



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

THE DUTCH DISCOVERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

By Peter Douglas



The name Dirk Hartog sounds as if it belongs to the swashbuckling hero of a Rafael Sabatini adventure novel or a similar Hollywood epic, and perhaps that's fitting, for this Dutch sailor and explorer certainly led such a life. However you spell his name (Dirck Hartogh, Dirch Hartichs, and even Theodoric Hertoge) he holds a place in

history for being, in 1616, the second European to make landfall in Australia, and the first to sight Western Australia. This, as with so many of such outstanding discoveries, was naturally under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company (VOC).

Hartog was born into a sea-faring family in 1580 and received his first command at the age of thirty, spending several years in trading ventures in the Baltic and Mediterranean. He was employed by the VOC in 1615 and appointed master of a brand new ship, the *Eendracht*. This was a popular ship's name of the period, meaning "concord," "unity," or "harmony," and taken from the motto of the Republiek der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden: "*Concordia Res Parvae Crescunt*," ("through union the small prosper"). The *Eendracht*, at 700 tonnes, was quite a large vessel for the time, carrying 32 guns and a crew of about 200.

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The *Eendracht* set out on her maiden voyage from Texel on January 23, 1616, in the company of several other VOC ships, on a trading venture bound for Batavia. Off Africa a storm separated Hartog's ship from the rest of the fleet, and he put in at the Cape of Good Hope, where he stayed several weeks. In August he decided to set out unaccompanied for Batavia.

The ship's course across the Indian Ocean was more southerly than had previously been customary, and it was one that made the best use of the prevailing westerly winds at that latitude, the "Roaring Forties," a route pioneered a few years earlier by the Dutch navigator Hendrik Brouwer (1581-1643) as a faster route to Java. The VOC had instructed captains to take advantage of this route as it could reduce the travel time from Europe by several months. The routine was, however, to change to a northerly heading at a more westerly longitude than the *Eendracht* did, though whether Hartog had intended to keep to the southerly track, or was perhaps blown off course, is not clear.

Whatever the reason for this deviation, the result was that Hartog was farther east than he should have been and thereby unwittingly found Australia. On October 25, he came unexpectedly upon uninhabited islands in the region that would become known as Shark Bay in Western Australia. Hartog was the first European to see this area, though he was not the first to make landfall on this new continent, that honor having gone to Willem Janszoon in the *Duyfken* ten years earlier when he set foot on the western shore of the Cape York Peninsula.

The crew of the *Eendracht* went ashore at the northern tip of a skinny island. It was uninhabited, and they found nothing of great interest or value, but spent three days examining the coast and nearby islands. Hartog named this area *t'Landt van*



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d'Eendracht or "Eendracht's Land," after his ship. The island where he landed was subsequently named Dirk Hartog Island in his honor. Before leaving he acknowledged his the landing by leaving a flattened inscribed pewter plate, now known as "Dirk Hartog's Plate," nailed to a post in a location now called Cape Inscription. The inscription goes like this:

"Ao 1616, den 25sten October, is hier vangecommen het schip de Endracht van Amsterdam, den Oppercoopmen Gilles Mibais van Luyck; schipper Dirch Hatichs, van Amsterdam, den 27sten, ditto t'zeijl gegaen na Bantam, den Ondercoopman Jan Stoyne, Opperstierman Pieter Dockes, van Bil, Ao 1616."

Translation: *"In the year 1616. On the 25th October the ship Eendracht of Amsterdam arrived here. Upper merchant Gilles Miebais of Liuck [Liege]; skipper Dirk Hartog of Amsterdam. On the 27th ditto we sail for Bantam. Under merchant Jan Stins; upper steerman Pieter Doores of Bil [Brielle]. In the year 1616."*

Eighty-one years later in 1697, the Dutch captain Willem de Vlamingh was in command of the frigate *De Geelvinck* (*Yellow Finch*) on a rescue mission to locate a VOC capital ship that was thought to have run aground on the west coast of New Holland. Vlamingh landed at Cape Inscription and found Hartog's badly weathered plate, which he removed substituted his own. Hartog's plate is now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and is the oldest-known artifact of European exploration in Australia. It was not long before "Eendracht's Land" began to appear on maps of the world, and Hartog's voyage heralded the beginning of the Dutch unveiling of the west coast of that vast continent. There still exist place names of Dutch origin on that shore, some the names of subsequent explorers, and some, sadly, from the names of wrecked VOC ships.

After leaving the island, the *Eendracht* sailed northwards along the coastline of Western Australia as far as the North West Cape, Hartog making nautical charts as he went, up

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to about 22 degrees south. Hartog arrived safely at Batavia harbor on December 16, 1616, some five months after his expected arrival. He left the VOC upon his return to Amsterdam in 1617 and resumed private trading in the Baltic until his death at the age 41 of in 1621.