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Australia's history of colonialism is under scrutiny as Black Lives Matter protests around the world force many to examine our country's own record.

For years there have been growing calls for statues of Captain James Cook to be removed, something that is gaining traction as other statues around the world have toppled, including one in the UK of slave trader Edward Colston, following [Black Lives Matter protests](#).

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison has [defended Cook's legacy](#) and declared there was "no slavery in Australia", which sparked claims he didn't know the history of the country he leads.

On Friday Mr Morrison apologised and explained his comments were about how NSW was settled on principles, which included that the colony was not to have slavery.

"My comments were not intended to give offence and if they did, I deeply regret that and apologise for that," he told reporters in Canberra.

Mr Morrison acknowledged "all sorts of hideous practices" had been waged against Indigenous people.

"In Australia we know we have had problems in our past. We have acknowledged those," he said.

Politicians from both sides of the political fence have rejected calls to topple statues of Cook.

"I don't think ripping pages out of history books and brushing over parts of history you don't agree with or you don't like is really something the Australian public is going to embrace," Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton told Nine's Today show. "There are good and bad parts of our history. You learn from that."

Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese also does not want statues removed.

"You can't rewrite history, you have to learn from it," he told Sydney radio 2GB.

"The idea that you go back to year zero of history is in my view, just quite frankly unacceptable."

The Prime Minister has previously said he wanted to help Australians better understand Captain Cook's historic voyage and its legacy as the 250th anniversary approached.

"That voyage is the reason Australia is what it is today and it's important we take the opportunity to reflect on it," Mr Morrison said.

Mr Morrison had allocated \$48.7 million to celebrate the milestone including \$6.7 million for a replica of the HMB Endeavour to circumnavigate the country starting in March, a journey that had to be suspended earlier this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The PM initially referred to the year-long voyage as a “re-enactment”, but later clarified it would be a “retracing”. This is because Captain Cook never made it around Australia.

In fact it was Matthew Flinders who circumnavigated the country, identified it as a continent and suggested the name “Australia”. This happened after the First Fleet landed in 1788.

There definitely appears to be confusion about Captain Cook and what he did, and didn't do.

Here's how he became such a divisive figure.

#### HE DIDN'T ACTUALLY 'DISCOVER' AUSTRALIA

Captain James Cook is often credited with “discovering” Australia in 1770 but parts of it had already been dubbed “New Holland” after Dutch navigator Willem Janszoon first landed in 1606.

Englishman William Dampier also came ashore north of Broome, in 1688.

While Cook did chart the eastern side of Australia, naming it New South Wales, he certainly didn't discover the continent. The entire country wasn't mapped until after the First Fleet arrived.

So why the confusion?

Historian Professor Ann McGrath, of the Australian National University's School of History, said early textbooks in Australia had recognised the different explorers before Cook but she believes this started to change when nationalism associated with the 1901 federation began to take off.

“There were a lot of memorial events and a re-enactment of Cook's landing at Botany Bay in 1901,” she told news.com.au.

A historical society was also created and she said organisations were active in memorialising Cook, leading to further re-enactments and statues being erected.

“It was a national memorialist project to glorify the British arrival,” she said.

Cook was also a great figure to memorialise because he was an expert navigator who came from a modest background, unlike fellow crew member Sir Joseph Banks, who was from an aristocratic family.

The efforts to memorialise Cook were so successful he even became a mythical figure among the Aboriginal people, and associated with colonisation, even though he was not part of the First Fleet that arrived in 1788.

Prof McGrath believes the term “discovery” is also very problematic, as it suggests what happened before Captain Cook landed was not part of Australia's history.

“The Aboriginal people had discovered the country — if you want to use the word ‘discover’ — 65,000 years ago. The whole argument about discovery has got to be put in that context,” she said.

Prof McGrath said Aboriginal people also don't have the same concept of discovery as the “white male hero tradition”.

“If an Aboriginal person ‘discovers’ an ancestral burial site they don't want the credit, they may be the first to see it of their tribe, but they just think their ancestors saw it before.”

#### GETTING 'CONSENT' FROM THE NATIVES

Captain Cook's original mission in 1770 was to travel to Tahiti to observe Venus moving across the face of the Sun.

