

**Address at a Festal Evensong for St James' Day in commemoration of  
Captain James Cook, FRS, RN and Sir Joseph Banks, Bt., GCB, PRS,  
at St James Church, King Street, Sydney, 24 July 2016.**

**Mr Paul Brunton, OAM,  
Emeritus Curator, State Library of New South Wales**

I am honoured to have been invited to give the occasional address at this ecumenical church service to commemorate Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks. Usually, at events such as this, one acknowledges any descendants of those being honoured who are present. Alas, in both the cases of Cook and Banks there are no direct descendants. Cook and his wife Elizabeth did have six children but none married. Banks and his wife Dorothea were childless.

However, such is their posthumous fame and indeed veneration that whenever I lecture on either at least one person will approach me afterwards to boast that he or she is a direct descendant. One dear gentleman once told me he was descended from *both*. I replied 'extraordinary, sir, simply extraordinary' and he went away as happy as a pig in mud. So if you have come to boast about your family connection, find someone who looks as though they might be sympathetic. I am not.

A memorial plaque to both Cook and Banks is truly an inspired idea. They *should* be commemorated together because, particularly on the *Endeavour* voyage of 1768-1771, they did in fact work as a team – a remarkably productive and harmonious team.

All Australians know, or at least they ought to know, that the *Endeavour*, under the command of James Cook and with Joseph Banks on board, sailed along the east coast of Australia in 1770. On reaching Possession Island at the tip of Cape York, Cook claimed the east coast for King George III. Nine years later, and after Cook's death, Banks gave evidence to a House of Commons Committee charged with recommending a destination to which convicts could be transported as the war with the American colonies had closed that country's borders. Banks recommended the east coast of Australia where at Botany Bay in May 1770 he had spent a blissful week collecting plants.

The *Endeavour* voyage inaugurated Cook's stellar career and was for Banks the adventure of a lifetime which led to his generous patronage towards the Colony of NSW until his death.

No-one really knows why James Cook was chosen to command the *Endeavour*. He was a labourer's son from Yorkshire, born in 1728, and did not enter the Royal Navy until he was 27 – exceedingly old for a service where entrance was usually at 12 or 13. In fact, he was 17 before he had even seen the sea.

He was 40 when he was appointed to *Endeavour* and had not yet risen above master, an important specialised position on board ship but not on the promotional ladder. His charts, mainly of North America, were highly regarded but there were many officers available who were more senior.

Cook was not in any case the first choice. Alexander Dalrymple was but he withdrew at the last minute and the Admiralty needed to fill the vacancy quickly. The main reason for the voyage was to observe from Tahiti the transit of the planet Venus across the face of the sun – and that would occur on 3 June 1769 whether anyone was there to observe it or not. Time was of the essence and Cook was at least in London and available. It is also possible that no-one else wanted the job – there was little fame and even less fortune involved.

Cook almost certainly had a couple of patrons – Sir Hugh Palliser and Philip Stephens – who suggested the appointment. Cook had served at sea under Palliser who later arranged for him to survey Newfoundland. Stephens was the highly influential secretary (Permanent Head as we would say) of the Admiralty. Both were admirers of Cook's work, in fact after Cook's death Palliser erected on his estate the first statue of the navigator. Both men were keen to give him a lift onto the promotional ladder. And Cook was just the man to make the most of this.

He successfully observed the transit and then searched, as instructed, for the Great South Land – the huge landmass in the south Pacific which was thought to exist in order to balance the landmass in the northern hemisphere. Cook did not succeed, not surprisingly, because The Great South Land does not exist. However, he charted New Zealand by circumnavigating it, found the strait which would later bear his name, and in the process cleared up the fragmentary squiggle left by Abel Tasman 126 years previously.

Having completed all his instructions he then decided to go one step further and sail west until he encountered the east coast of New Holland – as the western side of Australia was called having been charted by the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

This kick-started what had until then been a pedestrian career and catapulted him to stardom. He had gone the extra mile and was determined to follow this coast wherever it led. He commanded two subsequent voyages which

scotched once and for all the existence of a Great South Land, came within coo-ee of the Antarctic continent, and charted the last unknown - the Pacific Ocean.

'I whose ambition leads me' he wrote on 30 January 1774 as he reached 71° 10' south latitude, a record which would remain for 50 years, 'I whose ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has been before me, but as far as I think it possible for man to go'

When the French explorer La Perouse left Botany Bay on his Pacific voyage in 1788, almost a decade after Cook's death, he remarked that Cook had left him nothing to do but admire him. The chart of the Pacific is indeed Cook's memorial

James Cook was killed at Hawaii on 14 February 1779 aged 50. It was a gruesome death. Plays, pantomimes, ballets, books, pamphlets and paintings followed and the attention has never ceased.

Joseph Banks was born in 1743 into the landed gentry of Lincolnshire and followed the usual trajectory – Harrow, Eton and Christ Church, Oxford where, as a gentleman, he did not of course bother taking a degree. But then he broke the mould. Not for him the grand tour of Europe; 'Every blockhead does that' he said 'my grand tour shall be one around the whole world'.

He had been bored by the classical curriculum at Eton and Christ Church and independently developed his passion for botany.

On coming down from Oxford, he inveigled himself onto the *Endeavour* voyage in early 1768 – before Cook had even been appointed. And having obtained permission, rather grudgingly given by the First Lord of the Admiralty, for himself and himself alone we soon find that this later increased to include a staff of 8: a naturalist, 2 artists, a secretary; 2 retainers and two black servants, the latter the latest in chic for the young aristocrat. Also two hunting dogs – a gentleman could hardly be expected to sail without these. Charm and persistence combined with wealth and a touch of influence had worked their magic.

