Confronting Cook

Keith Vincent Smith

On the afternoon of 28 April 1770, two naked Aboriginal warriors stood their ground to defend their Country when Lieutenant James Cook and an armed party of marines from the discovery ship HM Bark *Endeavour* landed on the south shore of a small, shallow harbour, now called Botany Bay. They belonged to the Gweagal (‘Fire’) clan at Kundul (Kurnell) on the southeastern coast of the continent of Australia.

The English voyagers made signs that they wanted water, but the two men shook their spears and shouted their defiance. ‘Their countenance bespoke displeasure; they threatened us, and discovered hostile intentions, often crying to us, Warra warra wai’, wrote the young Scots artist Sydney Parkinson (1745?-1771).1 These words, meaning ‘go away’ or ‘begone’, were the first ever spoken to Europeans by the native inhabitants of southeastern Australia. In Cook’s boat with Parkinson were the botanist Joseph Banks and his colleague Daniel Solander, Isaac Smith, the 15-year-old cousin of Mrs Cook (later an Admiral), and Tupai, a high priest, navigator and artist from the Pacific island of Raiatea near Tahiti, who had acted as an interpreter and go-between with the Maori in New Zealand.2 They attempted to land at a beach near a group of bark huts, which Banks described as a ‘small village’.3 At first, Cook thought the Aboriginal men were beckoning the English sailors to come ashore. He was mistaken:

… for as soon as We put the Boat in they again Came to oppose us upon which
I fir’d a Musquet between the 2 which had no other effect than to make them
retire back where bundles of their Darts lay & one of them took up a Stone &
threw at us which caused my firing a Second Musquet load with small shott, &
altho’ some of the Shott struck the Man yet it had no other Effect than to make
him lay hold of a Shield or Target to defend himself …

After the first musket shot, the younger man dropped a bundle of spears, but quickly
snatched them up again. The small shot struck and wounded the older man’s legs. He ran
to a hut and, wrote Parkinson, ‘brought out a shield, of an oval figure, painted white in
the middle, with two holes in it to see through’.4 ‘Immediately after this we landed’, wrote Cook,
‘which we had no Sooner done than they throw’d 2 darts at us this obliged me to fire a third
Shott soon after which they both made off.’5

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Beaglehole, *Banks Journal*.


Fig. 1. Australian Aborigines and artefacts. Sydney Parkinson, 1770. Pencil Bl., Add. MS 9345, f. 14v.
This encounter was the most hostile show of resistance against the crew of the *Endeavour* while in Australia. In Banks’s opinion, the ‘two people who opposd the Landing of our two boats full of men for near a quarter of an hour and were not to be drove away till several times wounded with small shot’ were the exception to what he perceived as a ‘pusillanimous’ or cowardly race of people.7

While at Botany Bay, the 25-year-old Parkinson drew ten field sketches (now rather faded) in pencil on a single sheet of paper, a precious ethnographic record now in the British Library. His subjects include a bark hut, shields, paddles and details of the simple bark fishing canoes used by the Aboriginal people.

Parkinson also sketched two Aboriginal men. The figure of the man at right (fig.1) and his weapons is significant. Apart from the headband of an initiated man, he wears no clothing. His body is painted on the chest and legs. He holds an oval parrying shield with a small round hole near its centre in his left hand. His right hand is drawn back, poised to throw a spear with a wooden spear-thrower or *womera* (*woomerah*). This is not a killing spear, but a four-pronged spear used for fishing, which the English sailors called a fishgig.

Based on Parkinson’s sketch (iconographic evidence) and comparisons with his journal (ethnographic evidence) and events and artefacts described by Cook, Banks, and the astronomer Charles Green in their journals, it can be claimed that this is a portrait of the spearman who opposed Cook and his landing party. Parkinson was close enough to make a good likeness, as one of the spears came so close, he wrote, that it ‘fell beneath my feet’.8

The second Aboriginal man, who is unarmed, has painted pipeclay around his eyes, which look like spectacles, while the design on his chest looks curiously like a human figure with outstretched arms.

