

## Too Many Captain Cooks

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Chips Mackinolty  
Paddy Wainburranga

Non-Aboriginal histories of Australia accord Captain James Cook a special status. Although "historical" records show that he was not the first European to set foot on Australian shores, he is generally regarded as the person who "discovered" Australia.

However, contemporary accounts of Captain Cook among Aboriginal people bear little relationship to that which non-Aboriginal people regard as "history". Between Cook discovering Australia, and Aboriginal people discovering Cook, there is — clearly — a variety of historical truths. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, Captain Cook is of symbolic significance as much as anything else. For non-Aboriginal people, Cook is the progenitor of settlement; for Aboriginal people he is the archetypal "first white man" to invade Australia. At that level, at least, there is not much difference between the two versions. Both are seen as a kind of "beginning" of an epoch.

The new era Cook introduced, however, is seen quite differently by black and white Australians. A number of Aboriginal versions of Captain Cook stories have been recorded. Perhaps the best known is that from Hobbles Danairaiyi from the VRD district of the Northern Territory (Rose 1984). Other accounts appear in Kolig (1980) and Congoo (1981).

The Captain Cook story presented here is from central Arnhem Land.<sup>1</sup> Its details are well known by people from the Rembarrnga and Ngalkbun language groups living at Beswick Station, an Aboriginal community about 100 km by road from Katherine in the Northern Territory.

The following version of the Captain Cook story was recorded in June 1987 at a number of locations in Arnhem Land as well as at Beswick Station. The material is drawn from Paddy Wainburranga with additional information from Joli Laiwonga. Both story teller and artist, Wainburranga's role as a painter of stories is discussed elsewhere (Mackinolty n.d.). This version is not verbatim: it is a compilation of a number of accounts from the informants, and edited as a narrative. Translations from Rembarrnga and Kriol were carried out by Wainburranga, Miliwanga Cameron, Penny McDonald and the author.



## "I'm painting this story from a million years ago"

Captain Cook. This is his song. The whole story. This painting. Blankets... materials... they were all his things. That's the way we know from Rembarrnga side. We didn't know the new people. But everybody knew: too many Captain Cooks.

But from this painting here (you can see) old people used to sing for him. Nobody here was born then. It was the early days. From a long time ago. My grandfather hadn't been born. My grandfather's grandfather hadn't lived.

The first men knew him, because we've got the song (from them). We call the song *barrambarra*. It tells about everything that has come from Captain Cook.

Captain Cook. Nobody has seen the place of that sort of man. No. Olden days were his times. So we sing his song (like) olden days people.

Not from the days when my father died, or my uncle. But a long time ago when humans first came.

This is a new world now. No-one has seen Captain Cook, but everyone has seen his culture.

Who knows Captain Cook? Nobody has seen him. Captain Cook was around during the time of Satan. Everybody knows Captain Cook. Old people, not young people. You've got to have a lot of learning to know Captain Cook. More culture. Because I know from this song, I can sing it now for this bark painting. This is the way his song goes.

Nobody has seen this from my group before. No. Not from the Rembarrnga group.

Captain Cook and his wives — he only had two wives — he was born many years ago.

That was from a long long time ago. Like a million years ago. More than that.

He was like Adam — Adam and Eve. But Adam and Eve were only "half way" — Captain Cook was there first, before Adam and Eve.

The birds, the trees, developed at the same time. Captain Cook was a yirritja man, from the yirritja group.

Captain Cook was really a business man (involved with law and ceremony). All these people from the Rembarrnga side, from Warramirri side, Gupapyngu, Galpu, Dhalwangu, Balamumu, Gumatj, Nunggubuyu, all the yirritja people have a corroborree for him. From the earliest days. Captain Cook didn't do any wrong. Because people can't have a ceremony for him for nothing. Captain Cook didn't do any bad things.

When Captain Cook died yirritja people took it over. My mob (dhuwa) took over his song too. They call it *barrambarra*... material stuff, blankets, calico. All the sort of stuff we have — it's got a song. We have a song for it in Rembarrnga for the yirritja group. Not dhuwa men. Not dhuwa people. We call it mother.

Captain Cook was never a bad man. Since he died we have had business (ceremony) for him. There's business for him at Groote Eylandt. I've gone into ceremony for him. It is only for men at Groote.

He was a very serious (important) man.

He was very kind to Aboriginal people in the early, early days, because Captain Cook went all over the world. He didn't interfere. He knew not to interfere when he left Mosquito Island.

Captain Cook wasn't a bad man. Rembarrnga people know that. I don't know about other places. We know his song from our brains.

So we know how Captain Cook used paddles in his boat. We didn't have paddles. Captain Cook made them. People know he had white man's power, white man's things. Blackfellas never had those things, never had any of those things. Axes, steel knives; all came from Captain Cook.