Once there he opened secret orders that instructed him to search for the southern continent and take possession of new territories in the name of the king of Great Britain “with the consent of the natives”.

But it appears he did not get consent from any of the Indigenous peoples.

In fact Cook was threatened with spears and he also fired a musket at some of the Aboriginal people.

“So it wasn't a peaceful gathering, it was a conflict situation,” Prof McGrath said.

Cook first landed at Botany Bay, then stopped at Cooktown for seven weeks when his ship was damaged on the Great Barrier Reef, before going to Possession Island (at the tip of Cape York), where it was said he raised the British flag on August 22, 1770.

Prof McGrath said there is controversy around whether Cook did actually raise the flag and officially took possession of the land, because he didn't write about it in his journal for several days.

"There is a bit of suspicion around the fact he didn't write about it on the day," she said.

"That he may have just added it because he thought he'd better say he did something on behalf of the King.

"It's a bit hard to prove or disprove and it depends on how much you read into journal edits, was it Captain Cook who changed it or a later editor? There is room for doubt but it certainly can't be proven."

It was also interesting that despite his orders to gain the "consent of the natives", no treaties were agreed unlike in places like New Zealand, North America and Canada.

"So Australia is the odd one out with no treaties," Prof McGrath said.

It seems Cook may also have given authorities the impression there were hardly any natives in Australia as Governor Arthur Phillip, who arrived with the First Fleet in 1788, wrote in his journal there were lots more natives than originally thought.

"That's curious," Prof McGrath said. "They must have had so little to do with them during the short stay of Captain Cook that they must not have seen many."

Another interesting fact was that Cook had not yet been made a captain when he arrived in Australia in 1770. He was in fact a lieutenant at the time.

"But everyone says Captain Cook because it sounds better," Prof McGrath said.

RELATED: [What life was like for Aboriginal people during colonisation](#)

#### WAS HE CRUEL TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE?

Captain Cook did shoot at Indigenous people when he arrived in Australia but much of the negativity around him appears to be related to being a symbol of colonisation.

"As a key figure glorified as discovering Australia in textbooks, he's the one that gets singled out for the horror that followed," Prof McGrath said.

This includes diseases that wiped out many of the Aboriginal people once the First Fleet arrived, as well as the frontier violence.

"Captain Cook is seen as the initiator of that," she said.

"He has become a mythical figure in the wider story of colonisation."

Some Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory even believe that Captain Cook visited them even though he never went there.

"It's because he became this mythical figure associated with the theft of land and children," Prof McGrath said.

"The symbolism was also encouraged by White Australia, through statues and textbooks, so it's understandable that the Aboriginal people singled him out for negative attention."

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#### THERE WASN'T SLAVERY IN AUSTRALIA

Maybe it wasn't called slavery but what some Indigenous Australians endured would definitely be considered slavery using the modern definition of the term, Prof McGrath said.

She said technically slavery was illegal so people were not allowed to make a profit by buying and selling people.

However, Prof McGrath said there were lots of examples of Aboriginal people being given no rights and being forced into domestic or sexual slavery.

"There were reports that Aboriginal women were chained up as sex slaves and horrible stories like that," she said.

“However, the Aboriginal people are also amazingly resilient and didn’t want to see themselves as victims, they found a way around it and to maintain their pride.”

Indigenous historian **Bruce Pascoe** told ABC: “It’s pretty obvious that when you chain people up by the neck and force them to march 300km and then work on cattle stations for non-Indigenous barons, then that is slavery”.

Many Pacific Islanders were also taken, some by force or because they were tricked, to work on plantations in Queensland for low wages in harsh conditions in a practice known as blackbirding.

“We used to think that Australia had clean hands when it came to slaves but that’s not the case when you look at the history,” Prof McGrath said.

Mr Pascoe said Australia won’t have proved itself as a nation until Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal cultures are brought together.

“It’s not rocket science really,” he said. “It’s about recognition, it’s about embracing the history – good and bad.”

Mr Pascoe said successive governments had failed to make any headway on the issue, with both histories not being embraced.

Indigenous people must be included in history and the economy, he added.

“That hasn’t happened. Until it does, we really can’t call ourselves a mature nation. We can’t say we’re any better than America.”

**CO** blkvtt : Black Lives Matter

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**IPD** Aussie history

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