
Cambridge refuses to return Aboriginal spears ‘stolen’ by Cook



The spears in the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

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Cambridge University has rejected a demand for the return to Australia of hugely significant Aboriginal spears collected by James Cook’s crew at Botany Bay in 1770.

The university claims that repatriating four spears made by the Gweagal people — among the oldest surviving indigenous artefacts — would damage the “integrity” of its Cook collection.

The spears, which are owned by the prestigious university and housed at Cambridge’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, were taken by Cook’s Endeavour crew from an Aboriginal camp, in what was the first encounter between Europeans and Aborigines on Australia’s east coast.

The collection — some say theft — of the spears followed an altercation between Cook’s men and two Gweagal warriors who threw spears to try to stop the Europeans from landing at Botany Bay. The Aboriginal men were fired on, and one was shot in the leg.

Last year, Aboriginal campaigner Rodney Kelly — who claims to be a descendant of Cooman, one of the warriors who confronted Cook’s party — lodged a claim to have the spears repatriated. However, a report prepared for Cambridge University by the archeology museum and obtained by *The Weekend Australian* casts doubt on Mr Kelly’s ancestry claims.

ANU historian Maria Nugent says in the report that “the identification of Cooman as being one of the men who resisted Cook’s landing ... is speculation for which there is no corroborating evidence”. Indigenous cultural consultant Shayne Williams agrees, stating in the document: “We do not know the individual identities of any of the Gweagal population of 1770, and we certainly cannot link any individual Gweagal - person of that time to any of the spears that were obtained by Cook.”

Cambridge University said it recognised “the great significance of the spears, not only to the Gweagal people, but to all Australian citizens”. However, removing parts of the university’s Cook collection would “cause considerable harm by depriving the collection of its integrity”. It also said Mr Kelly’s request “contains no clear proposal for housing and conserving the spears”.

Mr Kelly was unavailable for comment but NSW Greens MLC David Shoebridge called the report “an embarrassing charade”.