They knew this for a long time when the world was new. He covered up all the bad things. He came to the good law. But when the new Captain Cooks came over — bad things happened.

That's the way it is in Rembarrnga law, but I don't know about other places. It should be the same with everybody because they've all got a song.

This Captain Cook painting shows that all the material stuff: blankets, calico, shirt and trousers; all these things are in the Captain Cook song. According to the Rembarrnga group it is true. It's a yirritja song, and I call it mother.

Joli (Laiwonga) mob knows. Everybody has gone and seen Captain Cook's grave there, where he built that boat. They've got his story.

He always helped Aboriginal people. There were many millions of people in Australia and Captain Cook didn't interfere. He didn't interfere and make a war.

Captain Cook came from Mosquito Island, which is east of New Guinea. He came with his two wives, a donkey and a nanny goat.

He came from Mosquito Island, that was where his family was: nobody knows how much family he had. We don't know. But we know him. We've got his song. We dance for him; we dance culture for him. Captain Cook he was really a mardayin man. We sing songs belonging to him; now we're taking over. Not just anyone is taking over, only Aboriginal people from Arnhem Land. East Arnhem Land and central Arnhem Land. We've taken over that business from Captain Cook.

He was a really hard man, he had a hard job to do when he came to Sydney Harbour. He was never looking for trouble. He had his business building his *barrupa* — his boat. He made Sydney Harbour. He never made the (Sydney Harbour) bridge. He made a blackfella bridge out of planks first time. It was later that they made the (Sydney Harbour) bridge.

He was making his *barrupa* and his *kayung kayung* — his paddles. In more recent times when boats came, it came from *murldi* — Macassans in the white man's language. But the first boat came from Captain Cook.

From the earliest days Satan lived there too. We call Satan *ngayang*. It's the same as a devil. He lived on the other side of the harbour on Sydney Island. The other side of the harbour is called Wanambal.

Satan had feet like a bullock's. He's got horns, see? He had long nails on his fingers. He also had a devil bone to fight with.

Captain Cook worked by himself on his boat, he used to always be working on his boat, with his hammer and drill. He was making the boat for himself, no-one else. Every day he would work on his boat by the salt water.

He would always come back to have his dinner after working on his boat, then he would go to sleep.

But he didn't know that the *ngayang* was always sneaking up behind his back while he was working. The devil had been talking to his two wives.

"What does Captain Cook work for?" the devil asked. The wives said: "He

works for himself."

The devil kept coming up to the wives and saying: "Hey! Is Captain Cook still working?"

"Yes," the two wives would say, "Yeah! He's still working."

One time Satan came behind his back to the wives and said: "Captain Cook. I'm going to kill him. I'm going to take the two of you over to that other island. See over there? You two have to come with me."

Satan said to them: "You dig a well and cover me up with dirt. When he comes back to eat food, his meal, I'll come out behind him. I'll come up out of the ground."

When Captain Cook came back to eat his supper, he didn't know. And then Satan, *ngayang*, came out with his bone.

He came out and poked Captain Cook in the back with his bone.

Captain Cook said: "I know you. You're Satan behind my back. I'll turn around and look at you Satan."

Satan said: "I'll fight you and kill you and take your two wives."

"All right. We'll fight," said Captain Cook.

Satan said: "Have you got power (magic)? If you want to fight me you have to be a clever man!"

"No, I haven't got power." Captain Cook only had his stone axe to help him. "You put that bone down, and I'll put down the axe. We'll wrestle, hand to hand."

So they fought. At first Satan was winning. He threw Captain Cook against the boat he had built. But then Captain Cook grabbed the devil by his throat, he wrapped his arm around his neck. He pressed hard on his windpipe, until he had broken the *ngayang's* neck bone with his elbow. The devil couldn't move. He was dead.

Captain Cook then grabbed the devil by the scruff of his neck and through his legs and chucked him into the ground — into a hole — as a punishment.

The devil was in the hole in the ground. The hole in the ground is this side of the water. Here. He chucked him into the cave hole. Captain Cook won.

And motor cars go through there now. On this side is the hole in the ground, the other side of Sydney Harbour is where he chucked him: wanambal. Where motor cars can go inside and come out the other side.

Captain Cook and the devil fought. All right. They fought near the hole in the ground. Captain Cook won and the devil lost. He won and the devil lost when he was chucked in the ground on the other side of wanambal, inside Sydney Harbour. He was dead: the devil was no more.

Captain Cook and his family won. The devil was "temptation": he lost. Captain Cook was attacked along with his wives. They lived while the devil was killed and chucked into the ground with everything he had.

