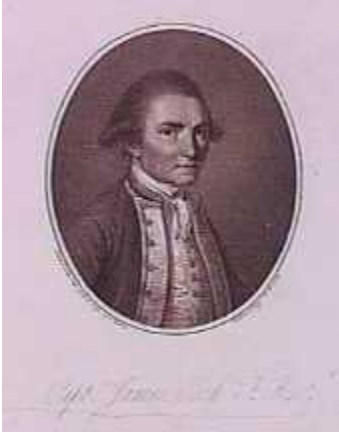


Discovery



Captain James Cook

In 1770 British Captain James Cook finally ended the mystery of "Terra Australis Incognita" for the European world. Although partly discovered and mapped to the west and north by Dutch and Portuguese traders and explorers and by English pirate William Dampier, until Cook's four-month cruise on the ship Endeavour the maps of the time showed a blank.

Of course the Aboriginal inhabitants had, over tens of thousands of years, mapped the land in their own way through their "Dreaming", a complex intertwining of land, culture, language, family relations and spiritual selves. This was put under pressure from the first moment of Cook's landing at Botany Bay on April 29th, 1770.

Botany Bay is now surrounded by the suburbs of Sydney. Later in August 1770, Captain James Cook, in the name of King George III of Great Britain, claimed possession of the whole east coast of Australia.

Ten years after the naming of Botany Bay the First Fleet left Britain in May 1787 and reached Botany Bay on January 19-20 1788. It was a long, hard journey. There were eleven vessels which carried about 730 convicts (prisoners) and 250 free settlers. The prisons of Britain were so overcrowded at this time that some prisoners were housed on ships around London. At that time it was possible to be sent to prison - or, even worse, Australia! - for crimes as small as the stealing of a loaf of bread.

The song "Botany Bay" lets us understand the desperate and hard life, in a strange inhospitable land, faced by the convicts (as well as the free settlers). Yet in spite of this the song shows a great spirit of optimism; even cheekiness.

One of the most evil and notorious penal colonies was situated at Port Arthur in Tasmania, where the prisoners were treated with extreme cruelty. You can read about it in Marcus Clarke's novel "For The Term of His Natural Life". Also, all but one of the Aborigines there was killed by the settlers. These killings happened throughout Australia.

For Australians now, the song produces a mixture of feelings - sympathy for the poorly-treated convicts (the ancestors of many "white" Australians), sorrow and regret for the inhumane treatment of the Aboriginals along with admiration for the brave spirit of the newcomers.