Tasman revalued

A note on Gilsemans' drawings

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The essential details of the Dutch visit to New Zealand in 1642-3 were worked out in 1640 by three men, Tasman, Visscher and Gilsemans, in a tiny fishing port called Hirado on an island off Honshu in southern Japan. The three were employees of the Dutch East India Company, the organisation which represented Dutch trading interests in Japan and elsewhere in the East. Each came from very modest backgrounds, but by the time they met together for the voyage each had established himself in the eyes of the Company as an experienced enthusiast for expeditions of discovery and each had demonstrated his ability to cope with and survive the rigours of long and hazardous periods at sea. Tasman had commanded ships on several such voyages, and a number of his officers rejoined him for the 1642 expedition. Visscher worked as a pilot for Japanese, Chinese and Dutch vessels for some 20 years prior to 1642, and Gilsemans. though the youngest of the three, had used his wide knowledge of cartography. bookkeeping, draftsmanship and Latin, at sea and ashore, in the service of the Company since leaving the Netherlands for Batavia in 1634.

Abel Janszoon Tasman, the future commander of the expedition. arrived in Hirado in August 1640, with a flotilla of four trading vessels. Francoijs Jacobszoon Visscher, its chief navigator, had been working there for a year or so as a freelance pilot, and Isaac Gilsemans, the merchant in charge of the trade goods taken on the voyage, and the presumed author of the coastal illustrations in its journal, was manager of the Dutch foundry there, making mortar guns to sell to the Japanese. By January 1641 the whole Dutch settlement in Hirado had been obliterated, and their trading post transferred to Nagasaki where they were confined to a reclamation built like an island in the harbour.

Tasman continued his Company trading in 1641, suffering near shipwreck off Formosa, Visscher returned to Batavia (now Jakarta), the Company's headquarters in the East Indies, and Gilsemans went to Nagasaki where he re-surveved its harbour in July that year. Their plan for the voyage appeared as a Memoir Concerning the Discovery of the Southland, under Visscher's name, in January 1642. Following a brief voyage to Palembang, Tasman joined Visscher in Batavia, and Gilsemans must have gone there some time after completing his work in Nagasaki Bay. The expedition left Batavia in August 1642 and sailed to Mauritius from where, after repairs and provisioning were carried out, it began the voyage proper in October.

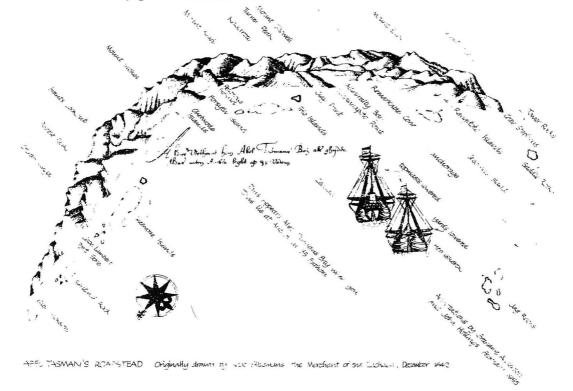
Knowing no more about Tasman's voyage than do most New Zealanders, I became aware of the illustrations attributed to Gilsemans when I used one of them in 1984 in Fresh About Cook Strait, a book about Wellington Harbour. In a chapter devoted to near misses - explorers who had failed to enter the harbour - I had joined the long-fashionable criticism of Tasman and pointed out his even greater shortcoming in missing the strait itself. The illustration I chose was a strange spherical perspective drawn at their December 1642 stormbound anchorage (see overleaf), said to be "somewhere east of D'Urville Island," but unable to be pinpointed, according to Andrew Sharp in his book The Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman. The location is quite fully described in the journal of the voyage, and Gilsemans' drawing is more detailed than most of the others on the New Zealand coast, but nobody seemed to have gone there to compare it with the modern scene.

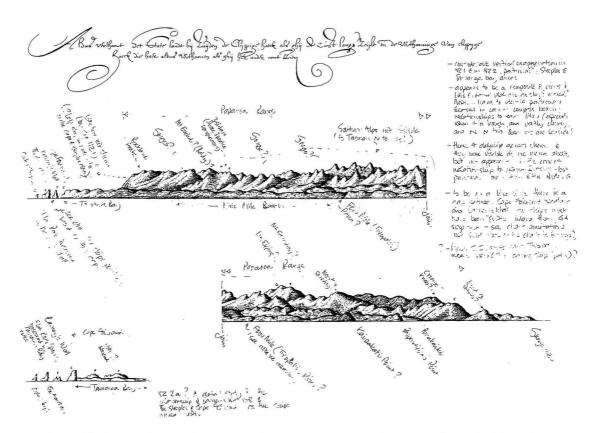
"Thus appears the Three Kings Island when you Being to the North West lie at anchor in 40 fathoms to this Island have given the name of Three Kings Island because we came to anchor there on Three Kings Eve and on Three Kings Day sailed again from it."

