

**NATIONAL WINNER
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**CAPTAIN COOK STATUE VENERATION OR
VANDALISM?**



Veneration or Vandalism?

*Why are historical monuments sites of contest?
Discuss with reference to the Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney.*

Abstract

Historical monuments valorise and commemorate significant events or figures in a nation's history. As such, they are didactic and public symbols that persist through time. This essay discusses why these features make historical monuments the sites where history is contested. It particularly examines this in relation to the Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney.

Historical monuments and statues commemorating key events and personalities incite contestability because they exist with an inherent ambiguity with the past¹, inviting opinions from differing and diverse perspectives, along with the revision of values and ideals that may have shifted over time. Further, monuments embody features that cause them to be historically contentious – they are didactic, representing ideals and values of the establishment which commissioned them; they carry meaning symbolically, as they do not record history; they are public, presenting these values as part of the ‘collective memory’; and lastly, they are permanent, persisting through time. A contemporary example of such contested history in action, is the vandalism of the Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney in 2017 and 2020, some 140 years after its unveiling in 1879. The changed public attitude to the statue can be seen to correspond with a revision to the historical narrative surrounding Cook’s arrival in Australia. However, the Cook Statue currently persists unchanged and therefore creates a salient site for history to be contested.

Public monuments are sites where history is contested because they represent values of the authoritative voice which erected them. Moreover, memorials only valorise a single event or person, therefore their creation always involves “[c]hoices...about which...memories to enshrine, and which ones to erase.”² To valorise one individual as a hero, is always to overlook another, glorifying one nation’s victory always infers another’s demise. Thus, historical monuments are never neutral or “silent”, nor can they reflect consensus, rather, they are “arguments about the past presented as if there were no argument.”³ Furthermore, historical monuments are public – displayed in civic squares, parks and other public spaces, and in this way act as public symbols, promoting specific ideals as the shared values of the wider community, commissioned by those with power and

¹ Robert Parkes, “Are Monuments History?”, *Public History Weekly*, (19 October 2017).

² Seth C. Bruggeman, “Memorials and Monuments”, *Inclusive Historian*, (18 July 2019).

³ *Ibid.*

authority to access these public areas. Thus, public symbols embody a community's "official memory,"⁴ contributing to the formation of a nation's collective identity. Maurantino writes:

Significance of sites such as museums, monuments, and memorials rests in their rhetorical power to...cultivate narratives that provide anchors for collective identity.⁵

Importantly, historical monuments only 'cultivate' narratives, they cannot write them. That is, statues "do not record history"—unlike books and oral histories.⁶ Instead, they are sites of symbolic meaning only, and cannot purvey literal meaning. They come to be the didactic embodiment of their maker's intentions. However, as symbolic representations only, they continually invite future and further reinterpretation of their meaning and significance, and hence the possibility of contestation.

Historical monuments are also highly contentious because they persist through time and therefore become artefacts themselves, literally 'setting-in-stone' and immortalising the individuals they portray. As monuments commemorate a distant past, they "exist with an inherent ambiguity,"⁷ because they also reflect the values and "culture of the time in which they were created". In turn, because of their permanence, they are judged by future generations, and therefore "reveal... our own history culture" and values.⁸ Thus, as recent historiography suggests, although the *past* might be fixed and set, "History, on the other hand, is constantly created."⁹ Facts can be reinterpreted, stories can be reconstructed and meaning can be revised, underlining the fluidity of historical narratives. The permanence of the historical statue as artefact, invites revision of its meaning, making them fertile sites for contesting history. Keith Jenkins writes that history is a, "contested discourse, an embattled terrain....There is no definitive history...consensus only being reached

⁴ Nicole Maurantino, "The Politics of Memory", *University of Richmond Scholarship Repository*, (July 2014), p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁶ John Patten, *Public Monuments – Contested History Public History Webinar*, History Council of Victoria, (14 July 2020), [46:20- 46:57 mins].

⁷ Robert Parkes, "Are Monuments History?", *Public History Weekly*, (19 October 2017).

