SYDNEY, October 2002

Recent evidence seeming to support a European discovery of Australia by the Portuguese, not Britain’s Captain James Cook, has proved not to be so. Historian Greg Jeffreys now agrees that parts of the wreckage found on a beach on Fraser Island, off the Queensland coast, are not cannons from a seventeenth-century Portuguese ship, as first thought, but hoisting gear from a vessel that sailed our shores some 200 years later. The identity of the relics became clear after they were cleaned with high-pressure hoses. Discussion about who really discovered Australia still persists, though. Some continue to suggest that the wreck of the sixteenth-century ‘Mahogany ship’ found in sand hills near Warmambool in Victoria is a Portuguese boat.

Those who believe the credit for our land’s ‘discovery’ should go to the Portuguese point to the existence of the Dieppe maps (drawn between 1536 and 1550), which may possibly depict Australia. Once, it seems, some people, including the explorer Matthew Flinders, did consider these maps were evidence of a Portuguese discovery. The Portuguese had established a presence in Timor in 1516, and Portuguese explorers such as Luis Vaz de Torres (who sailed through the Torres Strait in the early seventeenth century) were active in the region long before Cook’s voyage. However, what Portuguese records have been so far found from this time make no mention of any discovery of a ‘great south land’. History still guards its secrets.

Use the information above and any reference listed below to answer the following questions:

1. What primary sources are used as possible evidence by those who argue the Portuguese might have discovered Australia?

2. What did the historian Greg Jeffreys think the nineteenth-century hoisting gear found on a Fraser Island beach might have been? If he had been correct, what would this have proved?

3. What other important discoveries were made by the Portuguese during sea explorations in the latter part of the Middle Ages?

4. What ‘rules of discovery’ were agreed between the Portuguese and the Spanish with the signing of the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494?