



## FLAGGING AUSTRALIA: CLAIMS AND IDENTITY

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Flags Australia

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper has developed out of my research project, “Australian National Identity: Somewhere Between the Flags?” which investigates the cultural significance of the Australian and Aboriginal flags in relation to national identity with emphasis on what these flags might signify to Indigenous people. In this paper, I present information regarding the planting of the Union Jack by James Cook and discuss some of the subsequent events that have responded to the dominance of this prominent national symbol.

The history of the national flag in Australia has been fraught, as I will demonstrate, and the colonial dispossession of Aboriginal people and their sovereignty continues to challenge a national identity that continually attempts to revive itself through ceremonial and flag-waving events. In contemporary times this contestation has been augmented by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reasserting their sovereignty through flags that identify their distinct cultural pride and heritage and that symbolise opposition to the hegemony of the Australian national flag with its emblematic colonial reminder.

### CLAIMS

On 29 April 1770, Lieutenant James Cook first stepped onto Australian soil and planted a British flag. This event occurred at Kurnell in Botany Bay, Sydney, and was recorded thus: “[D]uring my stay in this harbour I caused the English colours to be displayed on shore every day, and the ship’s name, and the date of the year to be inscribed upon one of the trees near the watering place”.<sup>1</sup> Cook departed Kurnell, the first landing place, after just a few days and sailed north. It was not until Cook ‘discovered’ an island several kilometres off the northern tip of Queensland that he became certain no other Europeans had visited. It was on this island, known as Bedanug to the traditional owners, that Cook, on 22 August 1770, planted a flag and formally declared the *whole* of the east coast of the continent to be a British possession:

I now once more hoisted English Coulers and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast . . . by the name New South Wales, together with all the Bays, Harbours, Rivers and Islands situate upon the said coast, after which we fired three Volleys of small Arms which were Answerd by the like number from the Ship.<sup>2</sup>

Planting a flag in the ground to take possession of land can be traced back several centuries. During the Middle Ages flags were officially recognised as a way of transferring privilege or title to land.

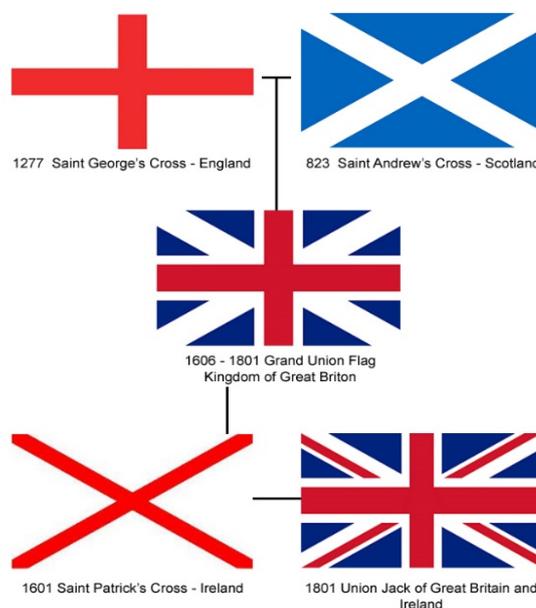
Throughout the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, as European colonists explored and seized lands in other parts of the world, the international legal principle of Discovery mandated that by planting their flag in the soil, “the discovering European nation gained real property rights to native lands and sovereign powers over native people and governments”.<sup>3</sup> Having planted the flag on Bedanug, Cook concretised British sovereignty by renaming it “Possession Island”. Cook left Australian waters and did not return. His legacy however lingers and the legitimacy of this act of ‘possession’ remains contested.

The ongoing failure to recognise Indigenous sovereignty in Australia can be traced back to 1768 when two directives of the *Secret Instructions* given to Cook by the British Admiralty were subsequently disregarded. Cook was directed to take possession of land only with “the Consent of the Natives”, or if the country is found to be “uninhabited”.<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that Cook’s refusal to abide by official dictates was a foundational act upon which the devastating effects of colonialism were introduced: such a blatant act of ‘possession’ in many ways secured British sovereignty and negated any need for recognition or treaties with the existing sovereign owners. Following this argument, Cook’s planting of the flag and subsequent naming of the island assumes an aggressive act of invasion.

