

Abel Tasman

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from Our Sunburnt Country

Perhaps the most famous of all the early Dutch navigators was Abel Janszoon Tasman. During his time, the Governor of Batavia (in Java) was Anthony van Diemen, an energetic man who wanted to do all he could to make Holland a powerful country with a rich empire of colonies. The Governor believed that somewhere to the south or east of the Spice Islands there was a great southern continent. This continent, he hoped, would be very wealthy, and he therefore decided to send someone to look for it and to explore it. The man he chose for the task was Abel Tasman.

The two ships chosen for Tasman's voyage were the *Heemskerck* (this means Home Church and is the name of a small village in Holland) and the *Zeehaen* (Sea Cock). Food for the voyage, and goods for trade with people in lands Tasman might find, were loaded aboard and then ninety sailors were chosen to man the ships. They were, Tasman felt, the best and "the ablest bodied seafaring men" to be found in Batavia. On 14th August, 1642, the voyage began. "May God Almighty vouchsafe His blessing on this work. Amen", were the first words written by Tasman in the journal kept during the voyage. :

Tasman sailed in a south-westerly direction until he was in the path of the westerlies. He was then blown steadily along, until, on 24th November, his lookout sighted the rocky western coast of Tasmania. You can imagine how excited the men aboard the two tiny ships became. Was this a great new country they were discovering? Would there be any rich spices to carry home from here? Were there any great cities to be seen? Would they be able to trade with the people? Would they all soon become rich?

As the ships sailed around the rocky coast, the sailors were probably a little disappointed. No great cities were seen and it appeared that there would not be any rich spices either. The coastline was rather barren and some rugged mountains could be seen in the background. Later two of these mountains were named after Tasman's ships.

In his journal Tasman tells that a meeting was held to decide upon a name for this newly discovered land. He wrote, "This land, being the first land we have met with in the South Sea, and not known to any European nation, we have conferred on it (that is, given to it) the name of ANTHONY VAN DIEMENSLANDT in honour of the Hon. Governor-General, our illustrious master, who sent us to make this discovery." Of course we all know that this name was later changed to Tasmania.

After following along the south coast of Tasmania and halfway along the east coast, Tasman dropped anchor in a bay now known as Blackman Bay. He sent some

of his men ashore to explore the land. Included in the landing-party were Pilot-Major Visscher, four musketeers, and six seamen to row the boat. They were all excited about the chance to get ashore and explore this strange land, but they probably were worried just a little about the possibility of meeting hostile natives.

They discovered a fine stream of water before sighting something which gave them rather an unpleasant surprise. The sailors noticed that notches had been cut in some of the large trees. They were sure that they had been cut by the natives to enable them to climb the trees more easily, but the notches were about 150 centimetres apart! "Could anyone but a giant," thought the sailors, "take such huge steps when climbing a tree?" The fact that the natives climbed round and round the trees, cutting notches when they needed a foothold, was not known to the Dutchmen. You see, they looked at each tree from only one direction. They could see only a few of the notches this way. Those on the other sides of the trees were hidden from their sight, and for every notch they did see there were several they did not.

Already a little frightened by the notches in the trees, the Dutchmen were still further startled by the footprints of a strange animal. The sailors thought they were like the footprints of a tiger. Then they nervously noticed dense clouds of smoke rising from various points around them. Tasman believed the land they had discovered was inhabited by people of "extraordinary stature" and it would be wise to leave it as soon as possible. They sailed away to the east and discovered New Zealand before returning to Batavia.