In February 1985, with three others in the 11-metre yacht Crescendo, I did just that, not really expecting to be successful for there had been all of 343 years since the Dutch visit, about half of which had seen European occupation of the region. I also assumed that others had tried and proved Andrew Sharp's observation correct. Within a few minutes of arriving at what we thought might be the right place, using Tasman's bearings to Stephens Island and his depth at the anchorage as primary guidelines, we found to our surprise and delight that we had pin-pointed their position to within 50 metres. Gilsemans' drawing was a precise cartographic document, with every island, headland and hilltop in exactly the right place, and its curved coastline encompassed the whole of the top of the Marlborough Sounds, from Cape Jackson in the east to Cape Stephens in the west.

That heady rediscovery, on a clear calm summer's day, has led to a close examination of the voyage and the circumstances leading up to it, in a series of expanding facets each interlocking with the other, limited only by the knowledge that the 350th anniversary of the voyage occurs in 1992 and that time was running out. Tasman's journal, on such examination, reveals itself to be an accurate record densely packed with data about a voyage for which the talents of its leading participants, the quality of their management, and the accuracy of their navigation has received quite inadequate recognition.

Since 1985, when the identification of the drawing made me realise that all the noon positions, (the daily latitude and longitude journal entries) long held to be inaccurate, particularly the longitudes, could be corrected, using the now precisely known D'Urville Island position as a minor cartographic Rossetta Stone, it has been possible to pin-point their position along virtually the whole of their course on the New Zealand coast. A simple adjustment of the other twenty or so journal noon positions to agree with the newly corrected one was not sufficient however, since it left some aspects of their course clearly at odds with information on the modern charts of the New Zealand coast. This led to the next facet: Tasman's thorough and comprehensive recording of the compass bearings and distances to prominent coastal landmarks as they sailed along. When combined with the tentative use of the rule-of-thumb adjustment of noon positions, and observations on sea depth, also recorded in the journal as they proceeded, a quite accurate plot could be set down. This degree of accuracy led to the application of information from the next facet in the process, the coastal illustrations themselves.





Since 1985, several more of the twelve drawn on the New Zealand section of the voyage have been identified out on the water, and these add to the data used in plotting the course. In the case of those not yet visited, careful examination of them now, knowing their accuracy, provides quite convincing clues as to where they were drawn. There are several places still to be visited, notably The Three Kings Islands where Gilsemans made two drawings, but there exists now an almost indisputable trace of their course from 14 December 1642 to 6 January 1643.

There is, however, a view of all this from landward which, if the sequence of facets is to be complete, must also be taken into account. A goodly part of Tasman's much-criticised caution had in fact to do with a concern for the rights and circumstances of those already occupying the lands they visited, and this aspect of his expedition forms a significant part of the present reassessment of it. For the Ngaati Tumata Kokiri at Taitapu, the advancing ships, sailing slowly down the morning sun-path across the bay between their coastal settlement and the long sandspit to the north, carried with them a pros"Thus appears the state Land to South of the Rocky point when you sail along the Coast and Views of Rocky point which appear thus as you can see here below." (The annotations were made on a fishing launch in 1988)

pect of menace which could only be met by what had become instinctive since their migration there from the North Island - a pre-emptive strike. And so that too becomes, in an attempt to better understand the events of that early summer in the middle of Aotearoa's little ice age, another facet in the examination of the events of 1642-3. There was a brief, dramatic and, for the local inhabitants, conclusive clash of technologies on a calm summer's day, and the visitors left without coming ashore, apparently driven off. By the time the Dutch came again, in much greater numbers, as immigrants in this century, the Ngaati Tumata Kokiri had disappeared.

Grahame Anderson is both architect and sailor. He has lectured at The School of Architecture at Victoria University and his firm are architects for the restructuring of the old Hunter Building at V.U.W. His Fresh About Cook Strait (1984) is an appreciation of Wellington Harbour. From a Stout Centre Seminar held on 13 March 1991.