

ANTARCTIC VIGNETTES II: THE SEARCH FOR S. TASMAN, AB, ON THE *TERRA NOVA*, 1903–04

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(with two plates)

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The Tasmanian seaman, Tasman Spaulding, served on the steam-powered wooden barque SY *Terra Nova* on her 1903–04 voyage to Antarctica. Throughout his life he was beset by official incompetence. The records of his birth, death and marriage all contain mistakes, and a clerical error in 1904 that reversed his first and last names meant he could not be traced. Consequently he never received the bronze Polar Medal awarded for his service as an Able Seaman on the *Terra Nova* in 1903–04. The medal entitlement of three other crew members — Robert Christie, Alexander McNeill and John M. D. Strachan — is challenged.

Key Words: S. Tasman, Tasman James Spaulding, SY *Terra Nova*, 1903–04, Polar Medal, Antarctic exploration.

THE FOUR MISSING POLAR MEDALLISTS

Little is known about many of the members of the ships' crews from the heroic era of Antarctic exploration. Interesting information has recently come to light concerning the Tasmanian seaman, Tasman Spaulding. Of the 31 men awarded bronze Polar Medals for their service on board the *Terra Nova* in 1903–04 (Poulsom & Myres 2000) four never received their medals. The Admiralty file (ADM 171/61), which lists the medal recipients, is annotated "no address known" for Robert Christie, Alexander McNeill, M. Strachan and S. Tasman.

It is not clear why three of these men — Christie, a 26-year-old from Glasgow, McNeill, a 57-year-old from Argyle, and Strachan, a 30-year-old also from Scotland — were recommended for Polar Medals in the first place. According to the ship's log (Board of Trade file BT 100/50) all three men joined the *Terra Nova* at Lyttelton, New Zealand, in May 1904 for the voyage back home to Sheerness via the Cape. If they did not go south they should be ineligible for the award. Nevertheless all three were recommended (Admiralty file ADM 1/7848). A sort of justice appears to have been served insofar as they were never presented with their medals.

TASMAN SPAULDING

The circumstances of the fourth man are completely different. Tasman Spaulding, a 23-year-old from Dunalley, Tasmania, joined the *Terra Nova* at Hobart on 3 December 1903, and sailed with her on the 1903–04 relief voyage to the Antarctic. He clearly signs his name Tasman Spaulding, in a thin spidery hand in the ship's log (Board of Trade file BT 100/50). The *Terra Nova* under Captain Henry McKay had been engaged by the Royal Navy to accompany the Steam Yacht *Mornington* to McMurdo Sound to assist in releasing HMS *Discovery* from the ice and bringing home the members of Captain Scott's National Antarctic Expedition. This was duly accomplished (Scott 1905, Aldridge 1999) and on 18 February 1904 all three ships headed north. When the *Terra Nova* reached Lyttelton, Spaulding signed off (5 May 1904) and presumably made his own way home. In due course he was recommended for



PLATE 1
Tasman James Spaulding.

the Polar Medal in bronze; however, someone accidentally reversed his first and last names and the award was gazetted in the name of S. Tasman. No one of that name could be found when the medals came to be presented and Tasman Spaulding never knew that his good services on board the *Terra Nova* had been recognised.

THE SEARCH

In 2004, in the Archives Office of Tasmania, I came across Tasman's marriage entry. I also located his birth date and a

record of probate. A subsequent examination of the original records showed that all three of these records had minor, but misleading, errors. On his birth record the family name is spelt Spalding; on the marriage record his wife's second name is given as Charlotte not Isobel (note that while the marriage certificate gives Charlotte, the family, probate record and gravestone all give Isobel), and on the probate record his year of death is given as 1940 when he died one year earlier.

All three records did confirm that Tasman Spaulding lived in Dunalley. Further investigation revealed that members of the Spaulding family still lived locally. Contact was made, and through them, with an old family friend William (Bill) Dunbabin, who had known Tas when he (Bill) was a boy. Bill, together with two of Tas's nephews, Jim Spaulding and George Whitehouse, provided the information on which the obituary given below is based.