**The spear**

The astronomer Charles Green, who, with Cook, had observed the Transit of Venus in Tahiti in 1769, explicitly described the spear launched at Cook’s landing party as a four-pronged fishing spear. Green wrote:

… the captain &c. were opposed on the rocks and sandy beach by two Indians, with 4-pronged wooden fish-gigs, tipped at the end with four fish-bones, and fastened to ye wood with a gummy resinous substance. One of them, under cover of a shield, approached the boats and threw his gig, and in return was wounded with small shot.9

The enhanced detail (fig. 2) of Parkinson’s sketch clearly shows that the spearman is about to launch a fishgig with four bone prongs, just as stated by Green. Aboriginal men used these pronged spears to catch fish, which was their major food source. Fishing spears were usually hand-held and the *womera* was used only to launch killing spears for small game. This shows that the Gweagal men quickly snatched up their fishing spears to defend themselves on the spur of the moment. Aboriginal women mainly fished from canoes, using handlines and shell lures.

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Fig. 2. Enhanced detail of Parkinson’s sketch (fig. 1), showing the oval shield, spear-thrower and fishing spear.
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Cook and Banks threw a few strings of beads, some ribbons and pieces of cloth into a bark hut where four children were hiding. ‘We however thought it not improper to take away with us all the lances [spears] which we could find about the houses, amounting in number to forty or fifty’, wrote Banks. All except one were fishing spears. Cook’s personal collection of Botany Bay artefacts was dispersed after his return to London. He gave some spears to his patron, John Montague, First Lord of the Admiralty and 4th Earl of Sandwich, who donated them to Trinity College, Cambridge, in October 1771. They are now in the Cook Collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University. Of the four surviving spears, all with bone points, two are three pronged fishing spears and one has four prongs. The fourth is a single shaft with a hardwood head.

The spear-thrower

Cook and his officers at first thought that the Aboriginal spear-throwers were ‘wooden swords’, used as clubs. Aboriginal hunters propelled their long spears, made from sections of the stem of the grass tree (Xanthorrhoea species), at kangaroos, wallabies and small game by harnessing the powerful lever action of the spear-thrower or womera. Parkinson’s sketch is the first representation of what Banks described as ‘a short stick which he seemed to handle as if it was a machine to throw the lance’. ‘This type of spear-thrower, with a peg of wood or bone hafted at one end, and a shell at the other, for use as an adze, was described by several First Fleet historians, but few actual examples survive’, wrote Isabel McBryde. ‘One is in the collection of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.’

In August 1770, Banks wrote a summary of his observations on the country and its people, titled ‘Some account of that part of New Holland now called New South Wales’. In his journal, Banks drew and described the ‘instrument’ or ‘contrivance’ used by the Aborigines to propel spears.

The instrument with which they threw them [lances or spears] was a plain stick or piece of wood 2 and ½ or 3 feet in length. at one end of which was a small knob or hook and near the other a kind of cross piece to hinder it from slipping out of their hands. With this contrivance, simple as it is and ill fitted for the purpose, they threw the lance 40 or more yards with a swiftness and steadiness truly surprising; the knob being hooked into a small dent made in the top of the lance they held it over their shoulder and shaking it an instant as balancing threw it with the greatest ease imaginable. The neatest of these throwing sticks that we saw were made of a hard reddish wood polish & shining; their sides were flat and about 2 inches in breadth and the handle or part to keep it from dropping out of the hand covered with thin layers of polished bone very white …

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11 Cambridge, University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cook Collection, UCMAAD, 1914, pp. 1–4.
Fig. 3. Shield from New Holland. John Frederick Miller. 1771. Pen and wash. BL, Add. MS. 23920, vol. i, f. 35.
The shield

The shield held by the Aboriginal spearman in Parkinson’s drawing (fig. 1) exactly fits the description given by Banks, who took it away from the scene.

Defensive weapons we saw only in Sting-Rays bay [Botany bay] and there only a single instance — a man who attempted to oppose our Landing came down to the Beach with a shield [sic] of an oblong shape about 3 ft long and 1 ½ broad made of the bark of a tree: this he left behind when he ran away and we found upon taking it up that it plainly had been pierced through with a single pointed lance near the center.15

Banks’s description matches the drawing of a bark shield by John Frederick Miller (fig. 3) now in the British Library signed and dated 1771. Miller captions a spear, No. 3, in ink as ‘A Fish Spear from [New Holland]’. The likely original shield picked up by Banks at Botany Bay, on which Miller modelled his drawing, was formerly in the Cook Collection of the Museum of Mankind, now the British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas in London.16 It is described as a ‘Bark Shield. From Botany Bay, New South Wales, Australia. Collected on the first voyage of James Cook (1768–71). AOA Q78.0c.839’.17

Banks employed Miller, a skilled natural history artist, to complete Sydney Parkinson’s sketches. Archaeologist J. V. S. (Vincent) Megaw noted that the shield has a bent wooden handle and that ‘the hole which he [Parkinson] shows in the centre of the shield matches precisely the position of that visible’ on the Museum of Mankind example.18

Naming the spearman

Aboriginal people at Botany Bay passed down the story of the spearman and his name for generations. In the 1840s, an Aboriginal woman named Biddy Coolman (Cooman) gave this version of the encounter in 1770 to Richard Longfield, who told William Houston, who wrote it down for the first time in 1905.

