



THE UNCOMFORTABLE OXFORD PODCAST  
A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Episode 4 - Thursday, May 21st, 2020

## THE PACIFIC OCEAN

With Paula Larsson (P), Olivia Durand (O), and Sean Phillips (S)

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P:

Hello and welcome to the podcast 'A Very Brief Introduction to the British Empire'. This podcast is run by *Uncomfortable Oxford*, a student-led social enterprise. My name is Paula Larsson, I'm co-founder and co-director and also a doctoral student at the University studying the history of medicine.

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O:

And my name is Olivia Durand. I'm also a doctoral student at the University of Oxford and I study global and imperial history. Today's speaker is Sean Phillips, who is one of our fellow trainee historians and Sean's research is very much interested in the Pacific Ocean and the development of a Pan-Pacific idea across the British dominions in the early 20th century. And Sean today will give us our third lecture in the first module of our lecture series on the Pacific Ocean.

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P:



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So welcome Sean !

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S:

Hi Paula, hi Olivia, it's an absolute pleasure to be able to join you today.

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P:

How about you tell the audience and a little bit about what you study?

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S:

Sure, so the thesis that I'm working on is called the 'Pan Pacific Idea and the British Dominions' and really what it's trying to do is to think about a series of different conceptions of the Pacific that emerged in the late 19th to the mid-20th century a type of thinking in which the 'Pacific' spatially could encompass everything from the Indian subcontinent all the way across the the vast Ocean to South America.

So a really vast semi-global space was both imagined and taken seriously as a unitary, almost a single commercial, geopolitical or even cultural space in some regards too. The way I am exploring this emergent framing and discourse is to explore some of the international organizations that emerged in the period which took the Pan Pacific by name and by nature as either their field of study or framed where invitees to their organizations might be drawn from a wide variety of different empires and emergent nation states in the region today.



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I think the term that we've used from the late eighties and to the present day that best captures that spatial frame today is the Asia-Pacific. Some scholars are increasingly using the term Indo-Pacific as well as a strategic concept which also captures much of the region I'm studying in my thesis.

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O:

So when did the idea of the Pacific Ocean as a single space emerge because I imagine that initially it was a lot of very distance bases that didn't have much to do with each other?

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S:

Yeah, one of the challenges that I'm grappling with is the fact that from the very beginning of European 'discovery' (inverted commas) of the Pacific there had been a sense that the ocean was one single space, a distinct and particular oceanic region.

And you do get accounts from the 16th century onwards that talk of the Pacific or a Pacific and so the sense that it's one defined space that you could look at you see appearing then but there's a real upsurge in the discourse around the Pacific as being a single space really from the second half of the 20th century particularly around the period of the discovery of gold which was a real stimulus for Chinese labourers to the gold fields of Victoria in Australia, and also to the West Coast of the United States.

The vast 'explosive' settlement of individuals from the British Isles to Australia and New Zealand and also to what's now the United States of America and Canada as well, coupled with an increasing influence of European powers in the region.



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One other thing I've actually forgotten to mention which is hugely significant as well is the emergence of Japan and the upheaval in the Far East (as it was called) whereby Japan emerged not just as an imperial power by the early twentieth century in Korea and present-day Taiwan but in the Pacific Islands themselves through the South Seas Mandate, so when you add all these things up there is this sense that there was a real dynamism and a sense that the direction of economic and political gravity in the world actually might well be towards the Pacific sort of almost like a stage, a dramatic stage of world history might well occur in the region. This is how it was talked about at least.

And when you take all of these conceptualizations together, which were really coming not just from those writing and speaking in the English language, but also in Chinese, Japanese, Russian, French, German – a multilingual discourse which speaks about the Pacific in this regard and really reaches a sort of fever pitch by the turn of the 20th century and gets louder and louder up until the Second World War, so it's that sense that I'm trying to capture and that's reflected as well in the first when the historiography, the first histories that talk about the History of the Pacific are written in this period as well.

