Abel Tasman’s first voyage of discovery

Who was he? Abel Janszoon Tasman was a Dutch navigator. Where did he explore? He was the first known European to land in Tasmania and New Zealand. He mapped Australia’s northern coastline from Cape York to Port Hedland.

Abel Tasman was born in the Netherlands in about 1603. He arrived in Batavia in 1633. Here he became the captain of a small ship carrying spices from the Macassar Islands to Java.

The Governor of the Dutch East Indies wanted to extend the territory they controlled for trading. On 14 August 1642 he sent Tasman with two ships, the Heemskerk with 60 men and the Zeehaen with 50 men to do three things:
1. explore the little known South Land
2. find out if there was more than one South Land
3. find a new trade route east across the Pacific Ocean to Chile to take trade away from Spain.

The ships set off from Batavia and sailed west across the Indian Ocean to the island of Mauritius. They then sailed east and on 24 November 1642 landed on the west coast of the island now called Tasmania. Tasman named it Van Diemen’s Land after the Governor of Batavia. He raised a flag and took possession for the Netherlands. The crew found climbing notches cut into trees about 1.5 metres apart. They thought that giants inhabited the land. They never met the Aboriginal owners, but they heard music and saw fires.

After sailing further east they discovered the South Island of New Zealand. When they landed to obtain water the traditional owners, the Maoris, killed four of the crew of the Zeehaen. Tasman called the place Assassins’ Bay. They sailed up the west coast of New Zealand and on to Tonga. Tasman believed that New Zealand was part of the Unknown South Land.

Tasman and his crew sailed where no Europeans had been before. They knew the latitude and longitude of their position but had no maps to guide them. After leaving Tonga they sailed to Fiji and arrived back in Batavia by sailing around the north coast of New Guinea. The company was not impressed. Although geographic knowledge was gained Tasman had not fulfilled the voyage’s aims.

Portrait of Abel Tasman, his wife and daughter. By permission of the National Library of Australia.

Tasman’s second voyage of discovery

Governor Van Diemen and his council in Batavia felt that Tasman had lacked enterprise in not finding answers to the questions they set him. They sent him on a second voyage in 1644. This time he was to find out:
1. if there was a passage between New Guinea and the unknown South Land, which the Dutch now called New Holland
2. if Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) was the southern part of New Guinea or an island
3. what islands were between Van Diemen’s Land and New Guinea
4. if there were suitable places for Dutch ships to call in for food and water on their way from the Netherlands.

Tasman left Batavia with two ships: the Linnen with a crew of 56, the Zeemans with a crew of 41 and a fishing boat, the Braag, with a crew of 14. They sailed east to the south coast of New Guinea and south to the Gulf of Carpentaria. He reported that there was no sea passage between New Guinea and New Holland. He continued on to explore the coastline across the north of the continent and down the coast of Western Australia. He travelled down the coast to what is now called the Gascoyne River, near Port Hedland. After sailing for over six months he headed back to Batavia. He reported that the native inhabitants, the Aborigines, were hostile, wore no clothing, were very poor and had no rice or fruit trees of any importance.

Tasman made many discoveries, but he failed again. He was mistaken when he said there was no passage between New Guinea and the Australian mainland. He did not discover any islands between Van Diemen’s Land and New Guinea. He did not prove if Van Diemen’s Land joined New Guinea and he did not find any places for Dutch ships to get provisions. This poor report disappointed the council and they decided against further exploration as they felt there were no trading or settlement opportunities. If Tasman had obeyed his instructions fully he would have sailed around Australia and discovered the fertile lands of the east coast. Tasman became a rich merchant who owned large amounts of land in Batavia. He died in 1659.