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Claiming possession of New Holland – the Possession Island mystery

Doctrine of Discovery

Every schoolchild knows that Captain James Cook claimed possession of the east coast of Australia (New Holland) in the name of King George III on August 22 1770 on Possession Island. 'Taking possession' or 'claiming sovereignty' was a common action taken by European nations with respect to newly discovered lands. The Doctrine of Discovery was the international law that gave license to explorers to claim vacant land (*terra nullius*) in the name of their sovereign. Vacant land was that which was not populated by Christians. This doctrine was based on The Papal Bull '*Inter Caetera*,' issued by Pope Alexander VI on May 4, 1493. This played a central role in the Spanish conquest of the New World. The document supported Spain's strategy to ensure its exclusive right to the lands discovered by Columbus and was still in play in Cook's time.

Of course it is also well known today that this doctrine has been justly rejected in courts in recent times, as it gives no recognition to the native peoples of lands newly discovered by European explorers. The arguments presented here are not about whether Cook or anyone else, was justified in claiming already populated lands under the laws and conventions of today, or even the laws of the time. This discussion is about whether Captain Cook's claim was actually made according to the conventions of 1770.

The ceremony of taking possession of new lands did not always follow the official guidelines, indeed on one occasion it was close to high farce. On April 16 1846 Lieutenant Yule in command of HMS *Bramble* took possession of the southern part of Papua New Guinea near Motumotu village. Lieutenant Yule in his official account wrote:

Immediately on landing I hoisted a union jack and took possession in the name of her Britannic Majesty of all the coast of New Guinea from the S.E. most point of land in sight of

where Captain Blackwood had terminated his surveying operations in HMS Fly, according to the usual form . . .

Also in the landing party was John Sweatman, clerk on the *Bramble*. He also left an account which went as follows:

On landing we found the union-jack had been forgotten, we however made a substitute by pencilling a flag on a leaf of the note book, and this being attached to a tree, Mr Yule took possession . . . the people giving three very low cheers, lest too much noise should attract the attention of the natives.

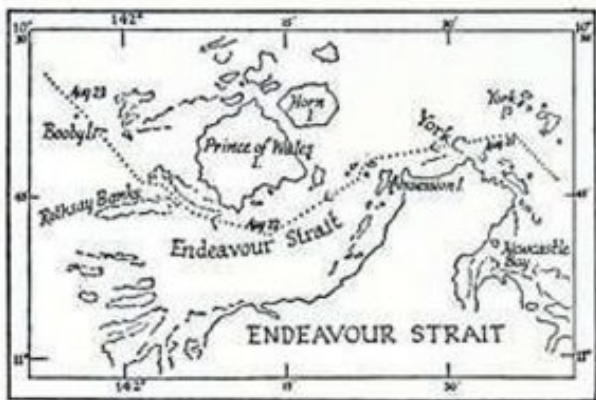
Which version is more believable? I think most would favour Sweatman's account – they were taking possession of the south coast of New Guinea, but were not brave enough to let the locals know!¹

There appears to have been something of a rush to claim sovereignty in the north of Australia in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s with sovereignty claims by Captain Bremer in HMS *Tamar* at Melville Island 1824, and again in HMS *Alligator* at Cape York in 1838. All this activity was apparently to forestall French claims over the area. We could also add Captain Lambert in HMS *Alligator* at Waitangi in New Zealand in 1834, all apparently due to concerns by the Admiralty over sovereignty. Yule's claim in 1846 must have been one of the latest claims in this area. In 1853 Admiral Febvrier Despointes took formal possession of New Caledonia for France and as late as 1896 officers of the British navy hoisted the Union Jack and read proclamations covering 21 of the Solomon Islands. Clearly 125 years after Cook, the Doctrine of Discovery was still a powerful legal consideration.

Possession Island

But back to James Cook and Possession Island. After leaving the Endeavour River on August 4 1770, Cook laboriously took his ship through the labyrinth of reefs and through an opening in the Barrier Reef and, for a time sailed trouble free, in the open ocean. However he was uneasy being so far offshore that he might miss something of importance. Most importantly he was concerned that he might miss the opening to the strait discovered in 1606 by Luis Vaz de Torres who sailed through the strait which now bears his name. Spanish authorities had suppressed information about this voyage and the existence of this strait had not been confirmed in 160 years. Cook was determined to prove or disprove its existence. He therefore looked for an opening in the reef to allow him to follow the coastline more closely, saying on August 14 in his journal:

I should have been very happy to have had it in my power to have kept in with the land, in order to have explor'd the Coast to the Northern extremity of the Country, which I think we were not far off, for I firmly believe this land doth not join to New Guinea. But this I hope soon to prove or disprove . . .



Map of Endeavour Strait from the Naval History Review December 2019. Showing the track of the Endeavour.

On August 22 1770 the *Endeavour*, having found an opening in the barrier reef, had rounded Cape York and was approaching the strait between

¹ The above quotes are from *The Journal of John Sweatman* 1977, edited by Jim Allen and Peter Corris for University of Queensland Press.