On 26 January 1788, now officially known as ‘Australia Day’, the British returned to establish a penal colony. The First Fleet, commanded by Arthur Phillip landed and Phillip records in his journal, “A flagstaff was erected at Sydney Cove and possession was taken for His Majesty”.<sup>5</sup>

The Union flag used by Cook and Phillip differs from its current form. The first Union flag was created in 1606 by combining the cross of St George and the saltire of St Andrew, which were the flags of England and Scotland respectively. The saltire of Ireland’s St Patrick was not introduced until 1801. The Union flag is most commonly referred to as the Union Jack. The heraldic invisibility of Wales relates to the fact that Wales has never been classified as a kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

The link between flag and territorial claims are an undeniable part of colonisation, and Iver Neumann attests, “the European rectangular-shaped flag certainly became dominant as a consequence of colonisation”.<sup>7</sup> Pieces of colourful material are stitched together and become flags. Flags can then transform to become *the* symbol of first phase possession. This symbol then morphs into that of lingering power and claims of legitimacy. Claims which are lauded at major public events and particularly on days considered significant such as centenaries and bicentenaries.



The 200th anniversary of white settlement on 26 January 1988 had been 10 years in the making, and much of Australia was in the grip of a national celebration.<sup>8</sup> According to the then Premier, Barry Unsworth, in New South Wales alone more than 32,000 Bicentennial events were planned.<sup>9</sup> The Bicentennial logo was designed by Don Goodwin in 1981 using the Commonwealth colours of blue and golden yellow and it was adapted for use on a flag by John Vaughan. However, in 1984, the colours were altered to green and deep yellow, reflecting the formal adoption of Australia’s national colours. The flag was adjusted accordingly.<sup>10</sup> According to Robert Jarman “[T]he Australian Bicentennial symbol is a ribbon broadly representing the Australian land-mass, and the differing stripes, harmoniously combined, visually express the Bicentennial theme of ‘Living Together’”.<sup>11</sup> Notions of harmony however, were not unanimous.

Since 1938, January 26 has been publicly recognised as a day of mourning for Aboriginal people. ‘Australia Day’ is now referred to by many as ‘Invasion Day’ or ‘Survival Day’. Patrick White, English born Australian writer articulated his disdain for the colonial celebrations of Australian nationalism, as Marlene Norst notes, “two weeks before Australia Day he hoisted the Aboriginal flag and the Eureka flag on makeshift poles in the garden, besides which he was interviewed, with excerpts televised around the world”.<sup>12</sup> These flags both symbolise resistance and have gained popularity in their own right. Russell Kennedy argues, this is because “[T]heir use was not imposed from above; they were people’s flags. In Australia this has been rare. Flags represent official power”.<sup>13</sup> It was during this time that Aboriginal Warrior of the Wurundjeri, Burnum Burnum “created the Bicentennial event that was to crown them all”.<sup>14</sup>

Burnum wanted to send a message, satirising the 200 year old history of Australia, “[A] bit of theatre-of-the-absurd to show the absurdity of people on the other side of the world claiming a whole continent for themselves”.<sup>15</sup> On 26 January 1988, Burnum, overshadowed by the white cliffs of Dover, raised the Aboriginal flag and took possession of England. The *Daily Telegraph* reported, Burnum chose this location not only for its striking beauty, but because it reminded him “of the desert because it is *Terra Nullius* in appearance and that’s the way Captain Cook and his cohorts must have seen Australia”.<sup>16</sup>



Under the White Cliffs of Dover the icon of English sovereignty and impregnability, Burnum Burnum confutes and satirises colonial pretensions.

This was a moment captured in time, “[T]he image of the Aboriginal hero laying claim to English soil with the Aboriginal flag held proudly aloft expressed ‘more than a thousand words’”.<sup>17</sup> Burnum’s act was profoundly symbolic. According to Senator John Coulter it gave “white Australians and British people the realisation that

this occupied land, Australia, was claimed arbitrarily by an alien people without any consultation, let alone treaty or compensation”.<sup>18</sup> The lack of a Treaty, constitutional recognition, or recompense persists, an ongoing legacy of Cook’s initial ‘claim’ through the planting of the Union Jack. Burnum’s gesture signified the symbolic ‘possession’ of England through the planting of a flag which represented Aboriginal sovereignty. It was an act that momentarily destabilised the legitimacy of Australia’s claims, its sense of itself as an ‘imagined community’ of unified subjects, and its national identity.

