Cook's journey was to have enormous consequences for the indigenous people of "New Holland" with their colonisation by the British Empire and for the entire cultural, political, and economic fortunes of the land now known as Australia. For these reasons, the early maritime explorers of the Southern ocean, but especially Cook, could perhaps be regarded as the people of most consequence in Australia's history. Had Cook not claimed Australia for the British, the course of Australia's history, its culture, heritage, language and social fabric may have taken a different weave altogether.

Prior to Cook's voyage in 1768, little was known about any land mass along the southern longitude of Tierra del Fuego (an archipelago off the southernmost tip of the South American mainland) and the famous "lozenge-shaped"<sup>1</sup> world map published in 1570 by Ortelius shows a huge "*Terra Australis Nondum Cognita*" (Latin for "Great Unknown South Land"<sup>2</sup>) occupying the entire Southern Ocean.<sup>3</sup> During the 1500s, the Portuguese and Spanish explorers fought to establish new spice and precious metal trading routes, and by the late 1500s had opened the sea routes to India and the East Indies, explored more of New Guinea's coastline and had begun to chart lands in the South Pacific.<sup>4</sup> With Spanish strength on the wane following the defeat of the Armada in 1588<sup>5</sup>, the Dutch seized control of trading routes and the 1600s was the Dutch "Golden Era" which saw the founding of the mighty Dutch East India Company (or 'VOC') in 1602, permitting Dutch enterprises to compete aggressively for the East Indies spice markets and to launch exploration farther afield.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pearson, M.P, 2005. Great Southern Land - The Maritime Exploration of Terra Australis. 1st ed. P.9.

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, "Southern land, not yet known but in due course to be revealed"; Collingridge, V.C, 2002. Captain Cook: Obsession and Betrayal in the New World. 1st ed. Great Britain: Random House. Pg. 86

<sup>3</sup> South Land to New Holland - Imagining a South Land. 2012. South Land to New Holland - Imagining a South Land. [ONLINE] Available at: [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Backgrnd-Imagining\\_a\\_South\\_Land.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Backgrnd-Imagining_a_South_Land.html). [Accessed 28 August 2012].

<sup>4</sup> Collinridge, V. *supra*, cit 2: Spanish sailors landed on New Hebrides in the early 1600s and, believing that they had discovered the famed South Land, named them *La Australia del Espiritu Santo* (or "Southern Land of the Holy Spirit").

<sup>5</sup> The Armada defeat nearly destroyed the national Treasury of Spain and marked the beginning of decline in Spanish power: Defeat of the Spanish Armada. 2012. Defeat of the Spanish Armada. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://library.thinkquest.org/20176/armada.htm>. [Accessed 28 August 2012].

<sup>6</sup> So rich and powerful was the Dutch East India Company during the 1600s that 42 of the 54 European ships that sailed into Australian waters before the HMS *Endeavour* in 1770 flew the flag of the VOC: See *National Library of Australia* website: South Land to New Holland - The Rise of the VOC. 2012. South Land to New Holland - The Rise of the VOC. [ONLINE] Available at: [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Trade-The\\_rise\\_of\\_VOC.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Trade-The_rise_of_VOC.html). [Accessed 28 August 2012].

The first authenticated sighting of Australia was in 1606, when the *Duyfken*, captained by Dutchman William Janszoon, landed at Port Musgrave on the western coast of Cape York.<sup>7</sup> In 1623, Dutch explorer Jan Carstensz was commissioned by the VOC to lead a voyage to New Guinea and the Southern Land to advance the knowledge of the coast sighted by Janszoon. Carstensz, landing in Cape York on the northeast coast, gave a dismal report to the Dutch East India Company about a dry, barren wasteland and aboriginal people who presented as miserable and with no prospects for trade.<sup>8</sup>

Thereafter, the Dutch Governor-General, Anthony Van Diemen, still believing in an 'Unknown Southern Continent', sent Abel Janszoon Tasman on a voyage in the hope of finding wealthy trading lands. During this voyage Tasman discovered the west coast of Tasmania and named it *Anthonie van Diemen's Land*, after the Governor General. He then crossed the sea between Australia and New Zealand, (the Tasman Sea, now named in his honour), and was the first known European explorer to chart the coastline of New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> Tasman's voyage proved beyond doubt that Australia did not belong to the mythological mass of a southern continent stretching to the South Pole, as depicted in the Ortelius map.

The many Dutch voyages of discovery to 'New Holland'<sup>10</sup> served largely to confirm the initial report of Carstensz about the lack of opportunity for trade. Furthermore, Willem de Vlamingh's voyage of 1696 "added greatly to the mapping of the western coastline, but his findings once and for all established the VOC would make little profit in New Holland. The Dutch would carry out only limited further exploration in the region."<sup>11</sup> Their reign as masters of the Southern Ocean would gradually decline together with the fortunes of the Dutch East India Company, which ceased trading in 1780.

