

A seafarer's cottage to Cook up a storm

It is 70 years since Cooks' Cottage was erected in Melbourne — and many people still wonder why, write **Jeff and Jill Sparrow**.

Generations of teachers have frogmarched schoolchildren through the narrow doors of Cooks' Cottage in the Fitzroy Gardens. Many visitors, especially the bemused foreign tourists who disembark from buses outside, doubtless wonder why a famous English sea captain chose to dwell in a rustic cottage within a Melbourne park.

The knowledge that the house came to Australia in 1934 to mark the 100th anniversary of John Batman's settlement provides an answer — but not an altogether satisfactory one. The more historically minded might still inquire as to what connects James Cook, an explorer of the late 18th century, with John Batman, a syphilitic businessman of the early 19th.

The answer lies in the process by which Melbourne's establishment consciously constructed an Anglo-Australian nationalism. Cook became part of the Batman Anniversary simply because his family cottage entered the real estate market in 1933, just as the businessman and philanthropist Sir Russell Grimwade searched

for a grand gesture to mark the occasion.

Back in Yorkshire, England, some locals openly questioned the wisdom of allowing cashed-up foreigners to strip-mine their historic sites, especially when Richard Linton, the agent-general for Victoria in England, overcame the owners' objections to the building leaving the country simply by upping his offer. Others echoed a British newspaper, which argued: "A more senseless move we have seldom met."

With the value of the building residing entirely in its historical context, shifting it thousands of miles seemed a curious project. Yet Linton's men had their orders and they assiduously tore Cook's family home into its constituent bricks, to be shipped over the seas.

The arrival of the atomised cottage in Melbourne presented Sir Russell and Victoria's premier, Sir Stanley Argyle, with a thorny problem. The reassembled icon needed a prominent place of display. But where? They decided that the lawns of the State Library in Swanston Street would provide the ideal showcase for the

cottage's sylvan charms. Unfortunately, Melbourne's artistic community reacted with horror to what one MP dubbed an "aesthetic atrocity". As national gallery trustee John Shirlow put it, they feared "the imposing facade of the (library) would be spoiled by this squalid little building in front".

The distinguished impressionist Arthur Streeton explained: "It would be just as incongruous to take a grand masterpiece by Rembrandt or Titian, and paint two or three bananas and a cup of tea in the corner."

The crunch came when *The Argus*, the newspaper most closely associated with Grimwade's schemes, published a composite photo of the cottage on the library lawns. It rather confirmed the comment from a Melbourne councillor that the premier might as well "dump a henhouse in front of the gallery as put the dilapidated cottage there".

As debate raged in the papers, burghers from across the city — indeed, across the country — stepped forward to explain how their particular suburb possessed the qualities necessary to situate a Yorkshire cottage to best effect. The honour, however, eventually fell to the Fitzroy Gardens — a central location that offered more security. Ensnconed in the lush grounds, the house appeared, as



one paper enthused, "just as if Cook were there".

The Melbourne crisis resolved, Grimwade turned his attention back to Yorkshire. To soothe whatever rancour lingered after the cottage's removal, he resolved to provide the local council with a cairn of Victorian rock, symbolising Cook's voyage to the new country from the old.

Here, the glitch came through the captain's regrettable failure to actually touch Victorian soil — an oversight that rendered the symbolism of Grimwade's gesture somewhat problematic. The ever-resourceful businessman mounted an expedition to Cape Everard, a place the explorer had at least seen, albeit from out at sea. He collected local boulders to shape into a monument, which he shipped to Yorkshire. To emphasise the value of this dubious object, he

also presented the villagers with what Chris Healy describes as "a short 16mm film on the making of the memorial, starring himself". It was a bizarre gesture.

Yet the real controversy came not from what the monument said about the explorer in Australia, but from the bold identification of the vanished cottage as Captain Cook's birthplace. The Yorkshire parish council, perhaps concerned that so large a historical claim raised the question as to why the sale had ever been permitted, loudly denied the building represented any such thing. Its chairman declared: "The weight of evidence that Captain Cook lived at this cottage seems to be so small that it is doubtful whether he ever visited the cottage during his parents' residence there ... (therefore it) could hardly be called Captain Cook's cottage" without straining at a gnat.

The council therefore made it clear that unless the text were amended, it would boycott the ceremony. The chairman added, in a phrase that reverberated around the world: "I am of the opinion that the Victorian government has been sold, not a cottage, but a pup."

This fresh development sparked a discussion in the Melbourne press as to the value of the city's acquisition. While many detected sour grapes in Yorkshire's attitude, it became apparent that an earlier exhibition of Cook memorabilia had indeed deliberately omitted the cottage as insufficiently important. Some might think that the ceremonial handover of a pile of stones from a place that Cook never visited (but may have seen from a distance) to replace a building in which Cook didn't live (but may have once visited) fully justified *The Age's* comment that: "On the whole,



Cooks' cottage in its resting place in the Fitzroy Gardens, left, and, above, the cottage in Great Ayrton, Yorkshire, in 1934, just before it was dismantled and shipped to Australia.

there has been a good deal of most unfortunate blundering in connection with the purchase of the cottage and the erection of the obelisk on the site."

Contemporary critics like Shirlow argued that the absence of any real historical connection with Cook doomed the building as a nationalist icon.

Yet nationalism rests on the assumption that all Australians share common interests or values distinct from other nations, an entirely imaginary notion in which historical accuracy plays little role. The fuss around Grimwade's project helped publicise the cottage as a "historic" attract., so much so that the Melbourne City Council found itself knocking a new doorway into icon to facilitate more rapti veneration.

The ceremonies ich reinforced nationalst mythology also provided opp unities for Aboriginal resistance. When the

government announced its intention to mark the 200th anniversary of the "discovery" of Australia with an historical re-enactment of Cook's landing, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders declared the anniversary as a day of mourning, with a protest in Sydney and vigils elsewhere.

In Melbourne, a demonstration gathered outside Cooks' Cottage behind a banner reading "Cook is Bad News for Aborigines". About 150 people carried placards denouncing white settlement as an invasion and demanding Aboriginal land rights. Many wore red headbands to symbolise the blood spilt by settlers in the aftermath of Cook's voyage.

On Australia Day 1976, a rally for Aboriginal rights again targeted the cottage. The city march culminated in a visit to the tourist shrine, where activists re-enacted the rites of white settlement by offering the startled caretaker a handful of beads in return for his building. When he refused to cede ownership, they draped the house in flags and held a speak-out.

Today, the casual visitor might note the placement of the apostrophe at Cooks' Cottage, signalling an association with many Cooks rather than the sin ar captain.

If ey look carefully enough, they 'ght also see the sign that original affairs minister Rob A Tickner erected in 1991, ch 'gging a display at the cottage to acknowledge that Abo iginal people actually lived in stralia prior to Cook's visit.

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