

Chapter 3

Abel Janszoon Tasman

Sailor, Captain, Explorer

A glimpse of Tasman's personality in paint peers through the gloomy varnish in Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp's portrait of the navigator and his family, which was completed sometime around 1637.¹ Tasman's watery blue eyes stare thoughtfully into the middle distance while he gestures towards a globe, clasping a drawing compass in one hand as he does so – and, just in case the viewer misses these clear cartographic cues, hanging on the wall in the background is an astrolabe, which was used by sailors to measure latitude, and that had come to symbolise the science of seafaring in this era. This is not a depiction of a rapacious coloniser, but of a navigational specialist. Curiosity, not dominion, is the motif in this portrait. For men such as Tasman, plotting routes and sailing across oceans were ends in themselves rather than a means to any imperial aggrandisement. They were paid functionaries, employed by the Dutch East India Company principally as sailors and navigators, ensuring the regular flow of trade shipments between ports.

Six years before Cuyp painted this portrait, Tasman was a mere *vaerentgesel* – a sailor, with probably no navigational training. However, since then, he had served on company ships in South East Asia and had accumulated considerable knowledge about sailing and navigating in the process. By the time Tasman entered Batavia's nautical orbit, in 1634, company officials were keen on probing

1. J. G. Cuyp, *Portrait of Abel Tasman, his wife and daughter* (c. 1637), National Library of Australia, call number PIC T267 NK3.



Portrait of Abel Tasman, his wife and daughter (Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp, 1637)
National Library of Australia

beyond their existing trade routes to see what opportunities might be discovered in some of the more unfamiliar areas in the region – the sort of enterprise that required captains shifting from being map-readers to mapmakers. On 18 February that year, Tasman, who had now ascended to the position of first mate on the trading ship *Weesp*,² was despatched from Batavia on one such exploratory journey. The ship's destination was Ambon Island, around 2,200 kilometres east of Batavia – a location the Dutch had first visited in 1599, and where they were now asserting a firmer presence.³ By late May 1634, Tasman had risen to the rank of captain and was put in command of the *Mocha*, which was despatched that month to map safer routes for Dutch ships

2. K. Schuldt, 'Abel Janszoon Tasman', *Deutsches Schifffahrtsarchiv* 8 (1985), 117-46.

3. P.V. Lape, 'Political Dynamics and Religious Change in the Late Pre-colonial Banda Islands, Eastern Indonesia', *World Archaeology* 32, no. 1 (2000), p. 149.

in the region.⁴ It was a small and rudimentary undertaking and one which he accomplished to the satisfaction of his superiors in Batavia.⁵ In August 1635, he was promoted to the rank of commander, heading a small fleet of vessels which served to protect company trade in the region,⁶ and on 30 December 1636, the now much more weary and weather-worn Tasman boarded the *Banda* for the gruelling voyage back to Amsterdam, arriving on 1 August 1637. Eight months later, having settled his affairs in the Netherlands, Tasman sailed back to Batavia (this time, accompanied by his wife), reaching the port on 11 October 1638. Within weeks, he was again captaining a ship, this time headed for Ambon Island, where he took delivery of a cargo of cloves before returning to Batavia.

While Tasman was completing this relatively mundane voyage, the local company directors were already concocting his next mission – one that would be almost entirely exploratory in nature. Batavia's blossoming bureaucracy was burdening the company with mounting costs, for which increased trade was seen as the principal panacea. To that end, a plan was devised for two vessels (one captained by Tasman) to sail roughly 4,000 kilometres north in the direction of Japan, with instructions to chart 'unknown lands, shores, and shoals or shallows' along the way and to ensure that all the intelligence gathered was kept strictly confidential.⁷ A great deal of navigational and geographical information was harvested as the two ships tacked their way through the seas of South East Asia.

While the Dutch predictably painted their activities in this part of the world in favourable hues, some of those at the receiving end of their ventures were sometimes less approving. A Japanese assessment made at this time offers a blunt corrective, describing the Dutch as '[g]reedy and cunning, good judges of precious commodities' and saying that they 'fight with skill to obtain the greatest possible profit'. This was followed by a stark warning: '[w]hoever meets them on the high seas will assuredly be looted by them'.⁸ The Dutch certainly enforced

4. A. Hoving and C. Emke, *The Ships of Abel Tasman* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2000), p. 14.

5. J.E. Heeres and C.H. Coote (eds), *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal* (Los Angeles: Kovach, 1965), p. 10.