The rise of maritime exploration and discovery in the 1600s was partly a product of 'The Age of Enlightenment', a period of frenzied scientific and intellectual enquiry that "spawned a raft of public institutions whose very aim was to question the wonder of the heavens and earth"<sup>12</sup> Foremost among such institutions was the Royal Society for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge or "Royal Society", which commissioned Captain James Cook to command a voyage of the *HMS Endeavour*, the primary objective of which was the observation of the Transit of Venus, a once-in-a-lifetime scientific opportunity that was "key to a wealth of information about the universe, information that would be seized upon by the

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<sup>7</sup> *supra* (cit. 1)

<sup>8</sup> The Navigators - History - Early Explorers of Australia. 2012. The Navigators - History - Early Explorers of Australia. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/navigators/history/earlyexplore.htm>. [Accessed 28 August 2012].

<sup>9</sup> Pearson, M, *supra*, cit 6, p. 39

<sup>10</sup> New Holland was the name given by Tasman to the continent, which remained in use until at least 1817, when Australia (from the Latin 'Australis', meaning 'Southern', the name recommended by English navigator Matthew Flinders) was officially sanctioned; see *National Library of Australia* website: South Land to New Holland - Mapping of New Holland. 2012. South Land to New Holland - Mapping of New Holland. [ONLINE] Available at: [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Mapping-of\\_New\\_Holland.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Mapping-of_New_Holland.html). [Accessed 28 August 2012].

<sup>11</sup> South Land to New Holland - The Rise of the VOC. 2012. South Land to New Holland - The Rise of the VOC. [ONLINE] Available at: [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Trade-The\\_rise\\_of\\_VOC.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/60542/20060914-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/southland/Trade-The_rise_of_VOC.html). [Accessed 30 August 2012].

<sup>12</sup> Collingridge, V., *supra*, at p. 82

intensely curious men of science who characterized the age...opening up the whole universe to scientific enquiry”<sup>13</sup> The British monarch King George III also instructed Cook to seek out evidence of the still postulated *Terra Australis Incognita*. Cook departed from England on the *Endeavour* with a package containing explicit instructions regarding the unknown Continent, stating that Cook was to explore as much of its coastline as possible, recording all details of the rocks, trees, fruits, grains, positioning of the headlands and the direction of the tides. Cook was also to bring back specimens of any minerals or plants, and an account of the native inhabitants. His instructions concerning colonization were as follows:

“...with the Consent of the Natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain; or, if you find the Country uninhabited take Possession for His Majesty by setting up Proper Marks and Incriptions, as first discoverers and possessors”.<sup>14</sup>

As the Great Southern Continent was believed to be rich in natural resources, Britain wanted to colonize this land before the Dutch or the French as it would open up many opportunities for trading. Additionally, at this time Britain was also facing major social issues. Due to the British losing their penal colonies in the Americas as a result of the American Revolution, Britain needed to expand its territories in order to manage its ever-growing criminal population.<sup>15</sup>

Though Cook was more interested in charting the Southern Continent, his French rival, Jean-François-Marie de Surville, who set sail upon the *St John Baptiste* in 1768, was eager to discover *Terra Australia Incognita* for trading opportunities. De Surville was led to believe that the unknown land housed a colony of Jewish traders, due to secondhand reports claiming that those aboard the English ship, the *Dolphin*, in 1767 had witnessed 800 men in a fleet of canoes who had an uncanny resemblance to the Jews. The dream of discovering new southern lands that France could occupy, and thereby slow down Britain’s expansion and sea power, was a major motivation for the French, whose dominance within European politics had been severely curtailed after the war with Britain that also ended France’s colonial developments in Canada and India<sup>16</sup>. Leaving France, de Surville’s ship was packed full of goods that he hoped to exchange for the presumed pearls, jewels and gold.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Collingridge, V., *supra*, at p. 84; see also Pearson, M., *supra*, who notes that the observation of the transit of the planet Venus across the face of the sun from a number of widely spread observatories was recognized as a method of measuring the distance of the earth from the Sun and Venus, which was information of major scientific importance and relevant to the development of navigation: “The urgency of the project was that the Transit, which had been first observed as a phenomenon in 1639, and was the subject of serious [but unsuccessful] study in 1761...would occur in the year 1769, but then not again until 1874, 1882, 2004 and 2012.” (at page 56).

<sup>14</sup> Pearson, M.P., 2005. Great Southern Land - The Maritime Exploration of Terra Australis. 1st ed. P. 59.

