

It's not all glory

Age 30th April 1970

FOR white Australians, the 200th anniversary of Cook's landing at Kurnell yesterday was a day for real rejoicing. It was a day for pride; a day on which to salute our many achievements in the past; a day to remember gratefully those who have helped to make this country the free, prosperous and contented country that it is. Cook did much more than simply put us on the map. In a sense he laid the foundations for our spectacular growth from penal colony to full nationhood, from tent and barrack settlement to a rich and thriving commercial, industrial and agricultural State. All white Australians, new as well as old, are to that extent the English sea captain's debtors.

But for 130,000 dark-skinned Australians yesterday was a day for anything but celebration. It was a day on which old wounds were re-opened, old spectres raised — a day on which they were reminded all too forcefully of the exploitation, degradation and inhuman treatment they have suffered at the white man's hands, and in various ways still suffer. Those Aborigines who hurled their wreaths into the sea near La Perouse yesterday at the same time as Cook's landing was being re-enacted had a valid point to make. From the Aborigines' point of view the past 200 years have not been by any means all glory. On the contrary, they are 200 bitter, shame-filled years.

For them Cook's coming was a complete disaster. It marked the beginning of a concerted campaign of decimation. Wiping out the Aborigine became something of a national sport. Those who survived the first onslaught of white brutality were left to eke out their existence in conditions of abject squalor, poverty and degradation. Over the past few years the white Australian's conscience has at last been stirred. The Aborigine has been given equal pay, full citizenship, full voting rights and a measure of public and governmental sympathy. Even the principle of Aboriginal land rights has been tentatively endorsed.

But let us not delude ourselves. The poverty, the exploitation and the degradation are far from ended. For the Aborigine, Australia is not a lucky country, it is not a land of full and plenty, and no amount of bi-centenary oratory or official self-congratulations will convince him of it. The Aboriginal infant mortality rate remains appallingly high. Their living conditions are often primitive to the point of barbarism. They suffer from disease, malnutrition, illiteracy and under-education far more than white Australians. They suffer also from humiliation. They are equal in name, but not in fact. On basic human grounds they deserve a far better deal than we have so far given them.