Prince of Wales Island¹ on one side and the mainland and Possession Island on the other. Cook was still unsure whether the strait discovered by Torres between New Holland and New Guinea really existed and wrote in his journal:

At four in the afternoon anchored off a small island² in great hopes that we had at last found a passage to the Indian Seas. Landed with Banks and Solander, to the fright of a few people who were seen, and climbed the highest hill. These people were armed with lances and one had a bow and arrow – they were thought to be Melanesian.



A highly idealised and certainly grossly inaccurate illustration of the 'Possession Ceremony' on Possession Island by J.A. Gilfillan, noted Scottish artist, painted in 1865. (On the left are they skinning a kangaroo? Is that Tupia in the yellow coat? Who is that up a tree with a possum?) The painting is interesting as it represents the popular Nineteenth Century conception of heroes like Cook. National Library of Australia.

Having climbed the hill on what is now known as Possession Island, he reported in his journal:

After landing I went upon the highest hill, which, however, was of no great height, yet no less than twice or thrice the height of the Ship's Mastheads; but I could see from it no land between South-West and West-South-West, so that I did not doubt but there was a passage. . . . Having satisfied myself of the great Probability of a passage, thro' which I intend going with the Ship, and therefore may land no more upon this Eastern coast of New Holland, and on the Western side I can make no new discovery, the honour of which belongs to the Dutch Navigators, but the Eastern Coast from the Latitude of 38 degrees South down to this place, I am confident, was never seen or Visited by any European before us; and notwithstanding I had in the Name of his Majesty taken possession of several places upon this Coast, I now once More hoisted English Colours, and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern coast from the above Latitude down to this place by

¹ According to the *Naval History Review* December 2019, Cook realised that his 'Prince of Wales Island' was the same as the Dutch 'Hooghe Eylandt' (High Island). This big island gave Cook a valuable reference point to compare with early Dutch maps.

² Later named 'Possession Island'.

the Name of New Wales¹ together with all the Bays, Harbours, Rivers, and Islands, situated upon the said Coast; after which we fired 3 Volleys of small Arms, which were answer'd by the like number from the Ship.

What happened on Possession Island?

Recently Margaret Cameron-Ash in her book 'Lying for the Admiralty' (2018) has produced strong arguments questioning Cook's actions on Possession Island. She suggests that: '*in August 1770 Cook had no wish to claim any part of New Holland. So he did not stop the ship at Cape York in order to step ashore with 'the gentlemen' to conduct a possession ceremony*'². As Cook points out above, he was well aware that once he passed the northern point of New Holland and proceeded south or west, he was in waters previously explored by the Dutch. With modern knowledge, the appropriate place to claim possession would have been Cape York the northernmost point of the continent, but as *Endeavour* sailed past Cape York, Cook was by no means certain that he was not sailing into a large bay and that the coast of New Holland did not stretch further north, perhaps to New Guinea³. Soon after, the view from Possession Island and other factors such as the swell from the west, convinced him that it was indeed the entrance of the looked-for strait.

Cameron-Ash claims that Cook, while on Possession Island, probably had no intention of claiming the east coast of New Holland for England and was simply signalling to the ship his relief at the prospect of open water ahead. Her theory is that while at Batavia, Cook took advantage of his activities on the island to manufacture a taking of possession ceremony.

As mentioned previously, Cook stated that he had claimed possession '*of several places upon this coast*'. No mention of these other New Holland possession ceremonies is present in his journals. Indeed on reading Cook's journals, it would appear that ceremonies involving taking possession of new lands in New Zealand or Australia was not high on his list of priorities. Perhaps Cameron-Ash's suggestion quoted above that '*in August 1770 Cook had no wish to claim any part of New Holland*' is not far from the mark. She goes on to suggest that at the time Cook, while on Possession Island, probably was simply signalling to the ship that at last they could see open water, free from reefs, ahead.

Given his apparent lack of enthusiasm for such ceremonies, the question raised is why did Cook perform one on Possession Island? Alternatively if there was no possession ceremony, why did he modify his journal while in Batavia as suggested by Cameron-Ash, to include one? Her reason is that Banks while in Batavia, reported in his journal hearing news of the recent French expedition led by Bougainville⁴ which, at the time, suggested the expedition might have visited the east coast of New Holland, possibly signifying French interest in claiming the area. Cook, aware of the potential political implications, is then alleged to have altered his journal to claim priority for his expedition. He also called in any journals being kept by other crew members.

So, it seems that while in Batavia, Cook realised the need to have taken possession of the east coast of New Holland to thwart the French, and he conveniently made use of the flag raising, cheers and musket volleys to retrospectively construct a taking possession ceremony, and changed his journal accordingly⁵. This included adding the name 'Possession Island'. In addition to the major text

¹ The word 'South' was apparently inserted later in the journal resulting in the name 'New South Wales'.

