

Forum

Capitalization in "the British Empire"

TO THE EDITOR:

I enjoyed Alice Brittan's article on David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* in the October issue of *PMLA* (117 [2002]: 1158–71). I think it imprecise, however, to refer to "the British Empire" (1161) when the events discussed—here, the explorations of Captain James Cook—take place before 1 January 1877, when Queen Victoria was officially proclaimed empress of India. Prior to that, no British monarch had ever held any official imperial title. This does not mean the discourses and deeds of imperialism were not then prevalent (they have been so even in many republics, alas). But it does suggest that, out of respect for the historical record, the term *empire* not be capitalized in references to Britain's domain in 1770. This is particularly salient since Brittan refers to Cook's claiming "the fabled southern continent *for* the British Empire" (1161; italics mine).

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