

Some New Aspects of Tasman's Visit to the East Coast of Tasmania in 1642

By

A. L. MESTON*

* Formerly Education Department, Tasmania. See Obituary Notice, Papers and Proceedings, Vol. 86, 1952.

INTRODUCTION

The celebration, in 1942, of the tercentenary of the discovery of Tasmania prompted the late Archibald Lawrence Meston to find out whether more could be learnt about the events of those few days in December 1642 when Tasman's ships were anchored off the east coast of Tasmania. The two main questions at issue, many times disputed, are the sites of Tasman's first watering place and where the master-carpenter raised the Dutch flag of annexation. These two spots have been variously located, but it has always been held that Tasman's charts were quite inaccurate and that their 17th century topographical symbols were mere convention. Meston, however, took the opposite view, on the ground that no man in Tasman's situation could afford to be inaccurate, and he was prepared to assume that, on the visual data apparent to Tasman from his position and approach, he meant exactly what he set down in his journal.

Mr. Meston's findings were made known to the Society in a lecture which he gave on March 23, 1943: new evidence fixed Boomer Creek as the site of the watering place and the northern end of North Bay as the spot where the Dutch flag was raised. These conclusions were reached as a result of a thorough study of published material and examination of the locality itself. The latter involved several visits to Blackmans Bay and Forestier Peninsula. On one of these visits, in January 1943, he was accompanied by L. R. Jensen, Rosamond McCulloch and Janet Somerville, and for a week they walked over the coast-line from Cape Bernier to Wilmot Harbour and the whole shore of Blackmans Bay, as well as many places inland, examining topography and vegetation in relation to the record in log and charts.

In the manuscript of Mr. Meston's lecture to the Society he refers to a paper which he had prepared for publication. However, that paper was never completed, duties more pressing than the writing of history taking all his time. Even Mr. Meston himself realised that it might be a long time until his paper could be completed and so it was decided that the botanical evidence for the location of the watering place should be published separately: this was done by Curtis and Somerville (1948).

On Mr. Meston's death the Tasman material was found to include the draft of his lecture to the Society in 1943 and various jottings on additional data. From these sources and from recollections of the lecture delivered and of personal discussions with him the present paper has been extracted. It is largely in Mr. Meston's own words, only those parts being amplified which would otherwise not be clear.

Editors.

ARRIVAL

On December 11, 1642¹ Tasman's two ships, the yacht *Heemskerck* and the flute *Zeehaen*, drew towards the land with an easterly breeze and "about one hour after sunset . . . dropped anchor in a good harbour, in 22 fathom, white and grey fine sand, a naturally drying bottom²". Sunset on that day was at about a quarter to eight in the evening so that Tasman would have been coming up to his anchorage in the twilight

and it would not have been far from dark when the ships anchored, increasing his natural caution in coming close in to a lee shore in an unknown land.

FIRST LANDING

When day dawned on December 12 the voyagers would have had a clear view of the coast. To the south lay forbidding cliffs, Humper's Bluff and Yellow Bluff, towering aloft and dominated by Cape Frederick Hendrick, with the swell of the sea rushing and swirling among the fissured crags and breaking wildly under the stiff steady breeze from the south-east. Nearly opposite the ships was Cape Paul Lamanon with its minor fortification of eroded dolerite, and between the two capes was to be seen the two-mile stretch of sand backed by low dunes that is now called North Bay. Under their lee lay Green Island, or, as it has been named for Tasman's pilot-major, Visscher Island. To the north-west lay Cape Bernier and to the eastward of it Maria Island. The whole presented the appearance of a wide sweeping bay, with the entrance to the Narrows showing as a smaller inner bay; the background was forested hills.

Early that morning Tasman sent seventeen men fully armed under the command of Pilot-Major Visscher to search for vegetables, wood and water. They went in two boats, the pinnace from the *Heemskerck* and the cock-boat from the *Zeehaen*. Rounding Cape Paul Lamanon, a prominent headland from which an ugly reef runs a considerable distance into the sea, the two boats passed through the Narrows into what is now known as Blackmans Bay but which is marked on the Gilsemans chart as "Fredricq Henricx Bay".

"They had rowed the space of upwards of a mile round the said point, where they had found high but level land, covered with vegetation (not cultivated but growing naturally by the will of God) abundance of excellent timber, and a gently sloping watercourse in a barren valley, the said water, though of good quality, being difficult to procure, because the watercourse was so shallow, that the water could be dipped up with bowls only."

Late in the afternoon the boats returned to the ships, the sailors bringing with them various samples of vegetables, which they had found growing in great abundance. Of these plants two are referred to in particular, one useful as a pot-herb and the other resembling samphire.

This spot can be fixed with certainty as the mouth of Boomer Creek, on the evidence of the sketch in Tasman's Journal, of the Gilsemans chart² and of our botanical survey of Blackmans Bay. It seems clear also that it was the only place where they landed and that other parts of the bay were not explored.

