

Abel Janszoon Tasman: a biography

written by Grahame Anderson and contributed to the Abel Tasman website,
October 2014

Grahame Anderson's major published works include: *The Merchant of the Zeehaen: Isaac Gilsemans and the voyages of Abel Tasman* (Wellington Te Papa Press, 2001); *fast light boats: a century of Kiwi innovation* (Wellington, Te Papa Press, 1999); *Fresh about Cook Strait: an appreciation of Wellington Harbour* (Auckland, Methuen, 1984).

If you have queries or comments, please contact Grahame at: ampersand1647@gmail.com

Tasman, Abel Janszoon c1603 - c1659

Commander, explorer, cartographer, merchant

Born to subsistence farmers in Lutjegast the year the Dutch Republic was formed, Tasman may well have benefitted from its progressive education program. His ability to write, his knowledge of Latin, his rapid rise in rank, and the willingness of able officers to sail with him all bear witness to the quality of his education and to his command, seamanship, and navigation skills. He married his second wife Jannetje Tjaerts in Amsterdam in 1632, sailed for Batavia in 1633, and renewed his contract with the Dutch East India Company while back in the Republic in 1636.

Tasman's most well-known expedition of 1642-1643 was just one of twelve long voyages of which he was given command during his service with the Company. He began work with the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie), in 1634 by spending two years at sea patrolling the Moluccas as skipper of the *Mocha*. Though much of his time during that period involved enforcement of Company control of trade, he charted the seas between Amboyna, Banda and Ceram for the Company as he did so. Then Tasman shared command of the *Banda* with Mattijs Quast in an 8-month voyage back to the Netherlands, both being referred to in that ship's journal as 'skipper', with Tasman participating in navigational observations along the way.

Then in 1638, this time accompanied by his wife and with his contract again renewed with the Company, he returned to Batavia in command of the *Engel*, again with Quast on board. These two skippers were to spend much of the ensuing four years seeking new lands, new trade and new riches at sea for the Company and for themselves. Tasman continued in command of the *Engel* until mid-1639, when he handed this ship to Quast and took command of the *Gracht*. During his time with the *Engel*, decisions regarding courses to be followed were, the Company said, left to ... *the skill and experience of Skipper Abel Janszoon Tasman*.

Later in 1639, on this occasion with Quast as expedition commander in the *Engel* and Tasman as skipper of the *Gracht*, they sailed in search of ... *islands of silver and gold ... said to ... lie at the uttermost 400 miles from Japan ...* . Tasman was later instructed to have, based on his own ship's journals ... *two plane-charts drawn up ...* of this ill-equipped voyage, one of monotony, extreme hardship, and little discovery. Though unsuccessful in its primary purpose, lessons learnt during this voyage enabled future Dutch expeditions heading into uncharted oceans to be better prepared and equipped for long exploratory voyages. Following his return, Tasman provided his employers with navigation information which later formed the basis of

Company instructions and directions on the courses to be followed in future by many Dutch ships navigating the seas between China and Formosa.

In May 1640, sole command of three ships, the *Oostcappel*, *Meerman* and *Otter*, on a trading voyage to Formosa and Japan, between them carrying cargoes worth some 3 million guilders, was entrusted to the officer the Company described as ... *the painstaking, heedful and highly experienced skipper Abel Tasman, who had a large share in the drawing up of the directions for the courses to be kept.*

Still in command of the *Oostcappel*, he set out in early 1641 on a voyage to Formosa and China. On reaching Hirado, the Dutch trading base in southern Japan, he was held for several months against his will then was very firmly told by the Japanese, on the basis of the forbidden Christian symbols on the Company's wharf-side warehouse there, to relocate their trading operations to Deshima, an island in Nagasaki Bay.

Also in 1641, Tasman's flagship left Formosa for Japan at the beginning of August carrying gifts of emerald set in gold for the King of Laos and a silver telescope for the King of Cambodia, during which voyage, somewhere northeast of Formosa, the *Oostcappel*, dismasted, rudderless and leaking badly in a violent storm, drifted for 20 days before being found, eventually arriving back in Batavia under jury-rig. His demonstration of outstanding seamanship skills during this episode further enhanced Tasman's reputation amongst Company seamen in the East Indies and influenced many able officers to sail with him again and again on future expeditions.

