



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

ANTHONY VAN DIEMEN, THE MAN AND HIS ISLAND

By Peter Douglas



ANTHONY VAN DIEMEN.
From the engraving in Volume I of *Onze Mannen Ter Zee in Dicht en Bild*, The Hague.

Anthony or Antonius Van Diemen (1593-1645) would doubtless have faded into unremembered history were it not for his fateful decision in 1642 to send the seafarer and explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman (1603-59) in search of “The Great South Land.”

Van Diemen was born in Culemborg in the Netherlands, and at the age of 23 he became a merchant and moved to Amsterdam. This venture was not a success and he was broke within a year. Unable to pay his creditors, in 1619 he sailed in the *Mauritius* to Batavia, the capital of the Dutch colony of Indonesia and headquarters of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), the Dutch East

India Company, established in 1602. The VOC was not inclined to employ bankrupts, so Van Diemen took the name Thonis Meeusz.

Out east, Van Diemen came to impress Governor Jan Pieterszoon Coen, even though the Governor knew who Meeusz was, and in 1626 he was appointed Director-General of Commerce and a member of the Council for the Indies. He married Maria van Aelst, widow of Bartholomeus Kunst, in 1630 and a year later returned to the Netherlands as Admiral on the *Deventer*. He returned to Batavia in 1632 and in 1635 was promoted to

ANTHONY VAN DIEMEN, THE MAN AND HIS ISLAND

Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, succeeding Hendrik Brouwer, his appointment taking effect on January 1, 1636, a position that he occupied until his death. He devoted most of his energy in this position towards the expansion of the Dutch influence, and that of the VOC, throughout Asia. It was under his rule that Dutch power was established in Ceylon, having been wrested from the Portuguese.

His most notable act, as far as enduring historical distinction is concerned, was his instruction to Frans Visscher to draw up a plan for discoveries in the south. Visscher mapped out three routes, and in 1642 Van Diemen dispatched Tasman, also in the service of the VOC, in command of an expedition in search of the "Unknown Southland" that was believed to be in the south Pacific. Tasman was a Dutchman too, born in 1603 in Lutjegast, a village in the province of Groningen. On November 24, Tasman sighted the west coast of what is now Tasmania. He named the land "*Anthoonij van Diemenslandt*" in honor of the Governor-General, planting a flag and formally taking possession on December 3.

The name was retained (though shortened to Van Diemen's Land) when British settlement began there in 1803. The British used the new land as a penal colony, at what is now Hobart, the capital, and some 75,000 convicts were transported to Van Diemen's Land, or about 40 percent of all convicts sent to the antipodes when the American war for independence removed that colonial destination as a dumping ground for British criminals. Despite the presence of penal settlements, Van Diemen's Land was also developed by free settlers, and their numbers grew quickly. In order to remove the odium and unsavory connotations with crime associated with its name, in 1856 Van Diemen's Land was renamed *Tasmania* in honor of its discoverer. Nevertheless, the old name lingered, and until the turn of the 20th century Tasmanians were referred to as "Vandemonians." The last penal settlement in Tasmania at Port Arthur closed in 1877,

ANTHONY VAN DIEMEN, THE MAN AND HIS ISLAND

and in 1901 Tasmania became a state in the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia.

Anthony van Diemen, who knew nothing, of course, of how his name fell so hard from the original honor that Tasman bestowed, died in Batavia on April 19, 1645. He and his name would become one of history's many footnotes while that of his protégé Tasman lives on, with some justification, in the name of the land he discovered.

Van Diemen was succeeded in his post by Cornelis van der Lijn, whose governorship lasted five years. Van Diemen's wife, whom the VOC granted a generous pension, returned to the homeland and was married, for a third time, in September 1646, to Carel Constant of Middelburg. She, like her previous husband, lives on geographically in the name of the westernmost point of the north island of New Zealand, Cape Maria van Diemen, named by Tasman in 1643, and in Maria Island off the east coast of Tasmania.