The statement that "they had rowed the space of upwards of a mile⁴ round the said point, where they had found high but level land . . . and a gently sloping watercourse in a barren valley", means that their course to Boomer Creek was a direct one. The slope of the hills behind that part of the shore, forming a valley, must have led them to hope that water would be found there. On the return journey also they must have rowed direct; their instructions had been to return "speedily" and they were long overdue. Although they had been away a long time—not less than six hours—(high and low water soundings are recorded for the Narrows, 13 or 14 feet for the one—3 for the other) and possibly

as long as eight or nine hours (they left the ships "early in the morning" and returned "about three hours before nightfall", i.e., about 4.30 p.m.) this is amply accounted for by the extent of their activities. The details recorded in the journal show that they made many and careful observations on shore, not only at the landing place but "in the interior". Lastly there is the negative evidence that the Boomer Creek landing was the only one made and that they came and went direct, there being no mention in the log of any other landing or of other parts of the bay.

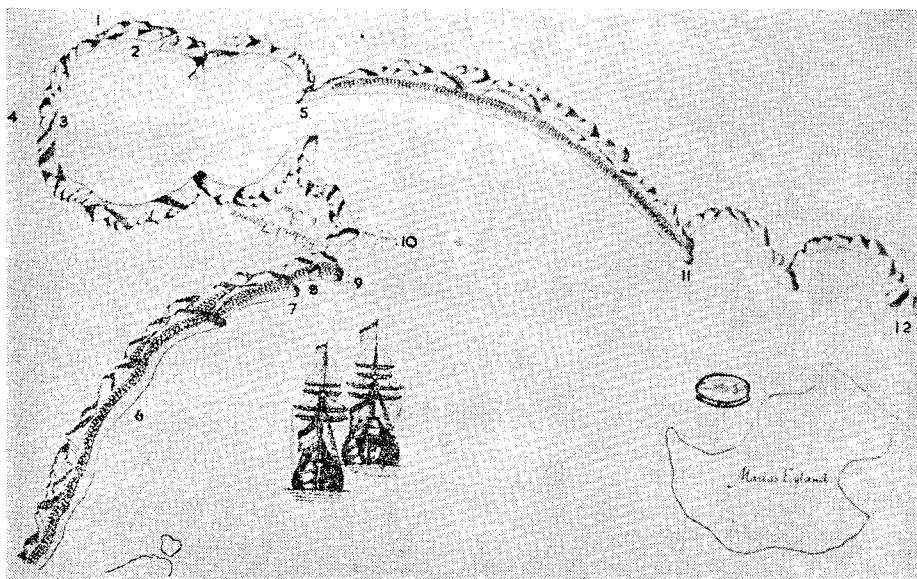


FIGURE 1:—Chart of "Fredrick Henrick Bay", Tasman's Journal.
(J. E. Heeres, 1898)

For explanation of reference points see figures 3 and 4.

The coastline is recorded by a series of panoramic drawings showing contour, timber and type of shore. The whole of North Bay is drawn from one viewpoint, closely approximating to that used in Figure 4. The coast between the Narrows and Cape Bernier presents another single viewpoint. Separate points of observation are used to represent Prince of Wales Bay, Chinaman's Bay, and Cape Paul Lamanon. The inner circle of Blackmans Bay (compare Figure 3) is a composite of views from successive positions on the boat's course to the watering-place.

Three successive headlands at the northern end of North Bay, approaching the position of the Flag, resolve themselves on the spot into parallel ridges of hills rather than indentations. Cape Frederick Hendrik and Visscher Id. are outlined, and the outlet of the North Bay Lagoon is identifiable at the bottom left-hand corner of this plate.

Other details equally applicable to-day are the demarcation between the sandy beach of North Bay and the rocky shore guarding Prince of Wales Bay, the reefs of Cape Paul Lamanon, and the salt-marsh flat between the mouth of Boomer Creek and Boomer Island.

It may be noted that the only definite break shown in the shore-line is that which approaches closely to the position of Boomer Creek.

A number of drawings were made in January, 1943, from various points on the coast, with reed-pen and ink in a 17th century technique. These were used for comparison with maps, chart, and photographs. Two are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Tasman's sketch of Blackmans Bay—or rather Visscher's, for the Pilot-Major went with the shore party and Tasman stayed with his ships—has always been regarded as a conventional chartmaker's representation of a coastline having a background of hills. But the chart *does* give a true picture of what the shore party actually saw, if we keep it in mind that these men were viewing the land as seamen do, from the sea, and that they were also seeing it from their boats, from only a few feet above sea level.