<sup>15</sup> Botany Bay as a Penal Colony | Australian History Research. 2012. Botany Bay as a Penal Colony | Australian History Research. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.australianhistoryresearch.info/botany-bay-as-a-penal-colony/>. [Accessed 28 August 2012].

<sup>16</sup> Note that de Surville was not the first French explorer to “nearly” discover the eastern Australian coast. But for the impediment of the Great Barrier Reef, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville might have claimed the east coast of Australia for France during his 1768 journey – see Pearson, M., *supra* (7), at p. 72

<sup>17</sup> Blainey, G.B., 2008. Sea of Dangers - Captain Cook and his Rivals. 1st ed. Victoria: Penguin Group.

And so the competition between France (led by Jean-François-Marie de Surville's expedition) and Britain (led by Captain James Cook) to seek national glory and fortune, began within months of each other, when both ships (the *St Jean-Baptiste* and the *Endeavour*) sailed "into unfavorable winds and a temperamental ocean, where no lands lay on the maps but many lay in the imagination".<sup>18</sup>

According to historian Geoffrey Blainey<sup>19</sup>, had there been the slightest change in winds, the *St Jean Baptiste* could have been pushed closer to the eastern Australian coast, allowing the French to view the coastline. Had de Surville sighted the coastline, it is possible that he would have sent a boat to inspect one of these safe harbours and take shelter there long enough for his crew to regain their health. Such a stopover on the Australian coast would have been recorded, and de Surville would have been acknowledged for discovering this part of Australia. His decision to change his course and head south-east to New Zealand was due not only to poor weather conditions but to the alarming state of his crew members, many of whom had already died from scurvy and lack of food.

De Surville's fateful decision to change course took him east towards New Zealand and the coastline that Abel Tasman had explored before him. Ironically, although de Surville may have believed himself to be the only European ship for thousands of miles, his ship (approaching the top headlands of New Zealand in an clockwise direction) was in fact less than a hundred miles from Cook's *Endeavour*, which was approaching in the opposite direction. At one point, after passing the prominent North Cape of New Zealand, the *St Jean Baptiste* "reached a point on the exact route the *Endeavour* had passed sailing the other opposite direction during the previous week. The French ship, on many occasions during the next day and night, was to cross the zig-zag route that the English ship had so recently made."<sup>20</sup>

De Surville anchored the *St Jean Baptiste* in New Zealand for about two weeks in 1769 and set sail further east in the southern Pacific, but made no new discoveries. As he encountered no land and his crew became increasingly debilitated, he decided to seek help at the port of Chilca, Peru. On 8 April 1770 he attempted to go ashore in heavy seas and was drowned.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Cook arrived safely home, having spent three years at sea accomplishing a feat of navigation and discovery unparalleled in human history:

"Cook...had guided Endeavour around the world, discovered a cure for scurvy, recorded the Transit of Venus, intermingled with several new cultures, charted the entire coastline of New Zealand, discovered and charted eastern Australia, and saved his men from shipwreck (while also discovering the Great Barrier Reef), all the while graciously sharing his great cabin with botanical specimens and the carcasses of fish and birds."<sup>22</sup>

Cook was to lead two more voyages until he was killed in 1779 in a skirmish with natives on the shores of Kealākūā Bay in Hawaii. In the same year, Joseph Banks, the famed botanist

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, at p. 42

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 120

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 127

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p. 367

<sup>22</sup> Dugard, M.D., 2001. *Farther Than Any Man - The Rise and Fall of Captain James Cook*. 1st ed. Australia: Allen & Unwin.

who had accompanied Cook on the *Endeavour's* journey, recommended Botany Bay as a potential harbour to which convicts could be sent.<sup>23</sup>

And so it was that, in January 1788, eleven ships sailed from Britain into Botany Bay, carrying aboard both marines and convicts. Although the unfavorable weather conditions resulted in the fleet moving further up the coastline to Sydney Cove, it was the British who arrived safely in Australia to “stake their claim” for the territory. However, this was not the end of the rivalry between the French and the British for the Great Southern Land. Just days later, the French explorer Jean-Francois de La Perouse with his two ships the *Boussole* and *Astrolabe* was sent to inspect the current situation of *Terra Australis*, and whether the British were making a settlement at Botany Bay. La Perouse arrived at Botany Bay and was treated courteously by the British. Many of the French crew were suffering from scurvy and other sicknesses, and as a result remained in the bay for six weeks, before sailing away for New Caledonia. It was expected that when they returned to France the French government would then decide whether to place a settlement in Australia. La Perouse's ships were last seen leaving Botany Bay and never made it back to France.

