Do you remember that ‘other’ Bicentennial?

1770-1970, the Cook Bicentenary

During the last 40 years or so there have been a number of momentous events of a maritime nature on Sydney’s Port Jackson.

Perhaps the first was the 1961 ceremonial entry to the harbour by the Royal Australian Navy to commemorate 50 years of the RAN. An even bigger version of this was repeated in 1986 for the 75th birthday of the RAN. On this occasion many ships of other navies were in port, including the vintage US battleship USS Missouri and the Royal Navy’s aircraft carrier HMS Invincible, which, later, was nearly handed over the RAN, in 1982.

Until the 1988 ‘shipfest’, the biggest and best of these maritime matters must have been the Cook Bicentennial, because, for the first time, large sea-going sailing ships came to Australia to take part in the festivities.

Some years before the celebration, a high-powered committee had been formed in Sydney to organise the construction, in Britain, of a full-scale replica of Cook’s Endeavour. It seems there were more figureheads in the organization than workers, because little was achieved, other than production of a fancy brochure. I still have my copy.

Invitations were sent to many of the Tall Ship fleet world wide and about a dozen eventually arrived, not all of them in April 1970, as had been hoped.

The organisers of the event, in addition to inviting many interesting naval vessels, had chartered a nearly new, rakish little barque from Canada, to represent Cook’s Endeavour. Monte Christo was re-named Endeavour II for the duration and took the central role in the celebrations at Botany Bay on 29 April and elsewhere.

An interesting little scale model of Cook’s Endeavour was seen on Port Jackson during the period. Built in New Zealand, this small replica was about seven metres long and sailed very well with a crew of three ‘giants’ handling her

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Argentina’s Libertad shows her style as she enters port.

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working square rig. She was built to celebrate Cook’s arrival in New Zealand and was brought to Sydney by her owner Ralph Sewell.

In port at that time were the Dewarutji from Indonesia, Libertad from Argentina and Esmerelda from Chile. Esmerelda was well known in Sydney having made her first visit in 1961 (she made another in 2001). Dewarutji of 875 tons, was a naval training ship, as was Libertad of 3025 tons and Esmerelda, of 3040 tons.

The two big sailors were very large indeed.

The restored barque James Craig, now active around Sydney is of some 650 tons gross and almost 60m long. These two big sail training ships were about 100m long.

Arriving in Sydney on May 12, after the main celebrations were over, was Colombia’s Gloria of some 1300 tons. Only a couple of years old, this fine ship caused much mouth-watering among those who hoped for a sail training ship for Australia. It was pointed out that Australia was a much wealthier country than was Colombia.

Japan’s merchant navy training ship Nippon Maru (1930), in company with the new submarine HMAS Onslow,
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Compact and modern, Colombia’s Gloria attracted much local envy.

arrived on July 3, with some 300 people aboard. She was the oldest of the big ships, although the 1908 Regina Maris, was the real veteran.

Onslow is now on display as a museum ship at the National Maritime Museum in Sydney.

Sydney’s harbour in 1970 was a very different place to that of today. It was still an active commercial port and residential areas had not yet displaced waterfront employment. The Opera House was unfinished, Darling Harbour was for ships and the wharves in Sydney Cove could berth five or six sailing ships for the interest and edification of pedestrians, who today have only cruise boats and cruise ships to study.

By a happy co-incidence, I was working as a launch driver at Garden Island naval base, and my photographic interests were well served as I was employed to drive the Press boat in those pre Press-Helicopter days.

After the celebrations, the sailing ships dispersed. Endeavour II, reverted to being charter ship Monte Christo and sailed for New Zealand, only to be wrecked on the North Island. Dewaruitji, Libertad, Gloria and Esmerelda are still naval training ships. Nippon Maru is a museum ship in Japan, having been replaced by a new, very similar ship of the same name. Regina Maris was sold by the Norwegian Brothers who made such a fine and expensive effort to get her to Sydney and is now owned and operated as a research vessel in America.