## IDENTITY

In order to demonstrate how national identity has been affected by the flags of Australia, it is important to consider the confusion wrought by flags as public emblems. The British Union Jack was the official national flag of Australia until 14 February 1954. However, Australians could still fly the Union Jack if they chose to until 1977.<sup>19</sup> Prior to 1954, and somewhat unconventionally, two other flags, both Australian maritime ensigns, were employed for use on land. The red ensign properly belonged to merchant vessels, and the blue ensign to naval and official craft.



Australian 1903 - 08 Blue & Red Ensigns

Alongside the Union Jack, both ensigns vied for and were given space and attention in the public sphere. This naturally resulted in practical and emotional confusion around flag usage. Which flag was appropriate for which occasion and what place? This conundrum lasted over half a century and Kennedy identifies that “[T]his clumsy sequence of events must be partly to blame for the stumbling development of our national identity”.<sup>20</sup> Acknowledging the specificity of the time gives credence to Kennedy’s argument. By way of example, Elizabeth Kwan notes that during the First World War there were struggles with identity as Australians entered the war with two flags to represent their ‘dual’ nationality. Kwan surmises, “[C]ould loyalty to Australia mean disloyalty to Britain? ... whether an Australian flag could serve as the national flag without being a disloyal symbol”.<sup>21</sup>

Identity confusion would have been compounded by the fact that Australian citizens were officially subjects of the British Crown until 1949. The longstanding confusion is contextualised by Colleen McGloin who argues that “Australian national identity is produced through a range of historical events, texts, and practices that continue to inform its representation”.<sup>22</sup> Thus it can be seen that Australian identity, forged from a contestation of loyalties, continues to manifest itself through its national symbol, which by design, fails to offer national inclusivity.

Resultant issues of confusion surrounding identity have been perpetuated into the twenty first century as the flying of multiple flags indicates. Currently in Australia the national flag and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are frequently flown in unison, a gesture of inclusion that sits in opposition to the on-going realities.



Tony Burton argues, “[A]s the chief icon of a nation’s sense of who we are, the flag should express appropriately our shared traditions, history and values”.<sup>23</sup> Harold Thomas, designer of the Aboriginal flag expresses his concerns about identity. We should not, Thomas argues, “leave a mess for the kids about identity, and the number one symbol is the flag. A flag has to include all people”.<sup>24</sup>

For Indigenous people, the national flag’s colonial iconography and its heritage serves as an ongoing reminder of national exclusion. Two hundred and one years after Cook employed the Union Jack to claim Australia, the Aboriginal flag was first introduced. It came at a time when for the greater part of two centuries, Aboriginal society had been fractured by racist policies and practice. Under the auspices of *this* flag, Aboriginal people from many different nations were offered a collective and tangible symbol of unity, identity, sovereignty and pride.

Since first contact, Aboriginal resistance to colonisation has been ongoing. Each stage of political agitation, with its demands for change, recognition and equality, bolstered and propelled the next, culminating in two of the most significant and long lasting Aboriginal symbols. As Gordon Briscoe acknowledges, “Aborigines ... were conscious of their state of sensibility towards European arrival.

However, it took some time for both political consciousness and nationalism to emerge”.<sup>25</sup> The first symbol to emerge was the Aboriginal flag created in 1971. Its colours of black, yellow, and red have since become central to Aboriginal cultural identity and represent an ongoing political resistance to colonisation. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that resistance to colonialism is “performed in embodied daily practices such as the public display of the Aboriginal flag and colours on Indigenous bodies and on buildings in cities, country towns and remote communities”.<sup>26</sup> Flying the flag or wearing the colours of Aboriginal identity is not only a statement of resistance, it is also an effective way of conveying solidarity and pride.



The second symbol was an Embassy of Tents, which as John Newfong states, “[W]ith its flags fluttering proudly in the breeze, the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawns opposite the Federal Parliament has been one of the most successful press and parliamentary lobbies in Australian political history”.<sup>27</sup> It was at the Tent Embassy in July 1972, that the Aboriginal flag began to enter the psyche of the Australian public as a reminder of Indigenous opposition to colonial rule.