The dramatic and often tragic tales of life in leaky ships in hostile and unchartered waters, as were experienced by the early maritime explorers and their crews, whether Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French or British, are perhaps beyond the imagination of Australians today. Air travel and Internet mean that they are constantly connected to the rest of the world at the push of a button or the swipe of a credit card. But Australians of all creeds and colours, still ruled by a British monarch as head of state, officially speaking our own version of the “Queen's English”, inhabiting this land with its eclectic mix of names such as “Zeehan” (named after the Dutch Abel Tasman's ship *Zeehaen*), “New South Wales” (named by James Cook), Recherche Bay (named after one of the ships of the French d' Entrecasteaux expedition), would do well to reflect on and appreciate the great courage and determination of the maritime explorers whose exploits at sea led to the most profound consequences of all for this Great Southern Land. It is not beyond bounds of possibility that if Cook had not discovered the eastern coast of Australia in 1770, had he not found a way to manage scurvy, shipwreck, and had the courage to face the unknown dangers of unchartered frontiers, Australia may have been settled by the French, at least until it passed into British hands either peacefully or by force. Either way, the consequences for development of Australia's history could have been significant. So viewed in this light, the great men of maritime exploration, most notably Captain James Cook, are of enormous consequence for Australia, its peoples, language, and cultural heritage.

## Bibliography

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<sup>23</sup> Britain had sent more than 50 000 convicts to the United States over 60 years but when the American colonies rebelled against England in 1775, they refused to receive “surplus shiploads from the motherland”. So Britain's parliament had to find a new destination to ship its growing population of ‘undesirables’: p. 372 Blainey

This text is based on the journals of James Cook, Joseph Banks and the translated journal of de Surville. It is a detailed account of Cook's astonishing voyage along the east coast of Australia and the little known voyage by Jean de Surville, a Frenchman in search for a 'mysterious Jewish colony' in the South Pacific. Both explorers were on a quest to find *Terra Australis Incognita* (the Unknown Southern Land) to expand the territories of their respective governments and both were also motivated by Enlightenment ambitions to make new scientific discoveries especially (in the case of Cook) with respect to the Transit of Venus occurring in 1769. De Surville is a central character in this very readable and engaging account of the national rivalry between France and Britain, although there are only scant references to this courageous French explorer in most other general texts on early maritime exploration. The text very vividly portrays the extreme hardships and personal sacrifices of Cook, de Surville and their crews, and reflects on "what might have been" in the history of Australia if de Surville had sighted the eastern coast of Australia ahead of Cook. This was the novel that motivated me to investigate further the rivalry between France and Britain for dominance of maritime explorations in the 1700's.

- Collingridge, V.C, 2002. *Captain Cook: Obsession and Betrayal in the New World*. 1st ed. Great Britain: Random House.  
This text is an account of James Cook's three voyages, detailing his humble beginnings as a farm laborers son, to his meteoric rise as a great seaman and explorer. This is a very personal account of Cook's life and journeys quoting often from Cook's journals and providing insights into what motivated Cook's commitment to become a captain of men whose own six children died while he was at sea. I used this source particularly for knowledge of Cook's background and the details of his first voyage, however it also provided some information on the previous exploration of *Terra Australis*, which was useful.
- Dugard, M.D., 2001. *Farther Than Any Man - The Rise and Fall of Captain James Cook*. 1st ed. Australia: Allen & Unwin.  
This text recounts the story of James Cook's success aboard his three voyages, while also detailing the complex personality of Cook and his eventual demise on the shores of Hawaii. It provides great insight regarding the hardship that Cook endured at sea, and details the relationships that he developed with peoples of the South Pacific, particularly Tahitians. This text was used mainly to verify facts regarding Cook's return to England after the *Endeavour's* voyage and his rivalry with Joseph Banks who was masterful at self-promotion and won immediate acclaim for his botanical and other scientific discoveries on the voyage.
- Salmond, A.S. 2003. *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*. 1st ed. England: Allen Lane.  
This text focuses on Cook's enlightened relationships with Pacific peoples as well as the troubled relationships with members of his crew. In particular, the book details an incident at Queen Charlotte Sound in New Zealand in which sailors staged a bizarre ritual in defiance of Cook being the trial, execution and consumption of a pet dog. This book was mainly useful for its explanation of the preparations for the Endeavor Voyage, particularly the royal societies commission of Cook to observe the Transit of Venus.
- Pearson, M.P, 2005. *Great Southern Land - The Maritime Exploration of Terra Australis*. 1st ed. This book is a broad history of the maritime exploration of Terra Australis, containing chronological and nation' specific description of each voyage.

This text was useful for investigating the French, Dutch and British exploration of the South Pacific and contains interesting illustrative maps, photos and graphics

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This was a very accessible, easily comprehensible and engaging website that explained the background and detailed history of the Dutch exploration of the Southern Ocean, the significance of the Dutch East India Company in the 1500's and the achievements of individual Dutch explorers.

The following websites were used for confirming information:

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