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So what are you gonna be talking about today in this lecture?

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S:

So in the first part of the lecture I'm hoping to convey how it was that the Pacific and its thousands of islands came to be settled centuries before any European adventurers landed on its shores.

In the second part of the lecture, I want to try and explain some of the reasons why it was that European navigators such as Captain Cook explored the Pacific in the first place and why broader European interest in the region was sustained.



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And in the third part of the lecture I wanted to dive into some case studies and to look at actually what some of those 'first encounters', as they've been called in the region, look like and about Cooke's complex perhaps even uncomfortable legacy and why that legacy matters in the region today

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P:

Great, so tell us what happened in the Pacific before the Europeans arrived.

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S:

Well this question has proven one of the great geographical mysteries – or was for a long time. Over the centuries thinkers had a whole variety of different theories as to how the Pacific Islands came to be settled.

To give you a couple of the more curious ones which haven't stuck because they're false for example:

The Norwegian, Thor Heyerdahl in the late 1940s was convinced that the early settlers of Polynesia were in fact from South America. A belief built almost exclusively on the fact that in Polynesia, there was the sweet potato, a vegetable which is indigenous to the Americas. He then attempted to demonstrate the plausibility of that thesis through the Kon-Tiki expedition.

Others thought that Polynesia may have been settled by ancient Greeks, seafaring Egyptians or perhaps even a lost tribe of wandering Jews. The New Zealander, John Macmillan Brown even considered the possibility that the islands were settled as a result of a lost, sunken continent.



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And the reason for this is because the feats of seafaring required to settle the Pacific are staggering feats, so it was thought impossible that Polynesian peoples might have been able to do this when Europeans hadn't been able to traverse those distances. What the cumulative archaeological and linguistic evidence shows is that some 60,000 years ago when early humans were exploring the limits of the continental world they were able to traverse the narrow sea passages on what we think were likely makeshift rafts from the Southeast Asian landmass, which was known as Sunda from another nearby landmass, known as Sahul which today is the region comprising Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea.

So generally we're talking about a region that is now Indonesia and making the journey across into New Guinea, which at the time was connected to Australia and from there, they were able to make a second 'hop' as it were across the seas to the Solomon Archipelago – a region broadly termed 'Near Oceania'.

Then about five thousand years ago a second group of seafarers expanded in various directions eastward from coastal China and present day Taiwan. This has been termed the Lapita expansion because of a particularly distinctive type of pottery identified with their culture called Lapita. They ventured north and eastwards towards Palau and the Mariana Islands and then about 3,500 years ago and into New Guinea and from there they began to move eastward to settle Near Oceania and then about 2,000 years ago, they then settled what's been called 'Remote' or 'Far Oceania', more simply, Polynesia.

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P:

I'm gonna betray my ignorance here, could you just explain what Oceania means?

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S:



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Today, Oceania simply refers to the Pacific Islands, defined into three groups: the islands of Polynesia, the islands of Micronesia in the North Pacific and also Melanesia which includes Papua New Guinea.

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O:

So Sean, you just talked about the migrations in the region, but how do you think it can help us rethink the whole idea of an Age of Explorations in the Pacific space?

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S:

Yeah, so the character of the way that the Pacific Islands were settled is actually really significant because if we think about them in the sense of the time span that I've just outlined... At the very time Leif Erikson the great Viking explorer reached North America, Pacific peoples had settled islands right across the whole Pacific Ocean from Easter Island (or Rapa Nui) to Aotearoa (New Zealand) and all the way up to the Hawaiian Islands.

This, in terms of the space that we're talking about here is a region in which you can fit all of the continental landmass of the entire earth and you'd have loads of room to spare, so we're talking about a remarkable feat of navigation.

And this is something as I said that happens at the time of the Vikings so when we come to talk about the 'Age of Exploration' or the 'Age of Discovery' that is very much a European way of framing and thinking about this longer history and the first encounters in the Pacific region. It's a periodisation that doesn't make any sense if you're a Pacific Islander. In short, I am trying to suggest we just need to bear in mind that there is already a highly sophisticated seafaring tradition, deep connections to the ocean and ways of knowing and ways of traversing this gigantic ocean space in the centuries prior to James Cook.