The history of the development of Aboriginal political activism has its origins in the African American opposition to the history of racism and discrimination from the late nineteenth century onwards. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) had a profound influence on many, including Malcolm X (1925-1965), Martin Luther King (1929-1968) and Aboriginal activists in Australia. In 1917 Garvey founded the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and by the mid-1920s established chapters in 41 countries, including Australia.<sup>28</sup> In 1920, the UNIA held its first international convention in New York’s Maddison Square Garden. Over 25,000 members attended, including a contingent from Australia.<sup>29</sup> It was here on 13 August 1920 that the Pan-African flag,<sup>30</sup> a tri-colour consisting of three equal horizontal bands of red, black and green was formally adopted. The flag was created in response to an American song of ridicule titled, “Every Race has a Flag but the Coon”,<sup>31</sup> one of many similar parodic music hall ditties that arguably drew attention to white racism. The Pan-African flag also served as an emblem of identity which would symbolically unite the African diaspora and represent its collective. Similarly Thomas notes the Aboriginal flag as, “important in helping people restore their links with their identity”.<sup>32</sup> The Pan-African and Aboriginal flags both offered tangible ways to unite those displaced by colonial policies and practice.

It was on the Sydney waterfront that Aboriginal activist Fred Maynard and others became aware of Garvey’s ideas and, the increasing realisation that they were not alone in their struggles. In 1924, as their political awareness increased, Fred Maynard and fellow activist Tom Lacy founded the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). According to Maynard many people consider the 1960s as marking the beginnings of Black political consciousness in Australia, however, he argues the AAPA is “rightfully recognised as the precursor of the Aboriginal political movement”.<sup>33</sup> The AAPA ceased in 1928, but was re-established by 26 January 1938 with Jack Patten as spokesperson. It formed a coalition with the Australian Aboriginal League, under William Cooper and the Aboriginal Progressive Association led by William Ferguson and Pearl Gibbs, to protest about the white sesquicentenary celebrations and organise a Day of

Mourning. Officially the 1938 calls for equality and citizenship rights for Aboriginal people were ignored, but the courage and resolve of those early leaders left a legacy which provided foundations for the next wave of social and political change. This legacy was also bolstered by an increased media coverage of the American civil rights movement.

As the Black Panther movement ascended, both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were assassinated. In Australia, Aboriginal activists made their call for 'Black Power' and were the catalyst for change. Paul Coe, a political activist and leader from Redfern, Sydney states that for the city dwellers in Australia, "Black Power is a policy of self-assertion, self-identity." Black Power is, "the relearning, the reinstating of black culture".<sup>34</sup> The 1967 Referendum was supported by ninety-one per cent of the population and resulted in changes being made to the Australian Constitution. Two discriminatory clauses which had adversely affected Aboriginal peoples since 1901 were removed. Of the referendum, Briscoe recalls his aspirations, it "would wipe away the injustices of the past 200 years of coercion, suppression and humiliation and establish a way of life for Aborigines that would bring the peace we are entitled to as human beings".<sup>35</sup> Despite the resounding 'yes' vote the reality for Aboriginal people was little different. Larissa Behrendt argues this was due to the systemic failure of official structures and institutions to change sufficiently, "to equalise – let alone reverse – the socio-economic impact of colonisation and past government policies and practices".<sup>36</sup> This reluctance to change is an ongoing failure, as is evidenced in present day policies, practices and national symbols.

