Cook’s life & voyage of discovery

Captain Cook cannot truly be said to have discovered Australia, but over his lifetime he did venture into every one of the world’s oceans, made a great many maps and named many places — possibly more than any other explorer.

Cook’s orders were to sail to the newly discovered land of Tahiti to observe the passage of the planet Venus across the sun. At the time, navigation in the Southern Hemisphere was made difficult because few star charts showed constellations and planet positions in the southern sky. Viewing and measuring the Venus transit would make further exploration easier.

ON BOARD were men of great scientific standing — the Royal Observatory’s astronomer Charles Green; a Swedish naturalist, Daniel Solander; and wealthy botanist Joseph Banks, who had part-funded the voyage. The ship also carried £10,000 worth of telescopes and other instruments from the Royal Society. A friend of Banks said they carried:

...all sorts of machines for catching and preserving insects, all types of nets, traps, drag and hookeys for coral fishing, they have a curious contrivance of a telescope by which, put into the water, you can see the bottom at great depth.

Cook’s SECRET MISSION

Such an illustrious crew seemed to demand a more important mission than simply observing the stars, and a second part to the mission was later revealed. In Cook’s cabin were secret orders! Having just finished the Seven Years War, the British were very suspicious of France, and military officers were frequently given secret orders so that details would not fall into the wrong hands. The secret orders given to Cook stated:

There is reason to imagine that a Continent of land of great extent may be found southward... you are to proceed southward in order to make discovery of the Continent... if you discover the Continent... you are to reemploy yourself diligently in exploring as great an extent of the coast as you can. You are also 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 Inscriptions as first discoverers and Possessors.

Cook did not claim possession of New Holland for Britain at Botany Bay, although he did hold the Union Jack each day on shore, to the bewilderment of the Aborigines. He dropped anchor in Botany Bay on 29 April 1770, but it wasn’t until 22 August 1770 that he raised the British flag and claimed “the whole Eastern Coast... by the name of New South Wales” at a place named Possession Island. In doing so, Cook made a grave error. He claimed the land as terra nullius, or land belonging to no-one — a decision that causes much offence and has had long-lasting ramifications for the Indigenous people of Australia, with whom no treaty has ever been agreed to. Cook’s decision to claim the land as terra nullius was against the secret orders he had received. His orders instructed him to claim land only with “the consent of the natives”. Banks later justified his captain’s decision, writing in his journal:

We only once saw as many as thirty Indians [all natives at the time were referred to as Indians] together. We saw indeed only the sea coast: what the innermost tracts of inland country may produce is to us totally unknown: we may have liberty to conjecture, however, that they are totally uninhabitated.

LEAVING TAHITI, the Endeavour first reached New Zealand and navigated the north and south islands before heading west to the east coast of New Holland. Point Hicks was the first land sighted and from there, heading north up the east coast, Cook named Cape Howe, Mount Dramedary and Batemans Bay. On 29 April, the Endeavour pulled into a sheltered bay and landed in the place now named Kurnell. Cook and his men explored Botany Bay, found shy inhabitants there, and scoured the headland opposite (now called La Perouse) for several days, carving the date and the ship’s name into a tree to mark their landing. The ship continued north. Along the way, Cook named Port Jackson, Cape Byron, Queensland’s Glass House Mountains and Bustard Bay, near the town of 1770.

A FOTHERING BOTHER

On 11 June 1770, the Endeavour struck the Great Barrier Reef, forcing a subsequent delay at Endeavour River to repair the vessel’s badly damaged hull. The crew tried all sorts of remedies to stop the ship off the reef. Anything in the hold that wasn’t essential was thrown overboard, including ballast, cannons and rotten food. Crew members used the row boats and anchor cable to try to tow the ship off the reef and the pumps were used continuously.

EVENTUALLY, the Endeavour was dragged off the reef at high tide with a lump of coral broken off in her hull. She was leaking badly and was salvaged only by the process of fothering — running a sail covered in chopped wood and animal dung underneath the ship so that the water pressure would suck it up.

Cook brought a Tahitian priest named Tupia with him to Australia. It was thought that Tup would act as an interpreter for the people they met. Of course, he is not able to interpret or understand the language of any of the Austal Indigenous people they encounter any more than the British could.

THE ONLY PERSON on board who have the unique gift of fo’ота previously was a young middle-aged named Jonathan Monkhouse.

Isaac Smith, one of the Endeavour’s midshipmen and the cousin of Cook’s wife, was the first European to set foot on this east coast. Cook is reported have him, "Isaac, you shall land first.

The AMERICAN War of Independence broke out in 1775 and occupied British forces until 1783. Further exploration of New South Wales was the least of the concerns for some years.