Greg Stewart: Welcome to the Australian History show. Today we’re talking about something controversial: Should we change the information on the statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park, Sydney? Joining me is one of our regular guests, Fiona Patel, who is professor of Australian History at Sun University. Welcome to the show again, Fiona!

Fiona Chin: (laughing) It feels sometimes like I spend more time here than at my job!

Greg Stewart: (laughing) We’re very lucky to have you with us. Now Fiona, the issue of the Captain Cook statue is a serious one.

Fiona Chin: Yes Greg, there’s been a lot of articles in newspapers about this issue over the last few months and everyone from the Prime Minister through to taxi drivers seems to have an opinion about it.

Greg Stewart: O.K. How about you take us through how the issue has come about and what different people think about it.

Fiona Chin: Well Greg, the issue is not a new one. For decades, many people in Australia have pointed out that the information on the Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney is wrong and that makes it racist. But even though people have been saying these things for a long time, it was only recently when the well known indigenous journalist Stan Grant made a speech where he talked about the statue that lots of people started paying attention to this issue.

Greg Stewart: Hmmm…interesting Fiona. What did Stan Grant say?

Fiona Chin: Grant pointed out that while the statue of Captain Cook says he “discovered” Australia in 1770, indigenous people had in fact been here for 65,000 years before he came. After Stan Grant made his comments, people had lots of of things to say. Many, many people agreed with Grant and said we should change the information on the statue to say something like: Indigenous people discovered Australia 65,000 years ago. Captain Cook was the first British person to discover Australia in 1770.

Greg Stewart: That seems reasonable. Don’t we want our statues to be accurate historical records?

Fiona Chin: Yes, of course we do. But there are different ways of thinking about what statues show us and what is accurate.

Greg Stewart: Oh? What is another way of looking at it?

Fiona Chin: Well, the Prime Minister for example, says that the statue is not only a memorial to Captain Cook but a record of what people thought when they put the statue up back in 1879.

Greg Stewart: People thought that Captain Cook was the first person to discover Australia?
Fiona Chin: Yes, when the statue was put up, people did think that Captain Cook discovered Australia. The Prime Minister argues that to change the statue would be to re-write history.

Greg Stewart: So it’s a tricky issue to solve?

Fiona Chin: Not really, Greg. I have to say I disagree with the Prime Minister on this one. For me, changing the information on the Captain Cook statue is a no-brainer. It wouldn’t be re-writing history, it would be updating history! We now know that indigenous Australians are one of the oldest cultures in the world. Why wouldn’t we proudly state that on a statue? I think our country is big enough to celebrate all the great things about our past. We should be able to commemorate both Captain Cook being a great explorer and being the first British person to find Australia and the fact that indigenous people were here thousands and thousands of years before him.

Greg Stewart: Thanks for your perspective, Fiona, I look forward to our next chat.

Fiona Chin: Thanks, Greg.