6. J.B. Walker, *Abel Janszoon Tasman: His Life and Voyages: Read before the Royal Society of Tasmania, 25th November, 1895* (Hobart: Government Printer, 1896), pp. 9-10.

7. Heeres and Coote, *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal*, p. 25.

8. Cited in P. Zumthor, *Daily Life in Rembrandt's Holland* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), p. 297, in Bennett, 'Van Dieman, Tasman and the Dutch Reconnaissance', p. 71.

their monopoly trading routes ‘ruthlessly’ and their patrolling vessels, including those captained by Tasman, were prepared to sink any ships carrying illicit cargoes.⁹

* * *

Tasman returned to Batavia on 19 February 1640 and delivered his journals to the company’s office. The maps were far from comprehensive, but the company was not looking for anything definitive anyway. Rather, the incremental accumulation of intelligence was what mattered and, by this time, for the board of directors in Batavia, acquiring details on little-known territories or new sailing routes was becoming a much greater priority for the company.

After four months in the cramped confines of Batavia, Tasman was once again about to sail into the yawning expanse of the South China Sea. On 14 June 1640, at the helm of the *Oostcappel*, he led a fleet of four vessels northwards to Taiwan, Japan (where he remained for four months) and then Cambodia, before returning to Batavia on 11 April 1641. Four weeks later, he was again captaining the *Oostcappel* to Cambodia and Japan, straggling back into Batavia on 20 December after being battered on the final stretch home by a vicious storm that blasted through the flotilla, fatally damaging two of the ships, which along with their crews ended up entombed in the ocean. Tasman’s vessel just survived, but he was given little time to recuperate. Almost immediately, he was sent back on another voyage – this time a trading trip to nearby Sumatra, which concluded on 20 June 1642. For the following seven weeks, Tasman adjusted to landbound life while waiting for orders for his next command. His reputation as a competent and reliable captain was now well established and justified and so, as the Dutch East India Company assembled its plan for an exploratory voyage to as-yet-uncharted areas to the west and south, Tasman emerged as an obvious candidate to lead this expedition. It probably helped that he also privately coveted the role, knowing that it would boost both his prestige and his pay.

* * *

The equatorial heat and humidity were unremitting in Batavia. On 13 August 1642, as the sun lifted above the morning haze hanging over the mangrove forests and mudflats to the east of the settlement, even the tide seemed to lap lazily against the ships moored in the harbour. Slowly,

9. Ibid., p. 72; A. Sharp, *The Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 4-5.

though, the town began to bustle into life as its residents commenced their daily activities. There was certainly nothing listless in the company's office that morning, though. Despite the overbearing heat, Dutch officials were busy putting the finishing touches to a meandering set of instructions that would form the basis of Tasman's exploration of parts of the world that no European had previously visited, and that would produce a new body of maps for the company.

The instructions arose from a resolution passed by the Governor-General and councillors of Batavia twelve days earlier, which in turn had originated in the minds of the company's directors back in Amsterdam. The general intention was to explore 'the partly known and still unexplored South- and East-land', in order to discover the most 'convenient routes to well-known opulent markets, in such fashion that the same might in due time be used for the improvement and increase of the Company's general prosperity'. The seed for the idea of this expedition had been planted in 1638 by Anthonij van Diemen (Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies in Batavia, 1636-45), who had urged the directors to give 'further attention to the discovery of the South [Land] and the gold-bearing island, which would be of great use to the Company, in order in time to get over the heavy burdens, and come into the real enjoyment of the profits of the East India trade'.¹⁰

This would be an expedition involving only two vessels: the *Heemskerck*, a 60-ton 'yacht'; and the 100-ton *Zeehaen*¹¹ – placed under the overall command of Tasman, who was known by officials in Batavia as being 'strongly inclined to this discovery'. Frans Visscher would captain one of the ships and Tasman the other and, crucially, they would be accompanied by the merchant Isaack Gilsemans, who was described as 'sufficiently versed in navigation and the drawing-up of land-surveyings'.¹²

There was a particular line of logic threaded through this mission. Company leaders had looked back to the discoveries of Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci in the Americas, and Vasco de Gama in Africa and the East Indies, and reasoned that a similar feat could be replicated in the Pacific. There was thus a sense of history that was invigorating the urge to explore, in addition to the prospect of profits.¹³

10. Van Diemen, cited in Bennett, 'Van Dieman, Tasman and the Dutch Reconnaissance', p. 75.

11. R. McNab, *From Tasman to Marsden: A History of Northern New Zealand from 1642 to 1818* (Dunedin: J. Wilkie & Co., 1914), p. 2.

