

## Affirm<sub>press</sub>



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**GREAT**  
**AUSTRALIAN**  
**URBAN**  
**LEGENDS**

**BY EAMON EVANS**

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# INTRODUCTION

What does Kyle Sandilands have in common with *The Bachelor*? And cane toads? And Chiko Rolls?

The answer, I am sad to report, is that none of these things is an urban legend. Just like Schoolies Week and selfie sticks and men with long, hipster beards, these are all actual, real-life things that you can find in Australia. Actual, real-life things that spread misery and social decay. There's no avoiding them, unless you're prepared to skip the country. Which, on balance, might just be a better option than having to sit down and listen to Kyle Sandilands.

But cheer up, folks, and turn those frowns upside-down. For it turns out that a great many of the other bad things that form part of our great southern land are in fact just big, fat myths. Australia is simply bursting with stories that need to be taken with a spoonful of salt. With stories that people *assure* you are true and that you tell others are true in your turn.

Stories like this: 'Hey, did you hear about that BBQ chicken place down the road? (You know, the one near that pizza restaurant that's run by the Mafia? And that mansion where the Masons meet and have orgies?) Well, they just sold someone a chicken from the late 1980s. And, get this, his whole family died.'

So goes a typical urban legend, plus a few more details for extra effect. They're usually something scandalous or silly or sinister or spooky, and they invariably happened to a friend of a friend.

*Great Australian Urban Legends* gives you myths, misconceptions and bare-faced lies about real people and real places down under. These pages libel Captain Cook and slander Phar Lap; they will piss off AC/DC and David Boon. They ask if Harold Holt really died and if the bunyip ever lived, and which, if any, Australian now gets by as a ghost. They discover underground bunkers, and they find buried treasure. They wonder whether Crown Casino really has its own morgue. This book gives you hearsay and half-truths mixed up with fiction and folktales, then it bakes the result in a big porky pie.

If you think that anything sounds untrue, please remember that that's because *it is*. This book is not called *Great Australian Facts*. Lawyers – kind, sweet, gentle, noble lawyers – I would urge you to please take note of this. And for God's sake, please don't sue.



# STUBBORN LEGENDS

**HISTORY IS WRITTEN BY THE VICTORS, AS SOMEONE ONCE  
PUT IT – AND WHO KNOWS, THEY MIGHT JUST BE RIGHT.**

But let's not forget that history can also be written by people who don't know what they're talking about. People who just half-read, or half-heard, or half-thought something, then half-forgot it and threw in a few prejudices. Our knowledge of the past is like a game of Chinese whispers – one that's played by people who are all slightly deaf and speak with a lisp.

If you don't believe me, keep reading these pages.  
A lot of the things you 'know' about the past are in  
fact just a big urban myth.



1770

# TERRA AUSTRALIS

It's said that, once upon a time, two cannibals were sitting by a campfire, tucking into a hot bowl of stew. 'God, I hate my sister,' one of them said. 'So just eat the veggies,' his friend replied.

Champagne comedy, I'm sure you'll agree, but Captain Cook probably isn't laughing. The main reason for this is that he's long dead: the man who 'discovered' Australia was killed on a Hawaiian beach in 1779 after a nasty spat with the locals. But the second and perhaps even more important reason is that his body was then eaten by cannibals.

Truly? Well, no. But he *was* cooked. Whatever the reason for Cook's falling out with the locals (and I'm guessing that his attempt to kidnap their king may have had something to do with it), it was a spat that eventually concluded with him getting a big spear right in the back. The locals then carried his body back to their town, and proceeded to honour it in a manner appropriate for the remains of chieftans. This involved a spot of skinning and disembowelling, then putting what remained in a giant oven, so as to more easily tear away the flesh. *Bones*, you see, were sacred to these people. And as a respected elder of his tribe (the British),



Captain Cook's bones were religious relics.

But perhaps the British respect him too much? After all, as at least most of us know, Captain Cook didn't 'discover' Australia. Quite apart from the fact that people have been living here for at least forty thousand years, he wasn't even the first foreigner to come say hello to them. Many historians argue that a Chinese fleet arrived in the early 14th century, and a Dutch ship called the *Duyfken* visited Queensland in 1606. But there's no 'Captain Janszoon's Cottage' in inner-city Melbourne. (Just some house that Cook may or may not have visited, as his parents didn't move there until after he went to sea.)



Captain Cook probably isn't laughing. The main reason for this is that he's long dead ... But the second reason is that his body was eaten by cannibals.

Cook, then, can only really claim the honour of being the first European to set foot in south-east Australia. And it may even be a stretch to say that. According to tradition, one Isaac Smith was actually the first man to row out from the *Endeavour* and set a pasty white foot on shore.

But even if this story is true (and all Cook ever told us about his eighteen-year-old crewmate was that he was ‘a young man’ who had ‘been of great use’), it doesn’t necessarily follow that the ‘first European in the south-east’ was Smith. Because urban myth has it that, somewhere off the coast of Warrnambool, there lies the remains of a Portuguese ship. You might even be able to find it if you swim a few kilometres out from Armstrong Bay ... and somehow reverse five hundred years’ worth of decay.

Sometimes called ‘The Mahogany Ship’, this mysterious shipwreck was first seen by a trio of sealers whose ship capsized in 1836. As described by George Dunderdale in *The Book of the Bush* (published sixty years later), the sealers

*succeeded in reaching the shore naked, and then travelled back along the coast to Port Fairy ... On this journey, they found the wreck of a vessel, supposed to be a Spanish one, which has since been covered by the drifting sand. When Captain Mills was afterwards harbour master at Belfast, he took the bearings of it ... Vain search was made for it many years afterwards in the hope that it was a Spanish galleon laden with doubloons.*

And it may have been spotted again in 1848, when a newspaper reported the presence of ‘a wreck about two miles on the Belfast side of Warrnambool ... [of a] three hundred-ton vessel ... thrown completely into the [sand] hummocks’.

The idea that this vessel is five hundred years old and *Portuguese* owes a lot to the legend that they were the first Europeans to set foot here (Australia not being far from their colonies in Timor). It’s an idea that has a lot going for it. But not, alas, any hard evidence. 🎲