Banks and his cohort was firmly ensconced when Cook was appointed and Cook would have to share the Great Cabin, the only decent space on board and traditionally the Captain's domain, not only with Banks but also with the artists and botanists for whom, and for Banks as well, it was a working office. So what might be the human dynamics would you think in a situation involving a 40 year old commander from the wrong side of the tracks who had only just been promoted lieutenant being forced to share his space with a 25 year old

milord and the milord's hangers-on, all on board purely because of Banks' status. Sparks could fly. It is a tribute to both Cook and Banks that they did not.

Both of course had work to do. Cook the surveyor and Banks, no dilettante, a serious scientist.

There was mutual respect. Banks admired Cook's dedication to duty and obvious cartographic abilities. Cook was quite prepared to learn from Banks the art of journal writing and quick to recognise Banks' usefulness as a go-between in transactions with the various societies they met en route.

Cook was not your typical naval captain from Central Casting and Banks certainly not your typical aristocratic Hooray Henry. Both held advanced views particularly on race.

Neither was Eurocentric and readily admitted that other societies had aspects which Britain could well adopt. These societies were to be studied, their languages were to be learnt and communication was to be respectful. Violence against indigenes was a last resort. Cook's death in 1779 was portrayed in Britain at the time as that of a great hero cut down by savages but this is neither how Cook nor Banks would have described it.

Cook and Banks were eager to learn about Polynesian navigation from the Society Islander Tupaia and the three of them produced the first map of the Pacific reflecting Polynesian knowledge.

Banks attempted to learn some of the Pacific languages and was skilled in creating trust between the inhabitants and the British. But drawing up vocabularies was fraught with difficulty, particularly in societies without a written language. Our word kangaroo is from Banks, ie. Banks transcribed what he thought he heard when an Aboriginal person at the Endeavour River now Cooktown, Queensland, may or not have been answering Banks' question what is that animal? Research has suggested that it may not have been the word for the animal at all and may have meant something like 'go away'. In any case, Banks spelt it 'kanguroo' presumably because that was closer to the pronunciation than how we now spell it - 'kangaroo'. So not only may it be the wrong name but we may be pronouncing it incorrectly as well.

When *Endeavour* returned home in July 1771, it carried the evidence of Cook's achievements: the observation of the Transit of Venus; the circumnavigation of New Zealand; the charting of the Australian east coast, the successful route through Torres Strait. It also carried a cornucopia of natural history collected by Banks and his staff: 30,000 plant specimens, revealing 1400 species new to science, and about 1000 species of animal. Drawings of nearly 1000 plants

had been made and of 298 animals. In addition there was a load of artefacts from Rio de Janeiro, Tierra del Fuego; the Society Islands, New Zealand, and Australia. It was dubbed 'The Argonautic expedition for the discovery of nature'. And another expedition to the South Seas by Cook was instantly planned.

And then the Cook/Banks team blew up. Banks, still only 28, spell bound by the Pacific, its societies and its natural history, wanted to return. This time he wanted to take 20 assistants with him and have a larger ship with more spacious quarters. He was young and cocky and threw his weight around. For the first and last time in his life, he behaved badly. Cook bided his time while working quietly and deferentially behind the scene. He was not going to accept the sort of ship he thought inappropriate and all Banks' servants. In the end, Cook won despite Banks appealing to his personal friend Lord Sandwich who was now First Lord of the Admiralty. Banks exploded and went to Iceland.

The explosion did not last as explosions rarely do. While at Cape Town on the way out on this second voyage Cook received a letter from Banks conveying the news that Cook had been promoted commander. Banks had a hand in this. Cook replied that 'Promotion unsolicited to a man of my station in life must convey a satisfaction to the mind that is better conceived than described... 'To a man of my station' indeed. He knew his place and there was no mileage in antagonising Banks unnecessarily.

The relationship was re-established. Banks actively supported Cook's third great voyage to the Pacific and was closely involved in the publication of Cook's accounts of the second and third voyages and arranged a generous government annuity for Cook's wife after her husband's death.

Although Banks never held any Government position, he became virtually a Minister for Australia. He was regularly consulted about Australian affairs. He corresponded confidentially with the early governors and, in the case of William Bligh, the fourth governor, engineered his appointment and had his salary doubled. He sent out botanical collectors such as George Caley; Allan Cunningham and George Suttor. The voyage of Matthew Flinders on *Investigator*, 1801-1803, which completed the map of Australia, was very much Banks' project. 'Is my proposal for an alteration in the undertaking for the Investigator approved', Banks wrote to the Navy Board in April 1801. 'Any proposal you may make will be approved. The whole is left entirely to your decision' was the reply. Banks paid for the artists and botanists on this voyage.

He became virtual director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in 1773 and fashioned it into a scientific establishment, which was the model copied throughout the world, for example; our own Botanic Gardens which celebrates its bicentenary this year. He was elected President of the Royal Society in 1778

and reigned – it is not an inappropriate word – for 40 years making science part of Government policy. The baronetcy came in 1781.

‘Wide as the world is’ Lord Hobart wrote to Banks in 1793, ‘traces of you are to be found in every corner of it’. And especially in Australia which had so ignited Banks’ imagination in 1770.

Governments could fall, interest in Australia could wane, but Banks was always there, guiding and directing until his death in 1820 at the age of 77.

The labourer’s son from Yorkshire who became the greatest seaman of the age and the aristocrat from neighbouring Lincolnshire who used his wealth for public rather than private good is perhaps an odd couple. But this odd couple inaugurated European Australia. They are if you like our Romulus and Remus and I am sure are smiling today at being commemorated as a duo in St James King Street. Each would consider himself honoured to be linked with the other.