With the delivery of the prime ministerial 'Australia Day' address by William McMahon in 1972, it became evident that neither the giving, nor the recognising of land rights for Aboriginal people would eventuate. According to McMahon, such recognition would "threaten the security of tenure of every Australian".<sup>37</sup>

This was an insidious statement, used to unease the white population, who might lose 'their' land to Aboriginal people. In response a group of young activists<sup>38</sup> drove through the night, and in the early hours of the morning,



raised a beach umbrella on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra, and identified the space as the 'Aboriginal Embassy'. Scott Robinson explains this was a multi-faceted display of symbolism, a metaphor which not only reflected the conditions under which Aboriginal people lived, but also raised questions of land ownership and status.<sup>39</sup> In the midst of a city of Embassies, overflowing with wealth, power and prestige, Aboriginal people had an umbrella for their Embassy. This quickly transformed and within a few days became a small tent city. Burton adds, "[E]mbassies show their country's flag; a collective flag for the Aboriginal nations of Australia was needed".<sup>40</sup>

Initially there were two flags raised at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Aboriginal activists wanted a symbol to both articulate their feelings of alienation, while emphasising their sovereign rights. Gary Foley notes in February, the first flag that "flew on the tents was a black, green and red pennant which was the flag developed fifty years earlier by Marcus Garvey as the symbol of his international black consciousness".<sup>41</sup> It was handstitched by Michael Anderson<sup>42</sup> who, in a show of international unity replicated the colours of the Pan-African flag. It was inverted and John Maynard explains why, "[T]he colours were not in the correct sequence because Anderson had never seen the actual flag but was only remembering what had been described to him".<sup>43</sup>

The first flag flown at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was a strategic signal. It neatly linked the Aboriginal struggle for justice to the broader international civil rights movement. In April a second flag joined the first. Foley describes it as, "comprising a spear laid across a red and black background with four crescents looking inward to symbolize the black rights struggle from the four corners of Australia".<sup>44</sup> This flag is known as the Tjuringa flag,<sup>45</sup> as it features "a barbed spear surrounded by a Tjuringa represented by four semi-circles".<sup>46</sup>



National and international support for the Embassy grew, and several months of peaceful protest passed as a transient group of Aboriginal people “remained encamped under the red, black and green flag of international Black unity”.<sup>47</sup> In July 1972 the situation changed for two reasons. First, it was sometime during this month that the Aboriginal flag made its timely arrival at the Embassy.<sup>48</sup> Second, on 20 July 1972 police entered the camp and made the first of several forced removals. The Embassy, while being physically displaced, according to Robinson, “continued to exist in the determination of the Aboriginal people”.<sup>49</sup> The Aboriginal Tent Embassy became the “human face” of Aboriginal political consciousness and Briscoe states, the Tent Embassy, “transformed any previous symbol into a national one that a series of flags personified. In my view”, Briscoe asserts, “the flag was an emergent property that presented the lasting elements of an Aboriginal response with its origin in 1901”.<sup>50</sup> According to Briscoe the Aboriginal flag was the result of seventy years of political protest.

1901 is a date which is significant for a number of reasons. On 1 January 1901 the six British colonies in Australia, that had been self-governing since the 1850s, united under a Constitution ten years in the making, which excluded Aboriginal people at every stage. Sean Brennan et al. note there, “were no Aboriginal representatives in the negotiations and processes in the 1890s that led to the establishment of the modern Australian state”.<sup>51</sup> As the modern Australian nation was born, modified versions of the colonial red and blue ensigns were endorsed, in effect the template for the current national flag. These all feature the Union Jack at the official point of honour, albeit the updated version of the flag employed by both Cook and Phillip as the symbol of national authority used to formally ‘claim’ Australia.<sup>52</sup>

The way in which colonial flags might be understood by Australian Indigenous peoples is proffered in a different context by Marcus Garvey who stated, “[T]hat we suffer so much today under whatsoever flag we live is proof positive that constitutions and laws, when framed by the early advocates of human liberty, never included and were never intended for us as a people”.<sup>53</sup>

In 1971, Harold Thomas, a member of the Luritja people of central Australia, created the Aboriginal flag. This is sometimes referred to as the Thomas flag, or the Adelaide flag as it was designed and first presented in Adelaide, or the Third flag, as it was the third flag to be flown at the Embassy.<sup>54</sup>

I can identify three events from 1970, which, when combined, resulted in the production of this striking symbol of Aboriginal identity. In 1970 Thomas wrote to the then Prime Minister, John Gorton, and enquired why no Aboriginal people were employed at the South Australian Art Gallery or Museum. Shortly afterwards Thomas was offered a job as a survey artist at the Museum.