² Cameron-Ash, 2018, pages 181-182.

³ It has been suggested that Cook chose Possession Island avoiding landing on Cape York as he feared the natives would be hostile. Pocket Oz, Travel and Information Guide, Possession Island (Bedanug). There is no such suggestion in Cook's or Banks's journals.

⁴ Louis Antoine de Bougainville led a French expedition to the Pacific in 1766 to 1769. After visiting several Pacific Islands in 1768 he sailed west hoping to encounter the east coast of Australia, but was blocked by the Great Barrier Reef. He did not land on, or even sight, the Australian coast. He then sailed north, exploring the Solomons and then north of New Guinea and south to Batavia and back to France.

⁵ Cook's journal was in loose leaf form and would have been relatively easy to alter.

quoted previously about the possession ceremony, Cook would have also had to change the text in two other places as in his journal where he used the name 'Possession Island'. On August 22, soon after the visit to the island, Cook wrote: '*At Noon Possession Island, at the South-East entrance of the Passage . . .*' Then on August 23 in a paragraph entitled 'Description of Torres Strait' he writes:

This passage, which I have named Endeavour Straits, after the Name of the Ship, is in length North-East and South-West 10 Leagues, and about 5 leagues broad, except at the North-East entrance, where it is only 2 Miles broad by reason of several small Islands which lay there, one of which, called Possession Island, is of a Moderate height and Circuit;

Who else was there to confirm or deny what occurred on Possession Island? Ray Parkin in his excellent book 'H.M.B. *Endeavour*' (2003), mentions five other observers, all (except Banks) on the ship at the time - namely Stephen Forwood¹, Lieutenant Hicks, one other anonymous journal keeper ('no. 153'), Sydney Parkinson and Joseph Banks. The first three of these all describe a possession ceremony with flag raising, volleys of musket fire and cheers, but not so Parkinson and Banks. Parkinson's Journal reads:

We stood through between two of these islands to the west and found a very strong tide which carried us along briskly and gave us hopes that this was a passage between New Holland and New Guinea. At length we came to and the pinnace was sent ashore to a spot where we saw some of the natives gazing at us; but when the boat's company landed, they immediately fled. The captain, and some others went up to the top of a hill, and, seeing a clear passage, they hoisted a jack, and fired a volley, which was answered by the marines below, and by three volleys from the ship, and three cheers from the main shrouds.

No suggestion there that these celebrations were for taking possession of the coast of New Holland. Perhaps significantly, the only journal-keeping observer ashore with Cook was Banks, who made no mention of any ceremony in his journal. Cameron-Ash discovered a previously overlooked note in Banks's copy of extracts from Cook's journal, suggesting that Cook initially named the island 'Passage Island'. At the time Banks refers to the landing as being on 'Passage Island' and does not use the name 'Possession Island' in his journal. It would seem that Banks simply thought the 'ceremony' was not worth mentioning. Perhaps significantly Beaglehole, in a footnote to Banks's journal entry recounting the events of August 22, comments: '*. . . it is curious how casually Banks records what was one of the great moments of the voyage.*'²

Officers keeping journals would have had access to the official journal and might have altered their journals either freely or by persuasion.

Later history

It is difficult to know if Cook's possession ceremony (real or invented) had any effect in changing French intentions in New Holland. But one fact that came to light later, might have had some effect on the colonization of Australia. In 1896 gold was discovered near the north west coast of Possession Island³, not far from where Captain Cook landed. Gold was mined there between 1897 and 1905 and again in 1919 and 1935. An interesting, but perhaps pointless exercise, is to imagine what would have happened if Cook or Banks returned in 1771 and reported gold on Possession Island!

The island is now a national park and a monument now stands near where Cook landed, commemorating the events of August 22 1770.

¹ Stephen Forwood was a gunner on the *Endeavour* and kept a journal of events.

² Banks, Joseph, 1770, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, vol. II, 2nd ed., ed J.C. Beaglehole, 1963, Trustees of the Public Library of NSW, p. 110, Trustees of the Public Library of NSW.

³ See National Park Brochure, 2020, *Possession Island National Park, Nature, Culture and History*.

Conclusion

Cameron-Ash's arguments have been debated in recent times and are interesting, even compelling in some aspects, but the full truth of the matter may never be known¹. Whatever occurrence the volleys and cheers celebrated, there seems no doubt that Cook and his party did actually land on Possession Island and that all were extremely pleased with the clear passage they saw to the west-south-west indicating that their days of battling the 'labyrinth' of reefs were ended. Too many reliable witnesses agree that Cook was there and that he was celebrating something. But did Captain James Cook alter his journal in Batavia ?

Margaret Cameron-Ash gives us the evidence in great detail, only a part of which is presented above. Does she present a winning case? What actually happened? Did the journal, as it read in 1771, deter the French in any way? I fear I must leave it to the reader to decide these questions.

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¹ See December 2019 edition of the *Naval Historical Review*, Possession Island.