

Abel Janszoon Tasman (1603 – 1659)

Text by Geoff Robertson, 2004.



Attributed to Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp
Portrait of Abel Tasman, His Wife and Daughter c.1637
National Library of Australia

A strong motive for exploration has always been the pursuit of profit. Tasman's voyages were no exception. Just like explorers in the time of Henry the Navigator some 200 years previously, he sought "rich lands" offering opportunities for trade and profit.

Abel Janszoon Tasman was born in the village of Lutjegast (today's Groningen), the Netherlands, in 1603 – a century after Vasco da Gama had reached India. Little is known of his early life. However, we do know that he was about 19 when he first went to sea. In 1633 he signed on with the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* - VOC) His main job was as captain of ships trading with Indian ports under Dutch control.

Before going on to discuss Tasman's achievements, it is relevant to look at The Dutch East India Company and the situation in the area of Asian trade at the time.

The VOC was formed in 1602 by an amalgamation of six smaller companies. Directly after the first Dutch fleet had demonstrated the potential of trade with Asia (1595-1597) a number of companies had been set up in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Zeeland. Each of the companies could only fund one expedition at a time. They competed fiercely with one another and this reduced profit margins. This began to frighten investors and endanger both the companies themselves and Netherlands-Asian trade in general.

The directors of the companies in Amsterdam quickly recognised the danger and amalgamated, but those in Zeeland at first refused to join, fearing that too much power would be wielded by Amsterdam in particular. However, the government finally stepped in and enforced unification into one company. The Dutch Republic was at the time at war with Spain and Portugal and it was considered that one company would be a powerful military and economic weapon.

On 20 March 1602 the States General issued a charter for the creation of a Grand United Chartered Company - the VOC.. The charter was to be valid for 21 years. Rivalry no longer existed: the charter lay down that only the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) could send ships from the Netherlands to or conduct trade in an area called “the trade zone” – an area east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of the straits of Magellan.

Of all the trading companies of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) was undisputedly the most successful. It forced back the Portuguese who had established their commercial empire in the region a century earlier and effectively squeezed them out as competitors in trade with the East. VOC’s principal competitor was the English East India Company (EIC) founded in London in 1600. However initially the EIC lacked the financial resources, organising ability and government support to mount a real challenge. It was not until the end of the 17th century that the EIC became a really potent rival. Even so, VOC remained the largest of any Asiatic trading companies until it ceased trading in 1800.

Several factors had a bearing on the rapid growth and influence of the Dutch East India Company (henceforth referred to as “the Company”) The Netherlands had the capital to support not only the actual trading ventures, but also to finance the costly “military” operations necessary to win a monopoly in fine spices. Nor was the Company’s activities confined to transporting Asian goods to Europe. Over time it also became involved in intra-Asian trade and this became extremely profitable.

The Company's aim was trade and not colonisation (except for the establishment of the Cape colony in 1562) However its aggressive expansion meant that on occasion it could not avoid acquiring territory, sometimes in the name of profit and sometimes for purposes of security. However, in such cases it delegated administrative responsibilities wherever possible. Batavia itself was under Dutch rule, but government of the other possessions in Java were entrusted to native regents, agents of the Company but in effect petty feudal lords. Apart from delivering goods to the Company as required, they otherwise ruled like little local tyrants. The Company had obtained a monopoly on tradable goods, usually by force and often by supporting local warlords to obtain such concessions.

In 1586 Anthony van Dieman became Governor General of Dutch-held Batavia. He was as enthusiastic as his predecessors in seeking out new sources of trade. At the time there were tales circulating of as yet undiscovered islands. In 1586 and 1611 Spanish expeditions searched for them but found nothing. In 1639 the Dutch sent two ships in another unsuccessful attempt to find the alleged islands. The captain of the second ship, the *Gracht*, was Abel Janszoon Tasman.

In addition to the very supportive administration (van Dieman), the Dutch had a most capable theoretical geographer in Frans Visscher. Visscher reviewed the known regions and competently designed the scope for expeditions to solve the great southland problem and support Dutch interests in the region.

Visscher envisioned a search for the great southland which would track eastward from Mauritius at 52 or 54 degrees south latitude.

- If no land were encountered by the longitude of the east side of New Guinea, the track should turn north by west and encounter New Guinea, then return to Java.
- Alternatively, the eastward run could continue to the longitude of the Solomon Islands, then turn north to discover them, then return across the northern side of New Guinea.
- Other strategies included expeditions across the southern Atlantic and refreshing ports at Chile, enabling close scrutiny of the region above 50 degrees south latitude.