In 1970, Thomas also met with Gary Foley, and together they talked about how they could engage and “encourage their fellow Aboriginals to ‘join the cause’ ... We ... needed a symbol of our unity – something that gave us a national identity”.<sup>55</sup> Also in 1970, at a Land Rights protest march in Adelaide, Thomas made a significant discovery. He noted, the “white sympathisers at the back marched with their assorted flags and banners while there was none of equal impact – indeed, none at all – to lead the Aboriginal people in front”.<sup>56</sup> Thomas asserts that twenty people with a flag can seem to outnumber a larger group without.<sup>57</sup> Together, Thomas and Foley decided that a flag would “provide the most appropriate focus for the land rights aspirations of Aboriginals”.<sup>58</sup>

Thomas worked at home and at the museum, where he reduced several colours on the original design to just three: “black, symbolising Aboriginal people; red, the mother earth, as well as ochre, which is used in ceremonies; and the yellow sun, the constant giver and renewer of life”.<sup>59</sup> Thomas explains that the Aboriginal flag was conceived at a time when Aboriginal people were marginalised. Thomas made the flag “to help provide identity” for Aboriginal people, the flag was to “identify self and it was not a reaction of Aborigines to Whites”.<sup>60</sup> The Aboriginal flag was first unfurled at Victoria Square, Adelaide, on National Aboriginal Day July 12 1971. A year later Gary Foley introduced the flag to the Tent Embassy in Canberra where it was adopted on a national scale. The Aboriginal flag and its colours rapidly became a multi-faceted symbol of both Aboriginal political resistance and cultural identity.

The fate of the original Aboriginal flag remains unknown. Described by journalist Tim Williams as, “one of our most powerful national symbols, the whereabouts of the original – a national treasure if it still exists – remains a mystery”.<sup>61</sup> Harold Thomas seeks to locate it and see it housed in the National Museum of Australia.

## A STRANGE COINCIDENCE AND A CLUE

During some early research (2012) I noted a black and white photograph of an Aboriginal flag with the caption underneath stating: “An “Aboriginal Embassy” consisting of three tents and a flag, set up at North Adelaide (*The Advertiser*, 14 July 1972)”.<sup>62</sup> From the photograph it was evident that this Aboriginal flag differed considerably from its present version. Square in shape, it stands in contrast to the European rectangular-shaped flags, which Neumann notes became dominant as a result of colonisation. The upper third of the flag is dark and the lower two thirds lighter. The flag carries a large central disk. *Tjuringa Dreaming: ‘An Adelaide Mystery’*,<sup>63</sup> details that off-cuts from the Thomas flag had been donated to the Museum of South Australia in 1991. Burton identifies that prior to his 1995 visit to the museum, vexillologists had “assumed that the Adelaide flag was the familiar bicolour evenly divided black over red, and in the centre, a large yellow disk overlapping both in equal parts”.<sup>64</sup> A subsequent visit to the museum in 2005 is discussed and photographs of the off-cuts detailed. Burton notes, “[T]he off-cut is the clue to how the first flag actually looked”.<sup>65</sup> I compared the 1972 black and white photograph with the 2005 photographs of the off-cuts. They seemed to match.

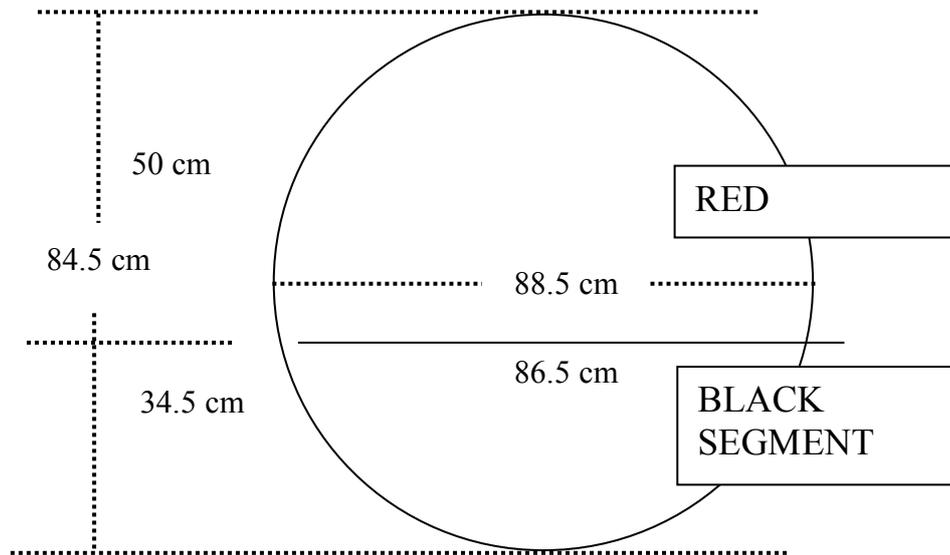
Burton furthered the investigation by:

1. Visiting the State Library to garner more information about the photograph which appeared on page 1 of the *Adelaide Advertiser* 14 July 1972 and mailing me a printout of the full text.
2. Contacting Harold Thomas who identified the flag as a copy or second generation of the original.
3. Providing a number of hypotheses:
  - The Museum offcuts are from one of the replicas, not the original.
  - They are from the original which itself had the anomaly of unequal segments in the circle.
  - That this was the original design and that replicas copied this anomaly exactly.<sup>66</sup>



Red and black off-cut from the Aboriginal flag held at Museum of South Australia Adelaide

*Crux Australis* Volume 20/1, No 81



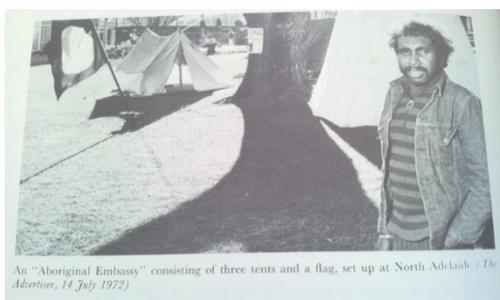
Red and black off-cut from the Aboriginal flag held at Museum of South Australia, Adelaide

The remnants of the Thomas flag in the South Australia Museum are evidence of a flag initially made to be asymmetric, though this by itself does not settle whether the black or the red band was on top.

*Crux Australis* Volume 20,1, No 81 Jan-March 2007, pp35-37



The ‘Adelaide Mystery’ is not solved, but perhaps one day further photographic evidence will be sourced that will help answer further questions raised by the sighting of the 14 July 1972 North Adelaide Tent Embassy photograph and my reading of *Tjuringa Dreaming* within the space of the same 24 hours.



Thomas states that his original flag was “squared up” and that “present day flags were too long”.<sup>67</sup> Thomas also notes, the flag manufacturers Carroll and Richardson were unable to produce the Aboriginal flag in its original, shorter proportions. Carroll and Richardson, as exclusive manufacturers of the Aboriginal flag, convinced Thomas, “that the Aboriginal flag would look out of line with other flags if it were not the same proportions as the Australian national flag”.<sup>68</sup> Thomas and Kelly concur, the original proportions of the Aboriginal flag, “were more balanced and stronger than the current stretched proportions and the central disk was better in its original larger size”.<sup>69</sup>

It could be argued that the ‘standardisation’ of the Aboriginal flag is an example of a homogenising force which has successfully imposed colonial uniformity upon the primary symbol of Aboriginal identity and pride.

An argument augmented by its gazettal. On 14 July 1995 the Aboriginal flag (and Torres Strait Islander flag) was gazetted by the Federal Government as an official flag of Australia. Thomas was critical of this as his flag was not intended to be “a flag of significance to the Australian nation generally ... (and) was not a reflection of white people’s flags”. Thomas’s complaint was compounded by the “failure of the Government to consult him as the designer and owner of copyright”.<sup>71</sup> Burton surmises, “[A]t the stroke of a pen, the defiant symbol of Indigenous resistance and survival had become a respectable part of the establishment”.<sup>72</sup> However, even though the Aboriginal flag has been homogenised by colonial uniformity and authority, it flies resplendent. A striking symbol of Aboriginal identity, pride and resistance.