They all run away: two fellows stand; Cook shot them in the legs; and they run away too!

Biddy, ‘who often yarnd with Mr. Longfield’, said the spearman’s name was Cooman and that he was the ancestor of her husband, also called Cooman, and often described as ‘the last of the Georges River Tribe’.19 The Georges River flows into Botany Bay. In 1901, Mary Everitt, a Sydney schoolteacher and scholar of Aboriginal languages, referred to Biddy Cooman, who had remarried and was known as Granny or Biddy Giles, in a letter to A. G. Stephens, editor of the magazine The Bulletin.

15 Beaglehole, Banks Journal, ibid.
16 British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania and Americas, AOA Q78.0c.839.
17 It and may be viewed online at: www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_image.aspx?image=k58542.jpg&retpage=15739
19 Richard Longfield to W. Houston, 1905, Archives of Captain Cook’s Landing Place Trust, Box 12, item 141, pp. 2, 6.
Granny Giles’ husband - Old Cooman, or Goomung … He was a tiny child when Capt. Cook came. He was alive, an extremely old man, when Dunbar was wrecked.20

The clipper Dunbar, bound from Plymouth to Sydney, was wrecked at the South Head of Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) in 1857, but Cooman, born about 1800, and the grandson of the spearman, had died at Liverpool (Sydney) one year earlier.21

In the vocabulary included in An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales (London, 1798), David Collins, Acting Judge Advocate of New South Wales, recorded Go-mang as ‘Grandfather’, which in Aboriginal usage might also mean ‘grandson’.22

In his engraving, Two of the Natives of New Holland, Advancing to Combat (fig. 4), Thomas Chambers (1724-1789) reconstructed the confrontation at Botany Bay. Although he took Sydney Parkinson’s original figures (fig. 1) into account, Chambers was more influenced by Parkinson’s verbal description of the event. Parkinson wrote that ‘some [of the Aborigines] were painted white, having a streak round their thighs, two below their knees, one like a sash over their shoulders, which ran diagonally downwards, and another across their foreheads’, which can clearly be seen.23 The second band of paint below the knees, obvious in the enhancement of Parkinson’s sketch (fig. 2), is echoed in the engraving.

Chambers follows Parkinson’s written description of the shield, which has ‘two holes in it to see through’, but the man carried his womera as a ‘wooden club’ and the spearman throws a pointed spear without a spear-thrower. James Mario Matra, a North American midshipman on the Endeavour, described similar oval shields in which ‘we observed small holes or apertures, designed to afford a prospect of the movements of their enemies when the shield is employed for guarding the head’.24

Apart from the bone ornaments (nose pegs) and tattooing (body painting), wrote Australian art historian Bernard Smith: ‘Everything else; the shield, sword, dart, the pose of the figure and method of dressing the hair, owes far more to the engraver’s knowledge of classical sculpture than to his knowledge of the Australian aborigine’.25

Sydney Parkinson, originally employed by Banks to paint botanical specimens, died at sea on 27 January 1771 from malaria after the Endeavour left Batavia (Jakarta) and was not on hand in London to correct these errors. Charles Green died a few days later. Parkinson had been a prolific illustrator, often sitting up all night in the ship’s cabin drawing or writing in his journal. On 12 May 1770, as the Endeavour sailed north from Botany Bay, Banks wrote: ‘In 14 days just, one draughtsman has made 94 sketch drawings, so quick a hand has he acquired by use.’26

20 Mary Everitt, Upper Picton, in a letter sent to A. G. Stephens, Sydney, 24 June 1901, 2/950a, Hayes Collection, University of Queensland Library, Brisbane, Queensland.
21 Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales Registrar-General, Sydney, Reg #4106, 1865.
23 Parkinson, op. cit.
Fig. 4. Two of the Natives of New Holland, Advancing to Combat. Thomas Chambers. Hand-coloured engraving. Sydney Parkinson, *Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas* (London, 1773), plate XXVII. LR.294.c.7.