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P:

So then when did the Europeans arrive?

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S:

European exploration of the Pacific began with the Spanish and Magellan and the Portuguese and their framings of the ocean were important to begin with. They were both competing for what was imagined as the 'riches of the East' and they came to seek gold but also began to spread 'the word of God' in the process.

So they were really inspired by two obsessions: the fastest routes to the Spice Islands of modern day Maluku / Indonesia; but the other thing as well that was really significant and was the theory that somewhere in this region of the world yet undiscovered by Europeans lay a vast southern continent possibly also rich in gold, spices and other trade goods, but critically as well in European imagination, a continent which could balance the continents to the the north.

So you start to see increased European engagement and exploration of the Pacific and by the late 1500s whereby the Spanish colonise the Philippines, 'discover' several of the Caroline Islands in the North Pacific as well as the Solomon Islands in Melanesia.

By the late 1500s what has been known or what has come to be termed as the first trans-Pacific trade or the 'Manila Galleons' as they were called where the Spanish trading routes across the ocean were established – largely bypassing the islands at the ocean's centre. From this point onwards we see increased European activity: Dutch, Portuguese, and eventually also British exploration of the Pacific, for example the first navigator William Dampier charted parts of Western and Northern Australia and by the 18th century really the British and the French were those that were dominating and sending the most well-resourced expeditions to explore the region.





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So really before we start talking about James Cook and his significance it's just key to know that the British were fairly late to the game in the sense that the Pacific had been increasingly – bit by bit – understood by Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and French before Cook made his three highly significant and influential navigations in the late eighteenth century.

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O:

So, why is the name of James Cook considered so important whenever we talk about the Pacific Ocean region.

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S:

There are many reasons for this and perhaps I'll miss talking about many of them. One of the one of the reasons the voyages were so significant is because they've become evocative of the Enlightenment, or they mapped neatly onto Enlightenment notions of progress and scientific endeavour.

In the sense that Cook's voyages or even his ships themselves become 'floating laboratories' carrying artists and natural scientists as well as seamen, who collected sketches, painted, measured, recorded much of what they saw. And it was the vast amount of material - we think that Joseph Banks brought back around a thousand plant species, for example that were previously unknown in Europe.

So this is just one reason why the voyages were so immensely significant. Another factor is the sheer scale of mapping and of what seemed to be new discoveries that were made that were so significant. And one factor that I really do want to want to bring in is the fact that there's no doubt what Cook and his crew achieved over the three voyages were remarkable seats of navigation and seafaring, but these occurred



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also because of the ways in which Cook was able to collaborate or co-opt indigenous knowledge and ways of navigating as well. And this is perhaps a way of trying to understand what that type of relationship looks like - it is the relationship that Cook builds with Tupaia the remarkable Tahitian 'priest' as we might call him today who essentially helped Cook to navigate and perhaps to better understand this 'new' region of the world. And it was that understanding of the South Pacific and indeed of the cultures of Polynesian people that were so significant.

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P:

So, much like Christopher Columbus, then Cook seems to be remembered as this glorified explore figure, but actually a lot of his ability to complete those explorations came from his use of indigenous and exploitation of indigenous knowledge and power just like we see with Columbus. I mean that's quite controversial in North America today. Is it similar with Cook?

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S:

Cook's legacy is incredibly complex and really that legacy reveals many of the central tensions at the heart of thinking about the Pacific and indeed about identities to this very day in the region. To some Cook is emblematic of violence and indeed of settler colonialism in the Pacific and his name really still resonates across the region - to think about the Cook Islands for example named after him or Mount Cook in New Zealand. There's even a crater on the moon named after Cook.