First Voyage: 1642 - 43

With van Dieman, the administrative support, Visscher, the strategy developer, and Tasman, the seaman and navigator an expedition was implemented. Tasman was given two ships (the

Heemskerck and *Zeehaen*) and the following instruction. With *Visscher* on board, Tasman sailed for Mauritius from Batavia on 14 August 1642. There he refitted his ships and set off on the course described on 8 October.

Intending to sail eastward at the southern latitude of 52 or 54 degrees, it became evident early on that weather would not permit this. It was decided to sail along the 44th and 40th parallels and as the two ships reached the longitude of the islands of St Peter and St Francis, there appeared no intention of following the southern coast of PeterNuyts Land east. Instead the ships stayed more south until sighting Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) in late November.

Variable weather made exploration of the eastern coast of Van Dieman's Land difficult. Seeking shelter in a large bay, Tasman put into a cove he called Storm Bay. A later explorer misread Tasman's notes and called this bay Adventure Bay and the larger bay was called Storm Bay.

On the 1st of December quieter water and storm abatement allowed the ships to anchor at Green Island and put ashore for supplies at what is now known as Blackman's Bay. Later a crew member posted a Dutch flag, claiming possession. Not finding good water, Tasman moved his ships northward on December 4th to search for it. Quickly the shore fell away to the northwest and the weather was coming in directly from the north. Tasman decided to quit this island and continue east.

On the 13th of December he saw land again, having reached the shore of the south island of New Zealand. The following sea and weather identify this shore as one treacherous to unwary sailors. Tasman was not this and worked north until able to round the point Cook would later call Cape Farewell and anchoring in quieter water inside the western end of Cook's Strait.

Tasman called this anchorage Murderer's Bay for the incident which followed. One of the Dutch small boats was rammed by a native (Maori) canoe and three Dutchmen killed. Little other of consequence occurred, except that Tasman determined he would be unable to make friendly terms with the local population. After sailing east, Tasman determined he was in the mouth of a great bay and he had a strong, following wind. He turned west and then north along the western coast of the North Island, then past (and naming) Cape Maria van Dieman, the northwest tip of the North Island.

It appears Tasman was not wholly convinced he had been in a bay and that perhaps on leaving Murderer's Bay there was exit to the east and on to Chile. Resolution of the channel between the two islands was made by Cook in 1769. Tasman named this land Staaten Landt, on the belief it may be a continuation of that land originally called such by Le Maire.

Tasman's need for fresh water increased as he left this new land. His ship's committee agreed to run north and eastward to 17 degrees South latitude and locate islands described earlier by Le Maire. In the track Tasman encountered four islands on 19 January 1643. These islands were of the Tonga group, where he was able to obtain water. Cook would call these the Friendly Islands and Tasman was treated well by the natives.

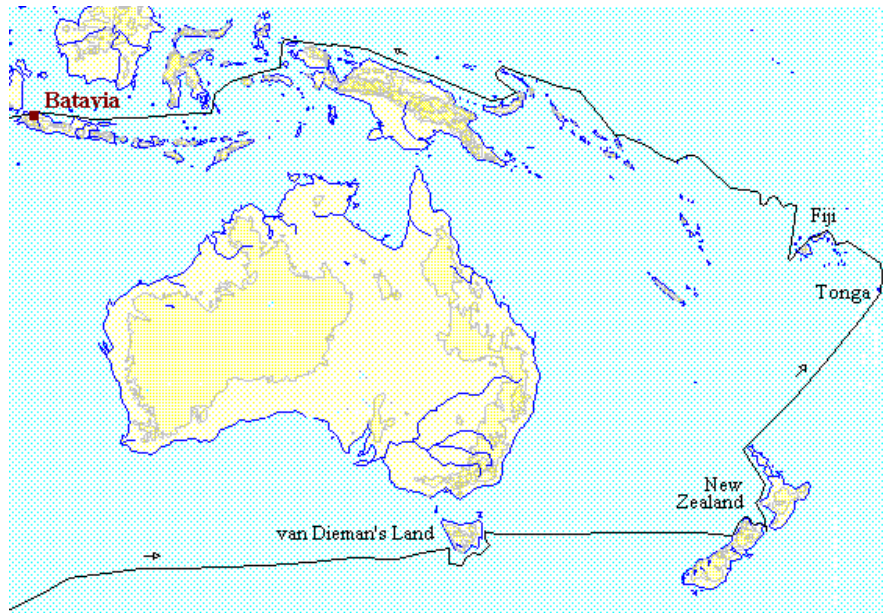
Determined that he was well enough east of Le Maire's islands, Tasman sailed northwest to locate them. On the 6th of February he found himself amidst many islands and water breaking over shoals. He was in the Fiji group and these islands did not appear on his maps. Islands recorded as being 800 miles to the west caused Tasman to question his position. The long cruise may have lead to compiled miscalculations which caused him to think he was in a place differently from where he actually was. This issue lead Tasman to decide to return to Batavia and the ship's committee agreed.