## CONCLUSION

I have presented evidence in this paper of the significance of the Aboriginal flag as both a symbol of identity and a public emblem of resistance to colonial rule. In identifying this, I have also argued that the Australian national flag continues to be a fragile emblem for national identity. Given its retention of the Union Jack, the symbol of Cook’s 1770 act of ‘possession’, the Australian national flag still represents invasion and colonial oppression for the sovereign owners of this land. The national flag transmits an ongoing sense of identity confusion. The Aboriginal flag, in contrast, presents no such confusion for its people. In a land of many Aboriginal nations it has, from the outset, been a symbol of distinction which has served to both unite and provide a collective sense of identity. As the Aboriginal flag provides this identity, it also transmits a message of resistance. A message which asserts prior ownership and sovereign rights over the land mass we have come to call ‘Australia’.



**Above:** How it all began - a beach umbrella and handwritten placards:

- LAND OWNERSHIP, NOT LEASE
- LAND RIGHTS – OR ELSE!
- WHY PAY TO USE OUR OWN LAND?
- WHICH DO YOU CHOOSE?  
LAND RIGHTS OR BLOODSHED!
- LEGALLY THIS IS OUR LAND -  
WE SHALL TAKE IT IF NEED BE.



**Below:** The Tent Embassy on the lawns opposite Parliament House Canberra has seen several iterations (see above) but the objective remains the same – to be a permanent reminder of Australia’s need to commit to reconciliation and justice for Indigenous people.



## END NOTES

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- 2 Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook was here* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 35.
- 3 Robert Miller et al, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 4.
- 4 *ibid.*, pp. 174-175.
- 5 Arthur Phillip, cited in: Ray Hood, *The Official Bicentennial Diary* (Brisbane: Sunshine Diaries Pty Ltd, 1987).
- 6 Nick Groom, 'Union Jacks and Union Jills', in Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (eds), *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) p. 80.
- 7 Iver Neumann, 'Afterword', in Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (eds), *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) p. 173.
- 8 Marlene Norst, *A Warrior for Peace: Burnum Burnum* (East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 1999) p. 122.
- 9 Robert Jarman (ed.), *Debrett's Bicentennial Australia* (Perth: Debrett's Peerage (Australasia) Pty. Ltd, 1987) p. 17.
- 10 Ralph Bartlett, 'Flags of Australian Celebration', *Crux Australis*, vol. 23/2, no. 94 (2010), p. 53.
- 11 Jarman, *Debrett's Australia*, p. 12.
- 12 Norst, *Warrior for Peace*, p. 122.
- 13 Russell Kennedy, 'A New Australian Flag: National Identity and Acceptance', (MA, Monash University, 1998), p. 20.
- 14 Norst, *Warrior for Peace*, p.130.
- 15 *ibid.*, pp. 131-132.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 133. By claiming the land belonged to no one, the doctrine of *terra nullius* was used by the British to assert legal authority.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 135.
- 18 Senator John Coulter, cited in: Norst, *Warrior for Peace*, p. 136.
- 19 Elizabeth Kwan, *Flag and Nation: Australians and Their National Flags Since 1901* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), pp. 106 – 109.
- 20 Kennedy, 'A New Australian Flag', p. 17.
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- 22 Colleen McGloin, *Surfing Nation(s) Surfing Country(s): An examination of Australian surfing culture's connection to nation and Indigenous surfing's conception of nation.* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2008), p.8.
- 23 Tony Burton, 'Indigenality and Australian Vexillography', *Crux Australis*, vol. 10/4, no. 44 (1994), p. 185.
- 24 Thomas cited in: Ralph Kelly, 'A Conversation with Harold Thomas', *Crux Australis*, vol. 22/1, no. 89 (2009), p. 43.
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## BIOGRAPHICAL



Tracey Mee is a cultural historian and researcher, based in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, who migrated from England to Australia in 1984. From the outset she was keen to learn about the history of her new home, fostered initially fostered through books and memorabilia on “all things Australian”, before enrolling in 2009 at Wollongong University. Tracey majored in Indigenous Studies and Australian History, Tracey has been a member of Flags Australia since 2012. She completed a PhD at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales in 2018. Her thesis investigates the signification of the Australian national flag, with particular emphasis on what this primary symbol of nation might represent to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Her work also provides a detailed account of the Aboriginal flag.

## Postscript:

At the ICV 28 held at San Antonio Texas in July 2019, Dr Mee, having been awarded her PhD in 2018, was made a Laureate of FIAV for her scholarship and contribution to the science of vexillology.