



New Netherland Institute  
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

## TRADE AND TERRITORY: ABEL TASMAN AND THE DISCOVERY OF NEW ZEALAND

By Peter Douglas



Detail from a portrait of Abel Tasman's family  
by Jacob Gerritszoon Cuyp (1637)

The year 1642 saw the death of Galileo and the birth of Sir Isaac Newton. In England, King Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham to begin that country's Civil War, and in the Netherlands, Rembrandt finished his famous painting, *De Nachtwacht*. Meanwhile, on the far side of the globe, a Dutch seafarer and explorer called Abel Janszoon Tasman (1603-59) became the first European to set eyes on Tasmania and, less than three weeks later, New Zealand.

In a previous edition of the *Mercurius* we have seen how the first known sighting of Australia by a European was by a Dutchman, Willem Janszoon, in 1606, under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC). That the VOC was behind this discovery, and that of other major land masses in the southern ocean, is no accident. The VOC was central to these Dutch discoveries because, firstly, its headquarters, after 1619, in Batavia offered a convenient base for the search for and the exploration of "the unknown land to the South," and secondly, the company, with its strong mercantile spirit and thirst for commerce, basically possessed

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the cash, the will, the ships, and the skillful and daring captains who could commit to these ventures.

In fact, this was policy. Specific orders were sent from VOC headquarters in Amsterdam in 1605 to the effect that “There must be more charting, mapping, and exploration of the lands farther east of the Spice Islands [the Moluccas, or the Indonesian Archipelago] and a renewed search for a passage through the Pacific Ocean.” The twin objectives of the VOC’s numerous expeditions to the unknown south were quite simply Trade and Territory, and commanders were instructed to find new commercial prospects and acquire new lands. Such were the orders that effectively signaled the beginning of the Dutch discoveries in the Southern Seas, almost a century before the more celebrated Captain Cook was born. .

In August 1642, Tasman received instructions to sail in search of this mysterious and supposedly rich southern continent, this *Terra Australis Ingognita*, and to take possession of it “on behalf of their High Mightinesses the States-General of the United Provinces.” Tasman set sail on August 14 in his flagship, the “jacht” *Heemskerck*, accompanied by the “fluyt” *Zeehaen*. The celebrated pilot, hydrographer, and surveyor Frans Jacobszoon Visscher accompanied Tasman. Their first discovery, on November 24, was the previously unknown island of Tasmania, given the name Van Diemen’s Land by Tasman in honor of Anthony Van Diemen, the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, under whose orders he sailed.

In early December the ships left Tasmania. The intention was to head north, but the ships took an easterly track because of unfavorable winds. On December 13 Tasman sighted the west coast of the south island of New Zealand, what he described in his log as “groot hooch verheven landt” – a large land, uplifted high. Tasman saw mountains whose tops were hidden in thick cloud. These were the Southern Alps, lying inland between, according to his stated position, present-day Hokitika and Abut Head, at the

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mouth of the Whataroa River. He named this land *Staten Landt*, meaning the “Land of the (Dutch) States-General,” because he thought that this could possibly be connected to Staten Island (Isla de los Estados) off Tierra del Fuego, discovered by his countrymen in 1616, and believed at the time to be the northern tip of the Southern Continent.

Tasman’s encounters with the indigenous inhabitants of this land were not peaceful. The two ships anchored on December 18 in what Tasman called *Moordenaers Baij*, or “Murderer’s Bay” (now known as Golden Bay, thanks to James Cook) on account of the skirmish with the Maoris there that killed four of his crew. They sailed farther north then, mistaking Cook Strait for a bight, bad weather preventing further exploration, and proceeded up the west coast of the North Island.