⁸ Connor Deegan, "Why do public monuments play such an important role in memory wars?", *Constellations*, 9(1), University of Alberta, (January 2018), p. 20

⁹ *Ibid*.

when dominant voices can silence others by overt power.”¹⁰ Thus, it is the result of ‘dominant voices’ silencing the marginalised, that opens-up the very space for history to become contested. For Bell this is because, ‘collective memory’ is never unified or coherently shared by *all*. Instead, concepts like national identity are better understood as “myths” – stories that “selectively narrates...a nation’s past...(re)constructing”¹¹ its contemporary meaning and identity. Thence, historical monuments become inherent sites of contest as histories of commemorated individuals and events are revised and reconstructed.

The Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park, is the site of a current battle over whether the founding narrative of the Australia nation should be one of discovery or invasion, igniting debate about its removal. The statue, attacked by graffiti-vandals a couple of times in recent years, was unveiled to 70,000 on 25th February 1879. It was commissioned under the authority of the then Premier of New South Wales, Sir Henry Parkes, also famously known as the ‘Father of Federation’, seeking to unite the colonies to create the modern Australian nation. The Cook statue can be seen to embody the spirit of that age. Cook, known for being a pioneering navigator, mapped the east coast of Australia and subsequently claimed it for the British Crown in 1770. However, it could be argued that modern Australia had not begun until Britain’s settlement almost twenty years after Cook’s voyage and eight years after his death. The raising of the British flag by Governor Arthur Phillip, on the newly settled penal colony on 26th January 1788, has been chosen to be commemorated as Australia’s Day. Nevertheless, it is the figure of Cook and his feat of ‘discovering’ Australia, that was deliberately chosen as the iconic symbol to be memorialised as the nation’s established founding-myth. McKenna suggests this reflects an “extreme sensitivity to the convict birth stain”¹² as “settler societies” are particularly self-conscious of seeking a “proper history of which people could be

¹⁰ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 1991, p. 19 (from *Extension History Resource Book*, HTANSW, (2019), pg. 61).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mark McKenna, “The History Anxiety”, *Cambridge History of Australia, (Volume 2)* Cambridge University Press, November 2013, p. 562.

proud.”¹³ The Captain Cook monument in Hyde Park, designed by Thomas Woolner embodies this. He depicts Cook in “slightly creased clothing”, without his hat and other insignia of rank, therefore representing him as a “self-made man imbued with the scientific and enterprising spirit of the age.”¹⁴ He holds a telescope in his left-hand, his right gestures heavenwards, signalling progress. The monument base clearly states Captain Cook, “discovered this territory 1770”. However, what is not clear, is whether Cook himself believed he ‘discovered’ Australia. Certainly, Cook was not the first European to set foot on the Australian continent – preceded by Dutch navigators like William Janszoon and Dirk Hartog in the 17th Century. Cook wasn’t even the first Englishman – William Dampier arriving in 1688.¹⁵ Cook’s diaries further suggest that he was destined for New Holland prior to his arrival to Australia.¹⁶ These ambiguous details illustrate the ‘mythic’ element of historical monuments – constructed by those with authority to “selectively” narrate¹⁷ the past and symbolically represent it in ‘concrete’ for a public audience. However, the choice to valorise Cook’s achievements necessitate silencing voices who have a different viewpoint. Those who see Cook as precursor to British invaders who stole Australia from its indigenous owners can only contest this established perspective through acts of rebellion against the statue, asserting their voice by graffitiing their opposition or petitioning its removal.

Furthermore, as the Cook statue persists over time, it invites contemporary perspectives to challenge its didactic meaning. Stan Grant, a Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man, contests the persisting message on the Cook monument that he “discovered this territory.” Grant writes, “Discovery is not merely a word, in Cook's time it was a doctrine...used by the empires of Europe to justify seizing

¹³ Quoting Tom Griffiths, in *Ibid*, p. 563.

¹⁴ Henry Ergas, “James Cook spoke to us then, and speaks to us now”, *The Australian*, (18 June 2020).