OBITUARY: TASMAN JAMES SPAULDING

Tasman James Spaulding was born on 24 September 1880, the son of Henry James and Ann Spaulding (née Longmore) of Dunalley, Tasmania. The birth was registered in Sorell, notified by a Trooper (Police Constable) from Bream Creek. Tasman went to the local school and spent much of his early life as a sailor and fisherman. One day in 1900, while on the Hobart waterfront, he and Claude Button, a friend, saw that the square-rigger the *Ethel* was advertising for Able Seamen. Both men signed-on after checking with their respective families, and sailed for England. They were in the English Channel when they learnt of the death of Queen Victoria (22 January 1901). Claude returned to Tasmania after a brief sojourn in London, and married Tasman's sister, Elsie Olive Spaulding. Tasman stayed with the square-riggers, rounding Cape Horn three times and plied the Chilean coast in the lucrative nitrate trade. He was a small, stockily-built man about five feet six inches tall (1.68 m), with a broken nose, very strong hands with nimble fingers and a fondness for liquor. Back in Hobart, in late 1903 he joined the *Terra Nova* (pl. 1). He kept a diary while in the Antarctic but unfortunately this has since been lost. However, one story he often related was that he manned one of the oars when the First Mate (Arthur Perry Jackson) set out to harpoon a whale. They got stuck into a large Blue Whale, which took off. Tas said "he'd never gone so fast, in all his life, in a boat and was most relieved when the line was cut as the whale dived under the ice". He was never keen on whaling after that. At the end of the voyage he signed off in Lyttelton and did indeed make his own way back to Australia.

On 5 November 1913 Tasman married his childhood sweetheart Amy Isobel Murphy and moved into the house they had built on a family block of land in Dunalley. They had seven children, six of whom died within a few hours of birth; the seventh, a boy, lingered for some months. Tas had a variety of jobs in those days including working as a rigger in the cement works on Maria Island, but most of the time he worked on the land and went fishing. When his brother-in-law John Clark Murphy died in 1925, Tas gave up fishing to run a 5000-acre (circa 2000-hectare) sheep farm on the Forestier Peninsula for his 12-year-old nephew,

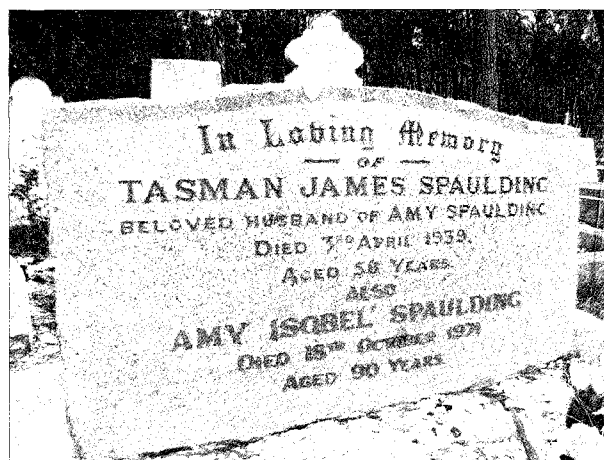


PLATE 2

Tasman Spaulding's headstone in the Dunalley Cemetery.

Francis Cooper Murphy. Tasman Spaulding, who suffered from bronchitis and asthma most of his life, died at his home of a cardiac syncope on 3 April 1939, aged 58. He is buried in the Dunalley Cemetery, alongside his parents and six of his nine siblings (pl. 2). He shares his grave with three of his children. The others are buried in two tiny graves nearby, none of which is marked. His widow Amy outlived him by 32 years and died in 1971 aged 90.

In 2007 the Spaulding family presented the Australian Antarctic Division with the large portrait photo of Tasman Spaulding (shown in pl. 1) and the ditty box he had while he was on the *Terra Nova*. Both items are on display in the Australian Antarctic Division library.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the late W. (Bill) Dunbabin of Dunalley who as a young boy lived next door to Tasman Spaulding, and Tas's nephews George Whitehouse and Jim Spaulding for much of the information on which this obituary is based.

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