



New Netherland Institute  
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

## CAPE HORN: HOW A TRADING MONOPOLY, A DISENCHANTED WEALTHY MERCHANT, AND TWO DUTCH EXPLORERS PUT IT ON THE MAP

By Peter Douglas



Cape Horn, the southernmost headland of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago, became notorious as a “sailors’ graveyard” because of its strong currents, gales, and frequent storms. It is named for the city of Hoorn in the distant Netherlands. How this came to be is a story that begins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In that century’s final years, the Dutch began to challenge the Portuguese monopoly on trade routes to the East Indies. Such voyages were organized and financed by Dutch syndicates until 1602 when a number of companies combined to form the Dutch East India Company, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*. The VOC’s charter guaranteed a monopoly of trade with the East by two routes: by way of the Cape of Good Hope, and through the Strait of Magellan at the tip of South America. Because no other route was known at the time, Dutch ships not owned by the VOC were effectively barred from the spice trade.

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This stranglehold did not sit well with one merchant in particular. Isaac Le Maire (1558-1624) was one of the VOC's largest stockholders but he became disenchanted with the company's power. Eager to reap his own huge profits that the spice trade promised, he became obsessed with undermining the VOC's monopoly. What he was looking for was a loophole.

Le Maire approached the French, who had dreams of their own East India Company and finding a northern route to Asia. Henry Hudson was under consideration for the task, but this came to naught because the VOC offered Hudson a better deal, resulting in Hudson's voyage up the "Hudson" River that was the beginning of New Netherland.

If Le Maire couldn't find a northern passage to Asia then he would seek a new southern route to the Pacific. He suspected that another westward passage existed farther south. Magellan himself had speculated about this, as had Francisco de Hoces in 1526, and Drake's 1578 voyage also supported the existence of open sea to the south of Tierra del Fuego. If such a route could be found, Le Maire's ships could reach the East without trespassing on the VOC's rights.

In pursuit of this goal, in 1614 Le Maire established the *Australische of Zuid Compagnie* and reached an agreement with Willem Corneliszoon Schouten (1567-1625), an experienced mariner from Hoorn, to share the raising of the necessary capital. Le Maire meticulously planned the expedition but at his age he declined to take part, nominating his son Jacob (Jacques) (1585-1616), also a seasoned sailor, as supercargo. The people of North Holland resented the dominance of the Amsterdam faction within the VOC and helped finance two ships, the 220-ton *Eendracht* and the smaller *Hoorn*. Isaac forbade a passage through the Straits of Magellan and Jacob, on his arrival in the Indies, was to make it clear that their route had not violated the VOC's jurisdiction.

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The citizens of Hoorn gave a civic farewell, and the two ships cleared the harbor at Texel on June 14, 1615. They replenished stores in Africa and crossed the Atlantic to continue south down the coast of Brazil and Patagonia. During a refit, the *Hoorn* was lost, having caught fire while her weed-fouled hull was being scorched clean. The now overcrowded *Eendracht* proceeded southwards, past the entrance to the Strait of Magellan, and rounded the Mitre Peninsula, entering a new and more southerly channel. This was duly named Le Maire Strait.

On January 29, 1616, the *Eendracht* rounded “*Kaap Hoorn*,” which was named for Schouten’s hometown that had sponsored their voyage. The discovery proved that Isaac Le Maire had been right about a southern passage to the South Seas. The *Eendracht* thus became the first ship to sail past South America across the open sea, and proved that “Terra Australis,” if it existed at all, was not connected to the Americas.

Le Maire and Schouten continued their voyage across the Pacific, making a number of discoveries in the Tuamotu Archipelago and the Tonga Islands before heading north for New Guinea and Java. At the end of October 1616 they arrived in Jacatra (soon to be renamed Batavia) where Director General Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629), although from Hoorn himself, was unsympathetic to the new arrivals. Refusing to believe that Le Maire and Schouten had found a new passage to the Pacific, he arrested them and seized the *Eendracht* and her cargo for having illegally sailed within the boundaries of the VOC charter. Their objections, he argued, would have to be settled back in the Netherlands.

Le Maire and Schouten were ultimately released and in December they embarked in the company of Joris van Spilbergen to return home. Le Maire would never see his father again, dying at sea aboard the *Amsterdam*. Schouten reached the Netherlands in July

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1617 and wasted little time in publishing his account of the voyage, giving himself much prominence and excluding Jacob's name from his book's title page.

Isaac Le Maire sued the VOC for the return of his property, and in 1619 the court ruled that the *Eendracht* had been unlawfully seized and the VOC had to return the vessel and its cargo, plus all related costs. Isaac also retrieved his son's journals, which he published in 1622 to set the record straight.

Isaac was unable to keep his son's discovery secret and thus never made his fortune from the exclusive use of the new trade route. However, Le Maire Strait became of great importance during the 17<sup>th</sup> century; despite its rough conditions, navigators preferred its open waters to the narrow, time-consuming Strait of Magellan, with its unpredictable winds and currents. The tenacity of both father and son in seeking and finding the new route, and fighting to get credit for its discovery, make it appropriate that the strait should still bear the name Le Maire.

As for *Kaap Hoorn*, general awareness of its derivation from Schouten's hometown has been lost. Despite what might appear obvious, Cape Horn is not so named because of its shape. In fact this geographic feature is actually not the Cape at all but the Mitre Peninsula, part of the Isla Grande of easternmost Tierra del Fuego. Cape Horn is in fact a small island off the Chilean coast. The association of Cape Horn with the town of Hoorn is further befogged by its curious Spanish name: "Cabo de Hornos," literally "Cape of Ovens."