¹⁵ Ben Collins, “What Australians often get wrong about our most (in)famous explorer, Captain Cook”, *ABC News*, 20 April 2020.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Duncan Bell, “Mythscape: memory, mythology, and national identity”, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 54 No. 1 (March 2003), p.75.

the land of indigenous peoples.”¹⁸ This sentiment along with the claim of terra nullius effectively extinguished the land rights of Australia’s First Peoples. For Grant, the doctrine of terra nullius, has made it easy to render indigenous voices “invisible”. Murdoch in his 1917 textbook, *The Making of Australia* said, “[W]hen people talk about the ‘history of Australia they mean the history of the white people....[Indigenous people] have no history, as we use the word.”¹⁹ Louise Zarmati’s survey of Australian school history textbooks before 1980 supports this picture of silence, saying that Aboriginal people were barely mentioned, and the narrative of “discovery and possession” was at the forefront.²⁰ However, in 1992 the doctrine of terra nullius was overturned by the High Court of Australia, and Native Title was established as law in 1993. Native Title recognises the rights and interests of Indigenous Australians to the land and therefore legally debunks the ‘discovery’ myth²¹. Interestingly, by 2016, the University of NSW policy, set out Indigenous guidelines for staff and students to change references of Australia being “settled” to being “invaded”, made front page of the Daily Telegraph.²² Despite this “rewriting” of the history books, the Cook statue persists unchanged. Grant laments, “The doctrines of discovery and terra nullius have been demolished...by our courts, by the United Nations” however, as long as the Cook statue remains, it “proclaim[s]...to the world that no one here mattered until a white person “discovered” the land?”²³

Persistent contest about the Cook statue has stemmed from revised attitudes around British colonisation, becoming a site that has furthered causes about recognition of genocide and racial injustices. The day following Grant’s article on 26 August, 2017, the Cook statue was graffitied

¹⁸ Stan Grant, “Between Catastrophe and Survival: The real journey Captain Cook set us on”, *ABC News*, (25 August 2017).

¹⁹ Walter Murdoch in the introduction to his school textbook, *The Making of Australia*, 1917, quoted in McKenna, pg. 565.

²⁰ Louise Zarmati, “Captain Cook ‘discovered’ Australia, and other myths from old school textbooks”, *The Conversation*, (29 April 2020).

²¹ “Mabo Case,” *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies*, (2015).

²² Lindy Kerin, “UNSW defends Indigenous Guidelines amidst claims of ‘whitewashing’ and ‘rewriting’ history,” *ABC News*, (30 March 2016).

²³ Stan Grant, “It is a ‘damaging myth’ that Captain Cook discovered Australia”, *ABC News*, (23 August 2017).

with, “Change the date,” and “No pride in genocide.”²⁴ It was again vandalised as part of the *Black Lives Matter* movement on 14 June, 2020. As part of that movement, a petition seeking the removal of the Cook statue was started on the premise that, “The statue commemorates a man who committed mass genocide...There is no pride in genocide.”²⁵ Significantly, these actions reveal a new narrative cultivated around the Cook statue – it has become symbolic of oppression and racist actions like genocide and colonisation with reference to the 1788 date, although both these actions are as readily contestable in Cook’s actual, personal biography as his achievement of ‘discovery’. What it affirms is the mythic element of historical monuments and their significance as symbols of national identity, for both dominant voices and the marginalised, which is why they are such a focal-point of contestation. With the shift of Australia’s identity over time, from being quintessentially British and male, to being more inclusive, the Cook statue no longer reflects contemporary Australian values, and this incongruity has led to acts of dissent against the monument, fuelling contestability.

Contentious debate around calls for the removal of the Cook monument highlights the complexity of imposing decisive actions on historical monuments. One extreme would be to do nothing – continuing the silence and erasure of the Indigenous Australian perspective. The other extreme would be to remove the monument entirely, thereby removing a symbol that is hurtful to Indigenous Australians, but also potentially dismantling aspects of Australia’s current national identity. In so doing, it runs the risk of erasing all traces of the preceding contest and thereby sanitising history. Former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull perpetuates this view suggesting, “Old histories should not be burned, any more than old statues should be torn down....Rather they should be challenged...complemented by new histories, fresh evidence and modern monuments.”²⁶ Thus, a

²⁴ Cameron Mee, “Vandals deface Hyde Park Statues in Australia Day protest”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, (26 August 2017).