The principal aim of the 1642-1643 voyage Tasman was appointed to lead, Company trading posts having yielded large quantities of spices, was to extend its field of mercantile operation, another of its purposes being to bring back new understandings of eastern seas and winds to enable their ships to navigate there all year round. When in April 1642 Tasman went out in command of three ships to ... *use his vigilance and good management, as well as his seamanship and military skill* ... to promote the best interests of the Company in Palembang he had with him experienced Company officers with abilities complementing his own and who knew his capabilities, all of which suited the Company's purposes in forming the ship's council with which he was required to consult.

Then Tasman, with his rank and Company contract renewed for three years and with the *Ruttem* as his flagship, went with a squadron of ships to ensure the safety of Dutch residents in their trading bases, arriving back in Batavia just two months prior to his departure on the 1642-1643 voyage. When two of his men were killed and three wounded while ashore on the island of Ceram during this voyage Tasman, much in danger of attack, succeeded in recovering the survivors and bringing them safely back to his ship.

Early in August 1642 its Governor in Batavia, Anthoni van Diemen, proposed the Company undertake ... *without cutting down the means for customary trade and war, the employment of two ships to navigate to the Southern and Eastern Countries, which were only partially known and had not hitherto been explored* ... the sending of the *Heemskerck* and *Zeehaen* ... *manned with the ablest seafaring people here in the roadstead* ... *under the leadership of the Hon Abel Jansen Tasman, very keen on this discovering likewise the experienced navigator Pilot Major Frans Visscher and the Merchant Isaak Gilsemans who has fair knowledge of seafaring and the drawing of lands* Just a year previously, during their enforced stay in Hirado, these three officers had assembled detailed proposals, later put to the Company by Visscher, for such an expedition.

Significantly, during his career with the Company the same names appear repeatedly amongst his officers, and similar repetitions occur amongst members of the ship's councils. Tasman was required to consult on all major ship-management and navigational matters. Also significantly, for this expedition the Batavia Council, having named him as commander, Visscher as Pilot Major, Gerrit Jansen and Ide Holman as skippers of the two ships and Gilsemans as Merchant for the voyage, left it to Tasman to select the remaining principal officers.

He set out westward to Mauritius that August to refit his ill-prepared ship and replenish provisions then sailed way south to latitude 49° south where, in severely cold weather, the first death occurred amongst the crew. Tasman then headed back to 42° south, at which latitude they 'discovered' their first new land, naming it *Anthoni van Diemens Landt* in honour of their Governor General in Batavia. First driven off-shore by strong winds, they eventually located a sheltered anchorage on Tasmania's east coast from which a party sent ashore found supplies of fresh water and signs of inhabitants then, unable to land again due to rough seas Tasman had his ship's carpenter swim ashore to claim, with a pole flying the Dutch flag, the newly-found land for the Republic.

Tasman, after crossing the sea later named after him and describing New Zealand as a ... *large and highly elevated land* ... called this second 'discovery' *Staten Landt*, believing it to be the western shore of distant *Staten Island*, so-named by Jacob Le Maire in 1616.

From their landfall off Perpendicular Point he continued northward along New Zealand's South Island west coast and, after rounding Farewell Spit, anchored in Golden Bay. After Visscher and Gilsemans, sent out ahead to find a suitable anchorage, had returned to the already-anchored ships, two Ngati Tumatakokiri-crewed waka left the beach then returned ashore as darkness fell. Next day, two waka came out and rammed the Heemskerck's small boat, overpowering and killing three of its crew and wounding a fourth. As eleven waka approached the ships the Dutch weighed anchor and kept quiet then as they headed out of the bay, fired several largely ineffectual cannon-shots at the waka crews.

In refraining from using his powerful armaments, and in confirming in his journal the undoubted strength of character and purpose of the Maori, Tasman displayed both his own good judgement and that of the Ngati Tumatakokiri in combining courage and caution in a pre-emptive attack on the small boat of a clearly more powerful adversary. After naming the location *Moordenaers Bay*, he first sailed east towards the North Island then returned west to shelter from strengthening north-westerlies in the lee of D'Urville Island. Though wind and sea conditions indicated that an opening further east might exist, Tasman, his ships unable to sail to windward away from possible danger, remained at anchor until the storm died.

