



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

THE SOUTH SEA VOYAGE OF JACOB ROGGEVEEN, 1721-1723

By Peter Douglas



From the 15th to the 18th century, one of the great legends among the seafaring and trading nations was the existence of a vast southern continent, *Terra Australis*. This hypothetical continent was imagined to encompass Antarctica and extend far into the South Sea (Pacific Ocean). The discovery of Australia, New Zealand, and many of the South Sea Islands was the outcome of the search for this land. Several of these discoverers were Dutch, and as the navigators of many countries gradually explored the southern ocean they finally realized that Antarctica was not connected to Australia or to any other great landmass.

In the company of the many notable Dutch navigators, the name Jacob Roggeveen (1659-1729) does not stand very tall, though his achievements do warrant an examination for it was Roggeveen who was the first European to set foot on an island that would become one of the most mysterious and culturally significant archaeological sites in the world.

Before he found fame as an explorer, Roggeveen had already lived a full and active life, having been notary of Middelburg, graduated as a doctor of law at the university of Harderwijk, and worked for the Dutch East India Company in Batavia. In 1721, at the age of 62, he decided to pursue his father's dream of searching for *Terra Australis* and

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persuaded the Dutch West India Company to outfit three ships for the voyage, the *Arend*, the *Thienhoven*, and the *Afrikaansche Galey*.

The expedition left the Netherlands in August 1721 and sailed down to the South Atlantic to the Falkland Islands and then through the Le Maire Strait and around Cape Horn beyond 60° south and entered the Pacific Ocean. The fleet ran into ice and rough weather and proceeded north up the coast of Chile and reached the Juan Fernandez Islands in February. Here Roggeveen made repairs and resupplied for his voyage into the unknown ocean. His course was west-northwest, expecting any time to sight the edge of the new continent. Instead, after around 1,500 miles, on Easter Sunday of 1722, he came upon a small island that he named *Paaschen Eylandt*, or Easter Island, for the date of its discovery.

Easter Island is the easternmost of the Polynesian islands, and is considered to be the world's remotest inhabited island. Because of its isolation, the inhabitants developed a unique culture whose most remarkable feature is the hundreds of huge monolithic rock figures called *moai*. Roggeveen and his Dutch crews were the first Europeans to see these imposing statues. The landing party described an island with no large trees, a rich soil, bananas, sugar cane, and figs. The Dutch spent about a week on the island, investigating the strange stone idols and interacting with the inhabitants, encounters that created some friction and resulted in several native deaths by nervous Dutch sailors.

After leaving Easter Island, the three ships steered northwest, often changing course, Roggeveen always thinking that the mysterious continent might be just over the horizon. In the end he decided to head for Batavia, going by way of the Tuamotu Archipelago, the Society Islands, and Samoa. They ran into many difficulties. On May 19 in Takapoto the *Afrikaansche Galey* was wrecked on a coral reef and most of the expedition's food was lost, and Roggeveen faced hostile islanders and desertions.

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In September 1722 the *Arend* and the *Thienhoven* arrived in Batavia, but the party did not receive a warm welcome. Because Roggeveen was associated with the Dutch West India Company he was considered a trespasser. The officials of the Dutch East India Company seized the ships and their cargos and arrested Roggeveen and his men for violating the company's monopoly in the area. The company was very touchy about this sort of thing. They were not released until November and were sent back to the Netherlands, almost as prisoners on company ships, arriving in July 1723. Roggeveen immediately started legal proceedings to get back the value of his ships, and negotiations between the two companies ultimately resulted in compensation for Roggeveen and his backers.

The Dutch navigator had not found the great southern continent, but he had traveled extensively through the South Pacific and added to contemporary geographic knowledge. The voyage failed to solve the question of the existence of this mythical continent, but it helped others to know which areas still remained to be explored. Most important perhaps, Roggeveen had discovered Easter Island, which in 1995 became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It remains unique and mysterious and has become a place of continuing interest to anthropologists.