After the fight, Captain Cook went back to his own country, to Mosquito Island. We don't know what happened there. Maybe all his family were jealous. But they attacked him with a spear. That's the spear in the painting. They attacked him with a spear, his own people on Mosquito Island. His own tribe did it — his relations.

We don't know what happened over there on Mosquito Island.

Captain Cook came back to Sydney Harbour then, and he died from the spear wounds. The old man was sick and he sat down with everything he had and died. Money, everything he had. Olden time money. Two bob, everything. They finished with him then. And then he was buried there in Sydney Harbour. Underneath. On the island.

He came back to Sydney and he's got all the money buried with him. That's what the old people tell us. Captain Cook was a money man. Two bob, one shilling, two pounds, five pounds, ten pounds. This is part of *barrambarra* that we sing. Now we only have five cents and one dollar and ten dollars. All that other money is buried with Captain Cook.

## The New Captain Cooks

I've finished with the story of old Captain Cook. I'm talking now about all the new Captain Cooks.

When the old Captain Cook died, other people started thinking they could make Captain Cook another way. New people. Maybe all his sons.

Too many Captain Cooks.

They started shooting people then. New Captain Cook people. That was new. New people did that. Those are the people that made war when Captain Cook died; because they didn't care, they didn't know, all those young people.

They are the ones who have been stealing all the women and killing people. They have made war. Warmakers, those New Captain Cooks. They fought all the wars. Warmakers. They fought.

The olden time Captain Cook is dead but all the new people have made trouble.

That old Captain Cook died a long time ago, but all the new people *munanga*, *balanda* (white people) — I call them *munanga* in my language — they killed us and shot us.

These New Captain Cooks shot the people.

They killed the women, these new people. They called themselves "New Captain Cooks."

I've got to talk to you about the warmaking people. The ones who made war. The new ones. Mr. White, Bill Harney, Mr. Sweeney.

They just went after the women. All the New Captain Cooks fought the people. They shot people. The New Captain Cook people, not old Captain Cook. He's dead. He didn't interfere and make a war.

That last war and the second war. They fought us. And then they made a new thing called "welfare".

All the Captain Cook mob came and called themselves "welfare mob". They were new people now.

They wanted to take all of Australia.

They wanted it, they wanted the whole lot of this country. All the new people wanted anything they could get. They could marry black women or white women.

They could shoot people.

New Captain Cook mob!

But now we've got our culture back.

That's all. That's the story now.



Although Wainburranga has never been to Sydney, Laiwonga and others have visited Sydney regularly over the past twenty years — mostly as dancers, singers and didjeridu players with the Bamyili Dancers. In that time, they have seen the places where it is said Satan was thrown into a hole — we know it as the Cahill

Expressway. It is said that Captain Cook is buried under Garden Island (the latter being just across the water from the Captain Cook Graving Dock).

The extent to which these visits to Sydney have fleshed out a pre-existing history cannot be ascertained with any surety. They are certainly seen as confirmation of the story of the old Captain Cook.

In some ways, the Rembarrnga/Ngalkbun version of the Captain Cook story echoes the "Saga" told in the VRD (Victoria River Downs) District, although it goes about it in a different way. The "old" Captain Cook is a good man, indeed, a law man who holds ceremony. He doesn't "interfere". He is responsible for the introduction of things of use value to Aboriginal people: steel, material, clothing and so on.

On the other hand, the "New Captain Cooks" represent all the bad things that came with the white man: killings, theft of country, of women, and so on. Even in the guise of the "welfare mob", they wanted to "take over the whole country". In the view of the informants, it was only after land rights legislation under Labour, and the restoration of culture, that some sort of balance against the New Captain Cooks could be achieved.

Once, I explained to Wainburranga the non-Aboriginal account of Captain Cook. When Wainburranga relayed this account to people back at Beswick, it was greeted with some hilarity. How did white people know about Captain Cook? Only through books, of course: books are notoriously changeable. At best, my version might be a partial account of the New Captain Cooks. Knowledge of the "old" Captain Cook lay with the songs that make up *barrambarra* and, now, with Wainburranga's painting and film.

## Note

A film (19 minutes, colour, 16 mm) of this Captain Cook story has recently been made by Penny McDonald. In the film the story is told and painted by Paddy Fordam Wainburranga with music from Roger Kelly Madarnngu and Joli Laiwonga. In fact, the complete story is not told in the film, nor by Wainburranga. According to Wainburranga, while he is allowed to paint the story, he defers to others for more complete knowledge of aspects of the story, principally those who sing *barrambarra* in the film. Further information can be obtained from P. McDonald, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, Lyons Park Rd., North Ryde, N.S.W., Australia.

## References

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