Tasman named the northwest tip of the North Island “Cape Maria van Diemen” (for Anthony’s wife) and “Three Kings Islands” (*Drie Koonijgh Eylant*) because they anchored there on the feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1643. The names that Tasman bestowed on these two landmarks endure to this day, though his *Cabo Pieter Boreels* (named for one of the VOC Council) was renamed Cape Egmont, again by James Cook, in 1769. The explorer is also remembered in the Tasman Sea (otherwise known as “The Ditch” down under), the large body of water, some 1,250 miles across, between Australia and New Zealand. Leaving the waters of New Zealand, the ships sailed northwards then, to Tonga, Fiji, around the north coast of New Guinea, and back to Batavia by June 1643. The following February he would set sail again, this time for the Gulf of Carpentaria and the north and western coasts of Australia, from the Torres Strait to Shark Bay.

As for the Dutch name of the country he discovered, there were actually *two* New Zealands at first. The name appears for the first time in 1606 when Willem Janszoon in

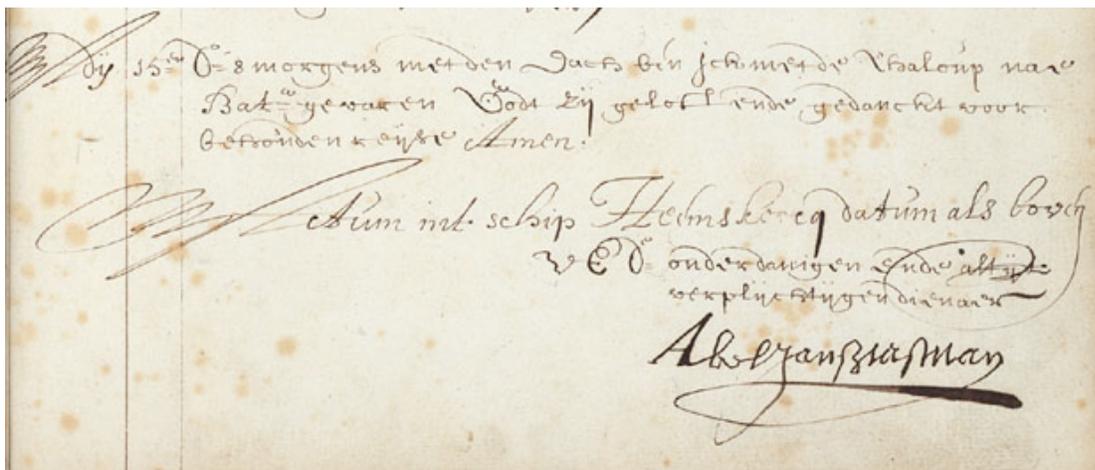
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the *Duyfken* discovered an island off the coast of New Guinea that he called *Nieu Zelandt*.

Regarding the “real” New Zealand, the name *Staten Landt* is what appears on Tasman’s first maps. Once it was understood that Tasman’s discovery was not part of the South American continent, within a decade Dutch cartographers changed it to *Nova Zeelandia*, derived from *Nieuw Zeeland* after the Dutch province.

There appears to be no records that explain how New Zealand received its name—why the name should feature the province of Zeeland. It has been suggested that New Zealand derives its name from the second most important chamber of the VOC, after Amsterdam. Another theory is the possible link between New Zealand and *Nova Hollandia*, the original name given to Australia. The two Dutch provinces of Holland and Zeeland are separated by sea, the same as *Nova Hollandia* and *Nova Zelandia*. The name *Zelandia*, for Zeeland, appeared on maps for the first time in 1645, and it is thought that the name may have been the choice of the cartographer Johan Blaeu (1596-1673). It was subsequently Anglicized by, naturally, James Cook who visited the islands in 1769-70.



The image shows a page of handwritten Dutch text in cursive script. The text is written on aged, yellowed paper. The top line reads: "Dij 15<sup>de</sup> D's morgens met den Jaets bin jehimster vhalonp naar". The second line reads: "Bat<sup>te</sup> gewaen Voot zij gelof vnde gedanc het woor". The third line reads: "Gefonden en vnde Amen." Below this is a large, stylized signature that reads "Abel Tasman". To the right of the signature, there is more text: "Datum als boech" and "VOC onderdangen Ende altijd".

Tasman’s signature from his journal, 1643