²⁵ Paris Zhang, *Petition for the removal of the Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park*. Currently there are 528 signatures supporting the petition. <https://www.change.org/p/for-the-removal-of-the-captain-cook-statue-in-hyde-park>

²⁶ Malcolm Turnbull, in “Vandalism of Hyde Park statues is a ‘deeply disturbing’ act of Stalinism, says Malcolm Turnbull”, Michael Koziol, *Sydney Morning Herald*, (26 August 2017).

way forward has been suggested by Professor Scates – the method of “dialogical memorialisation”, where plaques are added to existing monuments to explain history from an alternative perspective, for example, the Explorer’s Monument in Fremantle.²⁷ Similarly, a new monument can be erected alongside the old to provide a different viewpoint where, “one view of the past takes issue with another and history is seen, not as some final statement, but a contingent and contested narrative.”²⁸ Here, silencing and erasure is replaced with dialogue, and a contested history no longer aims for a conclusion where the winner takes-all and proclaims the ‘definitive’ narrative, but rather, the monument opens up the possibility for an ongoing conversation and new perspectives that seeks truth-telling²⁹.

Thus, historical monuments are sites that are highly contested as they persist through time valorising specific events or people didactically and publicly, therefore inviting the challenge of differing and evolving perspectives. The Cook statue embodies the national myth of the British ‘discovery’ of Australia, portraying enlightenment values of progress and colonisation, whilst silencing indigenous voices. Recent acts of vandalism to the statue shows it is a site where history is actively being contested between these two positions. However, contestation, unlike silencing and erasure, remains an act of engagement, and therefore becomes the place of possibility for discourse and revision. Thus Stan Grant writes, “History is not dead, it is not past or redundant, it is alive in all of us,”³⁰ revealing how monuments are not only sites of contest but places for dynamic historical dialogue and continued reflection on shifting perceptions of Australia’s colonial past.

²⁷ Vanessa Mills and Ben Collins, “The controversial statue that was added to, not torn down or vandalised”, *ABC News*, (29 August 2017).

²⁸ Bruce Scates, “Monumental Errors: how Australia can fix its racist colonial statues”, *The Conversation*, (28 August June 2017).

²⁹ Tahlia Nelson, “Rewriting the narrative: Confronting Australia’s past in order to determine our future”, *University of Technology Sydney*, (2017), p. 20.

³⁰ Stan Grant, “It is a ‘damaging myth’ that Captain Cook discovered Australia”, *ABC News*, (23 August 2017).

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This article allowed me to understand the relationship between myth, memory and national identity. Bell suggests that collective memory for a nation can never be completely unified or cohesive because there are different frameworks such as gender, age, race, religion etc. Also, memory requires direct ‘experience’, which means ideas and identity cannot be handed-down as a collective memory. Therefore, he believes it is more useful to think of national identity as being carried as myths. These are constructed and shaped by selectively narrating the story of a nation’s past, either intentionally or through the resonance of art and literature. However, he also recognises that there is the governing myth of a nation, perpetrated by those in power, but also the subaltern forms of the marginalised. Therefore, these myths become contested on what he calls the mythscape.

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This article discusses Australia’s history from the perspective of an aboriginal man. He writes about the controversy surrounding Cook and those challenging the current historical narrative. This article helped me understand, through an indigenous perspective, white settlement and the lack of recognition of First Peoples. Despite this, Grant recognises that Cook, and white settlers are part of Australia’s narrative as a modern democracy and he believes they should be acknowledged in history, because he sees Australia as ‘we’ not ‘us and them’.

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This text provided me with a deeper understanding of Australia’s history, and contested issues that began with the arrival of ‘white men’. It suggests settler societies hold a certain self-consciousness towards the

building of their nation and therefore seek to find legitimacy by constructing foundation narratives and myths. This helped me to understand the differing views of Captain Cook in relation to Australia's history.

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