But for example to someone like Haunani-Kay Trask, a renowned Hawaiian Studies Professor and and Hawaiian sovereignty activist, he's "a syphilitic racist". But to conservative Australians, he's seen as being the 'father of the nation' – the reason why Australia Day should exist. These tensions have played out very recently in the reenactment of the first time that the *Endeavour* – the ship Cook made his voyages on



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reaches the shores of Australia and New Zealand. These reenactments are highly contested moments, emblematic and highly significant for the contemporary identity of these nations, but then, Aboriginal Australians or figures in the Maori community see these displays as being hugely divisive and indeed insulting to their community.

So if we move on to the third section this lecture I thought it may be quite useful as a way of exploring the challenge that historians have of interpreting these events what have been called 'first encounters' and ultimately this larger legacy the Cook leads and the deep marks from then the British colonial influence leaves in the Pacific.

We could look at a couple of examples of actually what these first encounters look like and I thought we could look at the first time that Cook lands in Aotearoa /New Zealand.

I thought we could then look at his first engagement in Nootka Sound in present-day Canada. And also in Botany Bay the first landing on the East coast of Australia as well.

All three are incredibly complex contested historical events, but by looking at them it really shines a light on, as I say, the challenges that historians have in interpreting the events, but also a sense of how it is that this larger story and indeed these legacies around these encounters have emerged.

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O:

During your talk you've been talking a lot about encounters in the Pacific Ocean, exploration of that space, but we've seen in previous talks that there was quite often a lot of violence involved. So what kind of words can be used to reflect when violence happened in the exploration of the Pacific Ocean?

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S:



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That's a great question and a very tricky one really for me to answer. I suppose in one sense as historians we're referring, speaking with a language in a way that we're bequeathed or we're using or trying to tap into the way that historians in the past have talked about these types of events – to engage in the historiographical debate. One of the words that is often used to talk and to think through the first time Cook traverses the Pacific is this notion of the 'encounter', which of course is not a neutral term and depending on who you are as we've talked about before, the legacy of these 'encounters' looks quite different. One reason I think why 'encounters' still does have some significance for the debate about Cook is precisely because the nature of these first 'encounters' was fraught, volatile and ran the whole gamut of scenarios really from refuses by islanders to engage with Cook when he landed to extraordinary rituals of welcome and gift-giving to eruptions of violence and killing. 45 islanders as we know over the course of the three voyages died at the hands of Cook's men and more than a dozen of Cook's own crew died in the accounts, with Cook himself, of course, killed in Hawaii in 1779.

Perhaps, it's worth just maybe talking a little bit about why it's so tricky and for historians really to talk and 'what really happened' on Cook's voyages by referring to the nature of those encounters in a few places. In New Zealand, for example, when Cook landed in October 1769 on the east side of the Turanganui river near present day Gisborne, we know from later accounts from the local Maori that they took the ship to be a floating island or a giant bird. That first encounter really, we know, got off to a disastrous start when Te Maro of the Ngāti Oneone, was shot and killed by one of Cook's men.

It seems from what we've been able to learn, the local people were undertaking a ceremonial challenge, but Cook's members believed themselves to be under attack. So there you have a microcosm of a violent encounter based upon a misunderstanding of custom, of ritual, and ultimately, of language. One of the interesting things though I talked a little bit earlier was the role of Tupaia, the Tahitian priest. The next time Cook landed in New Zealand, he took Tupaia ashore and he was able to converse much more closely with the Maori - simply because of the affinity not just culturally but also linguistically of Polynesian peoples. And it's quite interesting actually that the Maori ultimately in the legend from those events thought that Tupaia was the captain of the vessel.

So that's an example from New Zealand and then we have a slightly different first encounter for example in Nootka Sound, off the coast of present-day Canada where



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Cook here was attempting to discover the fabled 'Northwest Passage' or a prospective northern route to the Asian markets. We know that to be a folly but part of his task involved surveying of the coastline of North America including Nootka Sound and it seems - the latest research shows that the Mowachaht first nation peoples in Nootka Sound - possibly based on their encounters with Spanish and possibly Russian fur trappers in the region, had developed what we might think of as being a commercial prowess or at least an understanding of the way in which Europeans were thinking to commodify fur for example, and actually were able to generate increased demand and drove prices for fur.