He then headed north along the North Island west coast, rounding Cape Egmont well out to sea - not sighting Mount Taranaki but illustrating Mount Kariori on his chart as they passed Raglan Harbour - reaching the northern-most tip of New Zealand by 4 January and naming it Cape Maria van Diemen in honour of the wife of their Governor in Batavia.

On sighting islands further north on the day of the Feast of the Epiphany, Tasman named them *T' Eijland Drie Coningen* and sent Visscher and Gilsemans in a ship's boat to look for fresh water. The sea conditions they experienced, and the likelihood of attack from the men of tall stature they observed there ... *armed with sticks or clubs who called out to them with rough loud voice* ... having made it too dangerous to land, Tasman left New Zealand waters and in January 1643 anchored off Tonga's northwest coast to obtain food and water still not replenished since leaving Mauritius.

Despite Tasman having spent only 23 days in New Zealand waters, his name remains associated with a number of the country's coastal features and appears on other geographical features; - Mount Tasman (New Zealand's second highest), the Tasman Sea, Tasman Bay, world-class National Park, and Tasman Glacier as well as with rivers, districts, townships, schools and hotels together with the names of numerous commercial, industrial and sporting ventures.

Critics of his navigational capabilities, unaware of the zero longitude on which they had been based, made much of the seemingly erroneous longitudes given in his ship's journal and charts. The essential difference between the modern-day universal system of longitudes - Greenwich is now used internationally of course - and those of Tasman's day stems from the zero meridian the Dutch and others referred to as *The Peak at Tenerife*.

The by-then well established longitude of the volcanic peak on that island, 16° 39' west of Greenwich, was in Tasman's time the last verifiable 'fix' available to navigators of many west-bound ocean-going ships. Deducting his Tenerife-based longitudes from those recorded in his ship's journal made it possible to match them with Greenwich-based longitudes on modern charts then to plot his courses in New Zealand and Tasmanian waters and match illustrations in his ship's journal with those countries' coastal landscapes - just as has been accurately shown on modern charts in *The Merchant of the Zeehaen*.

Stormy cloudy weather in February 1643 having prevented accurate observation of their position, Tasman, with the agreement of his ship's Council members regarding the best course for their return to Batavia, sailed to a longitude beyond the known eastern limit of New Guinea, turned north to a latitude from which he knew they could safely clear New Guinea's northern coast, then headed for Boutton Strait. Once there he used its strong favourable currents to speed his ships towards Batavia for him to report the events of his 10-month expedition to the Company.

The Batavia Councillors, despite noting that ... *no treasures or profitable commodities have as yet been discovered* ... kept their promise to pay Tasman and his crew ... *for the pains taken and diligence shown by them* ... but ended, after adding that Tasman ... *had been to some extent remiss in investigating the situation, conformation, and nature of the lands and peoples discovered* ... by observing that he had left the main part of the task ... *to be executed by some more inquisitive successor*

The purpose of that Council's next and last major voyage of exploration was ... *to have the unknown land situated between Nova Guinea and the unknown South-land discovered and surveyed by Commander Tasman and Pilot-major Frans Visscher by way of Banda* ... this time with Visscher and were to begin the search from ... *the farthest point of Nova Guinea* ... to find out whether there was ... *an eventual passage to the South sea* ... then to sail to ... *the northernmost extremity of the known South-land* ... and ascertain ... *what treasures, advantages, profitable trade-connections and convenient passages may there be available for the benefit of the Company* If that turned out not to be the case, he was to return east to recover the gold still lying on the seabed in the Company's ship *Batavia*, wrecked off the western coast of Australia in 1628 - this latter instruction being one of several not carried out.

Tasman, sent out on this voyage in February 1644, arrived back in Batavia six months later. Of this equally fruitless expedition the Councillors complained that he ... *had only come across naked beach-roving wretches destitute even of rice* ... and, though recognising that ... *the vast and hitherto unknown South-land had by Tasman been sailed round in two voyages* ... saying Tasman had been ... *left quite ignorant of what the soil of this South-land produces or*

contains ... and ending by advising that they intended to have everything more closely investigated than had hitherto been employed on this service.

