

The Journal of Abel Janszoon Tasman, 1642-3 ¹

The document is an extract from the journal of Abel Janszoon Tasman, leader of an expedition sent to discover what lay south and east of Batavia. The extract describes some of the events on board his ships, the discovery of land, what they found and experienced there, and all date referenced.

The document is an extract of an English translation of a copy of the original. The original was written by Tasman himself in Dutch, and a copy was made of this, either during the voyage itself or within the five months following.² This copy is now in the State Archives (Rijksarchieven) in The Hague in the Netherlands and the original is no longer extant.³ The introductory paragraph suggests this copy was written by Tasman, but is not in his handwriting. It is, however, signed by him to indicate that it is a true record of his journey.⁴

Tasman wrote the original in a language that was not his mother tongue, and he was primarily a practical seaman.⁵ The translation of the document may, therefore, have some difficulties. The translator has to be competent not only in Frisian, because Tasman may have used some words and phrases from his native tongue,⁶ but also Dutch as it was spoken in the 17th century, and modern English.

The handwriting of the copy is not easy to read. The small portion⁷ available to the writer shows two spelling errors, corrected,⁸ in the first three lines. Spelling errors are reasonably easy to detect, if sought, but errors in transcribed numerals are less easily detected. There is another copy manuscript, known as the Huydecoper, which seems to also be a copy of the original of Tasman. Comparison of the two has shown, among others, errors in transcribing numerals.⁹

The extract presented also contains a transcribing error,¹⁰ which completely reverses the meaning of the original.

The document is laid out in a fashion which infers that it was updated on a daily basis. This may or may not be true; the original document would be difficult to reconstruct from memory or invent at a later date because it is lengthy and detailed in many parts. Another document, reconstructed from memory nearly 30 years later, stands in stark contrast regarding details and length of account.¹¹ This is the document known as the Haalbos-Montanus account of the Voyage of 1642-3.

The extract seems to give an account of daily, pertinent, occurrences on the expedition. However, many things which are pertinent to the reader are of no interest to the author and therefore not recorded. It is difficult for the modern reader to establish exactly what Tasman saw and where he saw

¹ M. Bennett, *The Impact of Europe 1640-1780, Selected readings* (University of Tasmania 2000, 9th ed) pp7-10

² G. Schilder, *Australia Unveiled. The Share of the Dutch Navigators in the Discovery of Australia* (Amsterdam, 1976) p140

³ *Ibid* p140

⁴ F.W.Stapel, *De Oostindische Compagnie en Australië* Amsterdam 1937 p83

⁵ *Ibid* p68

⁶ some Frisian words look the same as Dutch words but have different meanings - 'kan net' means 'cannot' in Frisian and 'can, but only just', in Dutch.

⁷ G. Schilder, *op cit* plate XXIXa p142

⁸ the third word, translated as 'description' is written as "*Beschrijng*" and later "*v*" has been inserted with marks between the "*j*" and the "*n*" to indicate that the correct spelling is "*Beschrijving*"; the word "*augustus*", virtually the same in English and Dutch, was first written as "*augussus*" before a "*t*" was written over the incorrect letter.

⁹ G. Schilder, *op cit* p143

¹⁰line 6, p7, 'distrusted' should be 'trusted' - (Heeres translates it as 'not much to be depended on')

¹¹ M Bennet, *op cit* pp10-11

it.¹²

The document tells us nothing about the nature of the people involved, nor about their hopes and aspirations, nor about their skills except that one person, a carpenter, was a good swimmer, and that Tasman didn't like wasting time. It does not tell us of the ambience on board, how people got on with each other and how their work was affected by this.

The extract refers to a meeting of the ship's council on the 25th of November but nothing of their discussions and resolutions. It also omits nearly all details of location and weather conditions found in the translation of the original copy. The extract does include 'so they presumed here to be very tall people'¹³ but omits the following clause 'or must be in possession of some sort of artifice for getting up the said trees.'¹⁴ This second clause suggests that Tasman was prepared to credit the natives with some intelligence, perhaps even enough for trade possibilities. When this clause is omitted, and Tasman's subsequent actions considered, it suggests that Tasman was a bit frightened of meeting the natives.

The document is useful as an introduction to the general reader. Perhaps its major shortcoming is the lack of locational details, which makes it more difficult for the reader to follow the account.¹⁵

For a clearer understanding of the event it is necessary to refer to the translation from whence this document came. Ultimately, the copy manuscript in The Hague is the most important as it was composed most closely to the events being recorded. Without this manuscript we would only have the brief narrative of Haelbos, and a copy in the British Museum which seems to be a copy of the manuscript in the Rijksarchief, and an account by an unknown sailor from the Heemskerck. This sailor's journal seems to have been written by an ordinary seaman with rudimentary handwriting and language skills, and is consistently one month out with the date. It is a fairly short account and seems to have been written well after the event. Additionally, there are several maps. None of these documents are as comprehensive as or as close to the source as the original copy. Finally, the cargo lists for the two vessels are still extant, and the instructions for the voyage as issued by the Governor General in Batavia.¹⁶

The main value of these other documents is in comparing them, which helps a little in filling in some gaps, through additional detail or by deduction, in the original copy.

The episode described in this document is the first record of Europeans in this part of the world.¹⁷ Tasman notes he could not find anyone or anything to trade with or for. The facts of his discovery were duly noted and there was nothing more to do because it wasn't worth doing.¹⁸

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Bennett, M.J. (ed), *The Impact of Europe 1640-1780*, *Selected Readings*, 9th ed.
Hobart, 2000, pp.7-10

¹² J.B.Walker, *Early Tasmania Papers*, (Tasmania, 1902) p128ff

¹³ M. Bennett, *op cit* p8

¹⁴ J.E.Heeres, *The Discovery of Tasmania 1642*, (Tasmania 1943)p29

¹⁵ J.B.Walker, *op cit*, p132 Tasman named quite a few geographical features but these names are generally not found in the journal and recourse must be made to maps to find them (although this may also be confusing without some explanation as the bay named Frederick Henry by Tasman is not the bay so currently known but is the bay now known as Blackman Bay).

¹⁶ G.Schilder, *op cit*, p143ff

¹⁷ F.W.Stapel, *op cit*, p70

¹⁸ G.Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (Melbourne, 1966) pp5-6