12. Heeres and Coote, *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal*, pp. 129-30.

13. Bennett, 'Van Dieman, Tasman and the Dutch Reconnaissance', p. 68.

It also seemed to make some sort of intuitive sense that a huge territory lay somewhere to the south. The mythical 'Province of Beach' – a purportedly large and lucrative land-mass – had been referred to in maps for two centuries before Tasman's expedition.¹⁴ It was a speculative location, but one that the company now had the means to investigate. Tasman was furnished with the records of 'certain experienced pilots', who had previously plotted some of the routes south of Batavia, but which were of little practical use when penetrating areas of the ocean that were still completely uncharted.¹⁵ Detail would be paramount, as the company made explicit to Tasman:

All the lands, islands, points, turnings, inlets, bays, rivers, shoals, banks, sands, cliffs, rocks etc., which you may meet with and pass, you will duly map out and describe, and also have proper drawings made of their appearance and shape, for which purpose we have ordered an able draughtsman to join your expedition; you will likewise carefully note in what latitude they are situated; how the coasts, islands, capes, headlands or points, bays and rivers bear from each other and by what distances they are separated; what conspicuous landmarks such as mountains, hills, trees or buildings, by which they may be recognised, are visible on them; likewise what depths and shallows, sunken rocks, projecting shoals and reefs are situated about and near the points; how and by what marks these may most conveniently be avoided; item whether the grounds or bottoms are hard, rugged, soft, level, sloping or steep; whether one should come on sounding, or not; by what land- and seamarks the best anchoring-grounds in road-steads and bays may be known; the bearings of the inlets, creeks and rivers, and how these may best be made and entered; what winds blow in these regions; the direction of the currents; whether the tides are regulated by the moon or by the winds; what changes of monsoons, rains and dry weather you observe; furthermore diligently observing and

14. J. Huttich and S. Grynaeus, *Novus orbis regionum ac insularum veteribus incognitarum* (Basel: Hervagius, 1532), in T. Suarez, *Early Mapping of Southeast Asia* (Hong Kong: Periplus, 1999), p. 160; L.C. Wroth, *The Early Cartography of the Pacific* (New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1944), pp. 5-8, in Sharp, *The Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman*, p. 24.

15. Heeres and Coote, *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal*, p. 132.

noting whatever requires the careful attention of experienced steersmen, and may in future be helpful to others who shall navigate to the countries discovered.¹⁶

As if the risks of sailing through unknown parts of the world's largest ocean were not daunting enough for these explorers to contend with, the company accompanied its mapping instructions with a warning about the need for 'extreme caution' due to the likelihood of 'fierce savages' in some of the territories that they might come across. The experience of other European powers had taught the Dutch 'that barbarian men are nowise to be trusted, because they commonly think that the foreigners who so unexpectedly appear before them, have come only to seize their land'. Unlike their predecessors, however, the Dutch were aware of the reason for such indigenous suspicion, which they attributed to the 'many instances of treacherous slaughter' perpetrated by the Spanish and Portuguese in the Americas.¹⁷

The day after Tasman received his instructions, the voyage of the *Heemskerck* and *Zeehaen* got under way, despite the company's preparations for the expedition being 'hopelessly unsatisfactory'.¹⁸ Perhaps the wisest decision was in the timing of the venture. By departing in August, the ships would be conducting the bulk of their exploratory work during the southern-hemisphere summer, thus offering longer daylight hours for those on the vessels to make and record their observations.¹⁹ With favourable conditions and strong, dependable winds filling their sails, the two ships were whisked westward, sighting the white, foam-rimmed coral reefs of Mauritius on 5 September. While the crews used their time in port on the island to repair their ships (both of which were in extremely poor condition),²⁰ the Dutch Governor of Mauritius, Adriaan van der Stel, handed Tasman a collection of maps and charts. Some were useful (such as those detailing the Solomon Islands) and some of practically no value to the expedition (those charting the Straits of Magellan, for example). However, they were all pieces that contributed to the mosaic of cartographical knowledge to which Tasman had been instructed to add. From this point onwards, the route Tasman planned

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

19. Bennett, 'Van Dieman, Tasman and the Dutch Reconnaissance', p. 68.

20. Walker, *Abel Janszoon Tasman: His Life and Voyages*, p. 31.

to take would be into 'nameless waters' in an endeavour to 'enlarge the world' as Europeans knew it.²¹