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O:

This is clearly a very sensitive and complicated topic. Do you have any other examples of contested memories about those encounters?

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S:

Yes, what comes to mind surrounds what's been or what is now referred to as the 'Gweagal shield'. This is an undecorated shield made of red mangrove that's currently held by the British Museum and the pierced hole you can see in the centre of the shield is almost evocative or what was interpreted for a long time or could be interpreted as a bullet hole. We're not actually absolutely sure whether this shield was obtained by Cook in 1770 at Botany Bay, but it has become evocative of a violent first encounter between Cook and the Aboriginal people of what became New South Wales. In the accounts from Cook's diaries for example there seems to be an encounter where Gweagal 'warriors' shout and wave spears with neither side understanding each other. The idea of a shot and initial violence which characterises this encounter here has become evocative of the violent settlement ultimately of not just New South Wales, but ultimately of the Australian continent (and Tasmania).



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Specifically with regard to the shield and its contested memory Nicholas Thomas, for example, the anthropologist, was sure that the shield held by the British Museum was not obtained in this first encounter. Many similar replicas were found and brought back over decades that followed and in terms of the contested memory of the object this very much continues to today, for example the anthropologist Dan Hicks refers to and engages with the topic and the legacy of the Gweagal shield in a forthcoming book. So this is very much a contemporary issue. It lives on in our heritage displayed in Britain today.

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P:

So it seems like the Europeans and British especially had a lot of influence across the Pacific during the time period of the 1700s and we know from the history that they ended up colonizing and controlling a lot of the Pacific Islands as well. So, how did the decolonization processes go?

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S:

I think it's fair to say that you'd be hard-pressed to suggest that the Pacific region was decolonized. For example in looking across the region today, the dizzying array of different almost colonial formations of different types of political organization, really really do still do still live on.

So in the Pacific there is a history that aligns with decolonization, as many historians would know it, a sort of more traditional flag imperialism or flag pulling up and pulling down where you have nations gaining independence in the 1960s. In 1962 Western Samoa for example, but the Pacific is very much still an imperial space.

New Caledonia held a referendum as to whether it would secede from France in 2018. Hawaii still has a notable sovereignty movement. Pitcairn Island which is home to the descendants of the Bounty is currently an 'overseas territory' of Britain. Tokelau



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remains what's called a dependent territory of New Zealand and then there are more tricky almost neo-colonial relationships as well like Australia, for example has since the early two-thousands detained and processed migrants and asylum seekers on Nauru where it previously mined phosphate in the previous century.

So it's certainly the case that the Pacific poses real challenges when we're comparing the situation - the contemporary situation - in most of the Pacific compared to other places in the world where there's a sense that decolonization as independent state-making process might have ended. Now obviously we've expanded our understanding of what decolonization encompasses, not just the notion of political process, it also encourages to think about practice as well. So it's a little bit more fuzzy. But I suppose in terms of thinking about decolonization in the broadest sense, it's very much a live issue in the Pacific still.

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O:

Thank you so much Sean for this very thorough and brief introduction to the complicated history of the Pacific Ocean. As a reminder Sean Phillips is a doctoral student in global and imperial history at the University of Oxford, who works extensively on the Pacific Ocean space in the 20th century. This was also the last topic in our first module on the age of exploration. So stay tuned for our second module titled a new imperialism!

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S:

Thank you so much for having me on this. It's been a real pleasure.

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P:



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If you're interested in learning more about this topic Sean has compiled a reading list which you'll be available on our website at [www.uncomfortableoxford.com](http://www.uncomfortableoxford.com); there's also a full transcript, for anyone who's interested. Just a reminder that this podcast will be released every two weeks until the summer of 2020 as we go through our lecture series.

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