

## **A short overview of the Dutch exploration of Torres Strait**

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The colonial Dutch were our nearest neighbours until 1962, and our continent was formerly 'New Holland', so it is befitting that our historical knowledge extends to the activities of the Dutch in and around Australia. There is a considerable body of material in languages other than English relating to the early European contact history of Australia that deserves inclusion in our historiography.

The documented visits of the Dutch navigators to the Gulf of Carpentaria and to the eastern coast of Cape York occurred in 1606 (Janszoon), 1623 (Carstenszoon) 1644 (Tasman) and 1756 (van Asschens and Gonzal). Of these there are two extant accounts – 1623 and 1756. The journals of Janszoon and Tasman are unfortunately no longer extant. The most practical edition of these journals can be found in Jan Heeres (1899) *The part borne by the Dutch in the discovery of Australia: 1606-1765*.

This work presents an edited edition of the extracts from these navigators' journals that are relevant to Australia, with transcriptions of the Dutch text alongside an English translation. A useful analysis of the Dutch voyages to Australia can be found in Günther Schilder (1976), *Australia unveiled: the share of the Dutch navigators in the discovery of Australia*.

There has been some work done on **the contact between Aboriginal people and the Dutch** along the eastern coast of Cape York,[1] as each of four navigators undertook their voyages for the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie - VOC).[2] The primary documentation is found in the Company's archives.[3] There is a good guide to these papers produced as part of TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership in Dutch East India Company Archives and Research) which is available at <http://www.tanap.net/>. The original records can be a little daunting both by their size and complexity. They are also written in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch so present some difficulties in using them. Heeres transcribed from the journals held in the Company archives in Amsterdam and his rendition is quite faithful to the original archival sources. Heeres also produced a facsimile edition of Tasman's journal of 1642-43 and there is an excellent critical edition prepared of the Dutch text by Vibeke Roeper and Diederick Wilderman published by the Dutch National Archives in 2006. Unfortunately Tasman did not go near Cape York on this voyage.

[1] An example of an Aboriginal narrative of contact between the Dutch navigators and the Wik people of western Cape York can be found in this is Jack Spear Karntin, Dutchmen at Cape Keerweer: Wik Ngatarra transcribed by Peter Sutton in Luise Hercus and Peter Sutton, *This is what happened: historical narratives by Aborigines* (Canberra: Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986), pp. 82-107. A series of papers dealing with early European contacts (including the Dutch) with Aboriginal people can be found in Peter Veth, Peter Sutton and Margo Neale, *Strangers on the shore: early coastal contacts in Australia* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2008). A collection of brief papers relating to the voyage of Willem Janszoon in the *Duyfken* in 1606 were prepared for the unveiling of the First Contact Memorial at Mapoon in 2013. *The Duyfken unveiling of the First Contact Memorial* (Canberra: Australia on the Map Division of the Australasian Hydrographic Society for the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2013).

[2] The Dutch historian, Femme Gaastra has written extensively on the Dutch East India Company (VOC). A useful overview of the Company can be found in his *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (Zutphen: Walburg Press, 1991). It appeared in an English translation *The Dutch east India Company: expansion and decline*, translated by Peter Daniels (Zutphen: Walburg Press, 2006). The Company's role in the European discovery of areas

within the Company's trade zone can be found in F Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: a reluctant discoverer*, *The Great circle*, 19 (1997), pp. 109-23.

[3] A useful guide to the Company's archives can be found in *The archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the local institutions in Batavia (Jakarta)... ed by G L Balk [and others]* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

As far as we are aware, the Dutch did not venture into **Torres Strait**. From information contained in Castenszoon's 1623 journal both Janszoon and Carstenszoon - and therefore the Dutch - suspected that there was a likely sea passage east of Frederik Hendrik Island (after 1963 renamed Pulau Yos Sudarso by the Indonesian Government). No doubt due to reefs and currents, they were not successful in sailing east through Torres Strait. It is interesting that Governor-General Anthony van Diemen specifically instructed Abel Tasman to explore this possible channel, because a reliable and shorter passage from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean would further the Company's ability to attack Spanish shipping between Mexico, Peru and the Philippines, as well as to attack Spanish settlements along the west coast of Central and South America (indeed Hendrick Brouwers' capture of Valdiva in 1643 showed that this was possible).