Should he sail west and south of the known portion of the island of New Guinea? This route was unknown and carried the danger of being blown against a shore from which it would be too difficult to retreat. The alternative was to take the known (and safe) northerly track past New Guinea. Worsening weather and the scepticism over the ship's position made the decision obvious for Tasman and Visscher. They would take the northerly route.

For nearly two weeks the overcast weather made it impossible for Tasman to take positioning sites to determine his location. The weather had been wet throughout February and most of March and the contingent was relieved when the winds changed and conditions brightened. At the end of March land was sighted and Tasman named the multitude of islands Ontong Java. On April 1st Tasman rounded Cape Santa Maria, which was believed to be an extension from the island of New Guinea, until Dampier determined it was part of the island group he recognized as New Britain. Tasman was now in waters well enough known by Dutch sea captains and knew how to return to Batavia.

However, Tasman had been tasked at the outset of the voyage with exploring the north coast of New Guinea (should he reach it) and seeking a passage through it and south to Cape Keerweer. There is no such passage and at the end of May Tasman reached the western edge of New Guinea. From there, he sailed back to Batavia, arriving on 14 June, ending his 10 month voyage.

Though this voyage was spectacular by the reckoning of Dutch exploration in the period, it was deemed to have been relatively fruitless and created little excitement for the Dutch East India Company. There were no new trading partnerships opened and there were no major resource treasures found, which would enhance the company. Furthermore, Tasman had not proven passage through the south ocean to Chile as was originally outlined, though reaching east from Cape Maria Van Dieman did seem promising. However, the sailing skills of Tasman and the strategies of Visscher were significantly highly regarded that both men figured in further Dutch exploration planning.



Second Voyage: 1644

The Dutch interest in entering the south sea and accessing the Spanish shores off Chile lead to planning of another voyage for Tasman and Visscher. However, in the last months of 1644 the Dutch were encumbered with a war with the Portuguese and a voyage to prove the route was never undertaken.

Nevertheless, Tasman and Visscher were outfitted with three ships, *Limmen*, *Zeemeuw* and *Bracq* and sent in February 1644 to examine the bay on the southern side of New Guinea by anchoring on the western coast of the northern part of what is now Cape York (Australia) and send the *Bracq* eastward into the bay and search for passage into the south sea. Next, Tasman was to sail south along the west coast [Cape York Peninsula] and follow the coast to determine if it would open into the south sea. He was to determine if Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) was the southern part of New Guinea or a part of Pieter Nuyts Land or an island. If he should reach Van Dieman's Land through such a channel, Tasman was to sail to St Francis and St Peter, then westward and northward along the west coast of New Holland to the end of Eendrachtsland.

However, if there was no passage south from the starting point near New Guinea, then Tasman should follow the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria wherever it may lead. Should it lead westward to the Abrolhos, Tasman should try to locate the sunken chest from the *Batavia* then northward to look for the men marooned by Pelsaert and to find a watering place for ships bound to Batavia from Europe. Tasman should then sail into Arnhem Land and determine its geography and nature, before finally locating islands between Timor and New Holland.

Little is known of the actual voyage, except that the northern coast line was followed as it now is mapped today. From Eendrachtsland Tasman returned to Batavia in August 1644. He had sailed the coast, but had done little exploration of the land he passed. Tasman had noted the miserable existence of the natives along the coast, but had not sought gold and silver or trade possibilities the land would offer.



The Dutch East Indies Company, which sponsored Tasman's voyage, informed the stockholders that Tasman's travel had used money and returned nothing of stockholder interest. Tasman's efforts were not regarded highly.

Looking back on Tasman's voyages, it is clear that many opportunities were missed. He was apparently not intimidated by the scope of the voyages but unlike James Cook, for example, he was not prepared to take undue risks when on strange shores. Was he perhaps inhibited by the very detailed and specific directions from the Dutch East India Company, which was clearly more interested in trade and profit than pure exploration? Certainly the Indian and Pacific oceans were to be kept "locked up" by the Company for more than another century. Only governments with powerful navies and prepared to ignore the Dutch monopoly on trade would bring the Dutch trading empire to an end.

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