On 8 October, as the ships prepared to depart – brimming with supplies and expectations – Tasman unrolled the map that laid out the all the known landmasses in this maritime empire and again let his eyes stray over the immense uncharted expanses of ocean beyond them. It was a forbidding cartographical blank space, stretching roughly 20,000 kilometres from the coast of Africa in the west to the shores of Chile in the east. This was the known as 'The Great Chart of the South Sea' and was based on Gerritsz's 1622 map of the region.²² Another source that Tasman had access to at this time was Antonio de Herrera's *De Nieuwe Werelt*, published the same year, which contained maps of parts of the western Pacific and the Solomon Islands,²³ which was consulted along with a globe on board the *Heemskerck* (although the precise version of the globe used on this voyage remains unknown).²⁴

From Mauritius, Tasman sailed southeast, reaching as far south as 49 degrees longitude on 6 November. There, the commanders of the ships decided to head more or less directly east and continued for another eighteen days until in the late afternoon of 24 November, they sighted land 'not as yet known to any European nation'. It was bestowed with the name Anthoonij van Diemenslandt, in honour of the Batavian Governor-General. This was later contracted and anglicised as Van Diemen's Land (which in 1856 became 'Tasmania' – ironically, a name given to the island by British settlers).²⁵ Two mountains towering over the landscape also succumbed to the European habit of applying names to almost every topographical feature in sight. They were labelled Mount Zeehan and Mount Heemskirk. Additional features of the terrain might have been named, except that the unsettled weather and rough, choppy seas made a more thorough exploration along the island's east coast too

21. Words in this sentence taken from A. Curnow, 'Landfall in Unknown Seas', in A. Curnow, *Collected Poems, 1933-1973* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1974), pp. 136-39.

22. B.N. Hooker, 'Towards the Identification of the Terrestrial Globe Carried on the *Heemskerck* by Abel Tasman in 1642-43', *The Globe* (Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Map Society) 79 (2016), pp. 31-32; H. Gerritsz, *Mar del Sur. Mar Pacifico*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Cartes et plans, cote GE SH ARCH-30.

23. Hooker, 'Towards the Identification of the Terrestrial Globe', p. 31.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34; Sharp, *The Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman*, p. 81.

25. Bennett, 'Van Dieman, Tasman and the Dutch Reconnaissance', p. 68.

risky. Tasman found shelter in a bay (which he named Storm Bay) and waited for the violent weather to abate. Finally, on 1 December, with the storm having passed, the ships dropped anchor at Green Island (just over three kilometres off the mainland). Tasman claimed the island for the Netherlands; but there was insufficient water there to supply the vessels, and so the decision was made to leave the area altogether, and sail further east still – again into a vast oceanic region where no European had previously explored.

There is a sense of impatience at this point in Tasman's proceedings. Perhaps the fatigue and frustration of having travelled nearly 14,000 kilometres since leaving Batavia on this exploratory mission (with no obvious commercial benefits having emerged thus far) was beginning to exasperate him, particularly as almost the entirety of his career to date had been fashioned around trade. Perhaps, too, he was disillusioned with his only 'discovery' to date having been an inhospitable, apparently desolate island that seemed to promise so little that he did not even venture to circumnavigate it. It is also possible that Tasman held some vague hope, however diminished, that a territorial prize still awaited him somewhere over the horizon to the east. Up until this point, though, the only item of (questionable) value that had been extracted from this great voyage of discovery was an outline map of the west coast of Tasmania. However, as he left the island for whatever might lie ahead, his optimism seems to have gradually wilted, and from this point, the expedition seemed to take on an air that was much more perfunctory than passionate.²⁶

'Staete Landt'

'Again', Tasman jotted dispiritedly in his journal, as he ordered the ships to leave Tasmania on 5 December 1642 and once more sail eastward across unknown distances of ocean.²⁷ The vessels traversed what would become known as the Tasman Sea²⁸ until midday on 13 December, when 'a large and high land' was sighted on the horizon. Piecing together all that was known about the adjacent parts of the world, Tasman deduced (wrongly as it turned out) that this was most likely the western extremity of Staten Landt – a potentially enormous landmass which was connected to South

26. See Heeres and Coote, *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal*, p. 112.

27. *Ibid.*

28. H. Rotschi and L. Lemasson, 'Oceanography of the Coral and Tasman Seas', *Oceanogr. Mar. Biol. Ann. Rev.* 5 (1967), 49-98.