The declining fortunes of the Company and the inroads made by the English and French into their traditional trade areas saw the company concentrate on what is now the Indonesian archipelago. The commercial **rivalry between the Dutch and English** in the East Indies did have some import for Australian history, and a useful guide to this rivalry can be found in Nicholas Tarling's (1962) *Anglo-Dutch rivalry in the Malay world 1780-1824*. The VOC came to an end in 1799 when the Dutch State took over the remaining assets of the Company. The Dutch Republic had been abolished and came under the control of Napoleon. As a consequence the British occupied the Dutch possessions including the Dutch East Indies.[4]

Under the terms of the 1824 *Treaty of London*, the Dutch recovered most of their territories (the British retained the Cape of Good Hope and Ceylon) and would eventually control Singapore. The British also withdrew from their colonies at Palembang and Bencoolen in Sumatra (and some of the convicts from there ended up in Moreton Bay). The Dutch returned to the East Indies in 1824 and the Dutch East Indies continued under Dutch control until the Netherlands recognized Indonesian independence in 1949 (1962 in the case of Dutch New Guinea). The first Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies (1816-1826), Godert Alexander Baron van der Capellen, was determined to re-establish (and extend) Dutch control over the East Indies and to contain British intentions to expand into the lucrative trade of the Moluccas. For Torres Strait, Baron van der Capellen unwittingly played an important part. When he went on a tour of inspection to the Moluccas, he sent a young naval officer, Dirk Kolff, to explore the southern Moluccas and then to sail along the southern coast of New Guinea.[5] His account was translated into English by George Windsor Earl (who was involved in the failed settlement at Port Essington – one of several attempts of the British to establish trading ports in northern Australia to penetrate the east Asian markets) and was published as *Voyages of the Dutch brig of war Dourga through the southern and little known parts of the Moluccan archipelago and along the previously unknown southern coast of New Guinea performed during the years 1825 and 1826*. [6]

[4] Sir Stamford Raffles left an account of the British occupation of the Dutch possessions in his *The history of Java* (London: John Murray, 1830).

[5] A biographic sketch of Dirk Kolff can be found in Robidé Van der Aa's *Biografisch woordenboek der Nederlanders* and is available electronically at

[http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/vdaa/#source=aa\\_001biog12\\_01.xml&page=302&view=imagePage](http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/vdaa/#source=aa_001biog12_01.xml&page=302&view=imagePage)

[6] The work was originally published as Dirk Kolff, *Reize door den weinig bekenden Zuidelijken Molukschen Archipel and langs de gebied onbekende zuidwest kust van Nieuw-Guinea 1825 en 1826* (Amsterdam: G J A Beijnenck, 1828). The English translation was published as Dirk Kolff, *Voyages of the Dutch brig of war Dourga through the ...Moluccan Archipelago, and along the previously unknown southern coast of New Guinea...during the years 1825 and 1826, translated from the Dutch by George Windsor Eary* (London: James Madden, 1840).

The *Dourga* kept fairly close to the shoreline, and never entered into Torres Strait. Rather, Kolff turned the vessel around and returned to the Moluccas. The point where he turned around would become **the eastern boundary of Dutch New Guinea** (and consequently, the eastern limit of the Netherlands East Indies and the boundary with British and German New Guinea after 1884). His turn-around point would demarcate Australian and Dutch territorial waters (which later had interesting consequences for the Torres Strait pearlsharers). A useful, though now dated, overview of Dutch interest and claims in New Guinea can be found in A. Haga (1884), *Nederlandsch Nieuw Guinea en de Papoesche Eilanden. Historische bijdragen* and in the writings of Paul van der Veur such as his 1966 *Search for New Guinea's boundaries: from Torres Strait to the Pacific*.

As far as is known, the voyage of van Asschens and Gonzal in 1756 was the last of the VOC voyages to venture into Australian waters. The Company exercised very tight controls over its monopoly and was very suspicious of foreign vessels – especially the British and French (hence Cook's unwelcoming reception at Kupang and at Batavia).

With the restoration of Dutch control, merchant shipping did increase from various ports in the Dutch East Indies, and some of that shipping travelled through the Torres Strait. There are two useful catalogues which list Dutch shipping through the Torres Strait: *Reizen van Australië naar Java*, (Voyages from Australia to Java, published by the Royal [Dutch] Meteorological Institute in Utrecht 1862; rev edn 1872). This list is arranged chronologically, listing the name of the ship, and a small précis of the voyage. Some of the journals consulted by the compilers were deposited in the National Archives in Amsterdam. These two editions form an interesting supplement to Nicholson's (1995) *Via Torres Strait*, which though an indispensable guide to shipping in Torres Strait, is heavily Anglophone.

There is also an interesting list of voyages, some of which went through the Torres Strait, listed in an appendix in Robidé van der Aa (1879) *Voyages to Netherlands New Guinea, undertaken at the command of the Government of the Netherlands Indies in the years 1871-1878*. This gentleman had a particular interest in listing the voyages through the Torres Strait because he led a delegation to the Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies, urging the Netherlands to annex the whole of the island of New Guinea 'and the islands in between' as a means of thwarting British (including Australian) interests in New Guinea. The pearling history of Torres Strait might have been quite different if the Governor-General, James Loudon and the Dutch Minister for the Colonies had accepted his advice. However provoking more controversy with the British did not appeal to the Dutch - they were busy arguing about Borneo, the Dutch became increasingly concerned with the growing problems in Aceh and more trouble was brewing in South Africa.

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