A contemporaneous chart exists of their 1644 course, but no ship's journal of this voyage has survived which might have revealed why Tasman returned to Batavia with his instructions only partly carried out. Such irresolute behaviour and loss of the sense of purpose previously evinced by a commander with a hard-earned reputation the Company had described as trustworthy, experienced, and determined, and by officers with experience and capabilities the equal of his own, remains difficult to understand. Perhaps the deaths of his fellow Company officer Mathijs Quast shortly before the 1642-1643 voyage took place, of Ide Holman, skipper of the *Zeehaen*, just before that voyage ended, and of Franchoijs Visscher shortly after his return from this 1644 voyage, contributed to his otherwise inexplicable lack of determination to carry out a number of his Company's instructions.

Despite Company support for further such ventures waning after Cornelis Van der Lijn succeeded Anthony van Diemen in Batavia on his death in 1645, Tasman was sent out in 1648 in command of the *Banda* to lead an expedition intended to intercept heavy-laden Spanish silver-ships delivering their valuable cargo from Mexico to Manila. During his return from this unsuccessful venture he found two of his junior officers ashore despite having forbidden them to leave their ships. His angry reaction, which almost led to one of them being hanged, prompted the Batavia Councillors to suspend him from his rank and require him to openly confess his behaviour.

Though he may have briefly recommenced sea-going duty following his reinstatement in 1650, three years later Tasman was listed in Company records as an 'ex-commander'. Ashore in Batavia, he was appointed a member of the Company's Court of Justice and advisor to the VOC on matters of navigation and ship's journals, later becoming a major landholder and part-owner of a coastal-trading vessel operating between Batavia and north Java. Tasman had spent some 8 years at sea in command of at least a dozen different Company ships during the 14 years between joining the Dutch East India Company in 1634 and his retirement in 1648, over which period his signature had developed from one conveying an impression of relative immaturity to one revealing the self-assurance of a highly experienced commander of Company ships.

Tasman achieved a major-voyage death rate of less than 7% - impressive in 17th century terms. The first of his 1642-1643 expedition's recorded deaths occurred early in the voyage deep in the southern latitudes. The three killed in the skirmish during his stay in Murderer's Bay were next, after which only three further lives, including that of the quartermaster in March 1643, are known to have been lost, the last being that of Tasman's long-time friend Ide Holman shortly before the ships arrived back in Batavia.

In the absence of any authenticated Tasman portrait, it is his name alone which appears in New Zealand postage stamps, consumer products, modern publications and, more recently, in digital versions of documents to be found on websites connected with his voyages. Tasman also left to posterity, in the form of accurate illustrations, the first coastal landscapes of numerous countries he visited during his voyages of exploration.

His broad range of significant legacy elements consists of ship's journals, charts, coastal illustrations, safe anchorages, sailing instructions and prevailing winds and tides, compass variations, ship-provisioning locations, ship-board food and beverage management, together with advice on sailing conditions and safe harbours on the coasts he visited; Cook, la Perouse and du Fresne along with many who followed them, recognised the quality and accuracy of his information and advice by observing it during their voyages.

Particularly, but not only, in the Netherlands, renewal of interest in Tasman's contributions to Pacific exploration has become such that a Board of Administrators has recently completed a museum in his birthplace to house an expanding collection of Tasman-related documents, records, ship models, publications, ship's journals and other memorabilia.

Primary sources:

Abel Tasman and the discovery of New Zealand. J C Beaglehole. Wellington, New Zealand, 1942.

Dutch East India Company Records, held in the Netherland State Archives, den Hague.

Five Hundred Years of Nautical Science 1400 – 1900. Howse Derek, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, 1981.

Huydecoper MS, The. of the voyage of 1642-1643. Roest P K translation, held in the Mitchell Library Sydney.

Hollanders in Hirado. W Z Mulder. Fibula-Vandishoek, Haarlem. 1945.

Jan Compagnie in Japan. Boxer, C R. Martinus Nijhof, den Hague, 1950.

State Archives MS, J E Heeres translation, held in the Netherlands State archives, den Hague.

The Merchant of the Zeehaen: Isaac Gilsemans and the voyages of Abel Tasman. Anderson G, Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2001.

Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman, The. Sharp, Andrew. Oxford, 1968.

20 October 2014