In reality Visscher's representation is remarkably accurate. From the boats' course between the Narrows and Boomer Creek (Fig. 3) the long east and west reaches at the upper end of the bay would not have been discernible: their existence would not even have been guessed at for there is no *visible* opening. Boomer Island appears to be part of the western shoreline of the bay, the land seeming to extend on from it right across to the southern shore. What they could see has been faithfully reproduced on the sketch: the point of Little Boomer, the gap in the shoreline to represent the mouth of Boomer Creek, the sugar-loaf of Boomer Island.

The Gilsemans chart (Fig. 2) guides us even more definitely to Boomer Creek, for it marks that part of the bay with the words "Water plaats".

Our own examination of Blackmans Bay, along the whole shore of which we walked, only served to increase the certainty in our minds of the accuracy of log and charts. Details of description were found to agree with topography, and differences to have an explanation. We have already shown the form of the bay, as visible from the boats' course, to be that of their charts.

The lack of conformity of the open entrance shown on the chart and the Narrows of to-day is to be expected. The northern point is a sandspit, a feature which is notoriously subject to change from time to time under the action of the sea, winds, drainage from the land and so on.

Additional points of evidence became apparent as we walked. Firstly, Boomer Creek is the only permanent water along the northern shore line of the bay, between the Narrows and Boomer Island. In fact it was the only water to be found on the whole stretch of coast as far as Wilmot Harbour. Secondly, the description in the log of the watering-place agrees well with Boomer Creek and its surroundings: the "gently sloping watercourse in a barren valley"; the "high but level land" of the sandstone bluff on the eastern side of the creek overlooking the bay; and, lastly, the "waterplaats" growing where the creek flows into the bay, forming a salt-marsh at tide-level. Not only were they growing "in great abundance" but both sea-parsley and samphire occurred together there: nowhere else in Blackmans Bay is samphire to be found in anything like the same profusion and only here does sea-parsley occur as well as the samphire.

SECOND LANDING

The next morning Tasman, accompanied by Supercargo Gilsemans and a number of musketeers, the oarsmen also being armed, went ashore in the same two boats as Visscher used the day before.



Photograph courtesy Mitchell Library, Sydney.
 Figure 2: Portion of Gilsemans' Chart showing region discussed.

"We went to the south-east side of this bay" (that is, the sweeping bay of the sea coast between Cape Frederick Hendrick and Cape Bernier), says the journal. "Here we found water, it is true, but the land is so low-lying that fresh water was made salt and brackish by the surf, while the soil is too rocky to allow of wells being dug."

This would serve as an accurate account of the lagoon behind North Bay and the surrounding country to-day. In the south-east corner of that bay the water of the lagoon escapes to the sea over a wide, low-lying stretch of sand. If there is any sea running the surf breaks into the lagoon and from June to November, when the penned-up waters of the lagoon force a passage through the sandy flat, it becomes an arm of the sea into which the tide regularly flows. Beyond the sand the land is merely rock lightly covered with soil, if covered at all, rock which is the landward extension of the massive dolerite cliffs of Cape Frederick Hendrick.

So the boats returned waterless to the ships.

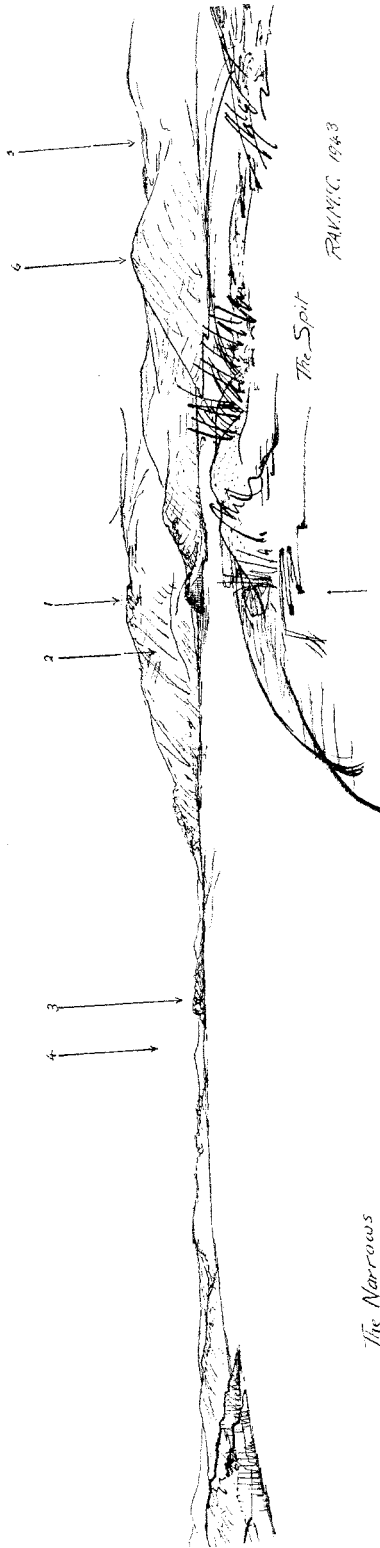


FIG. 3

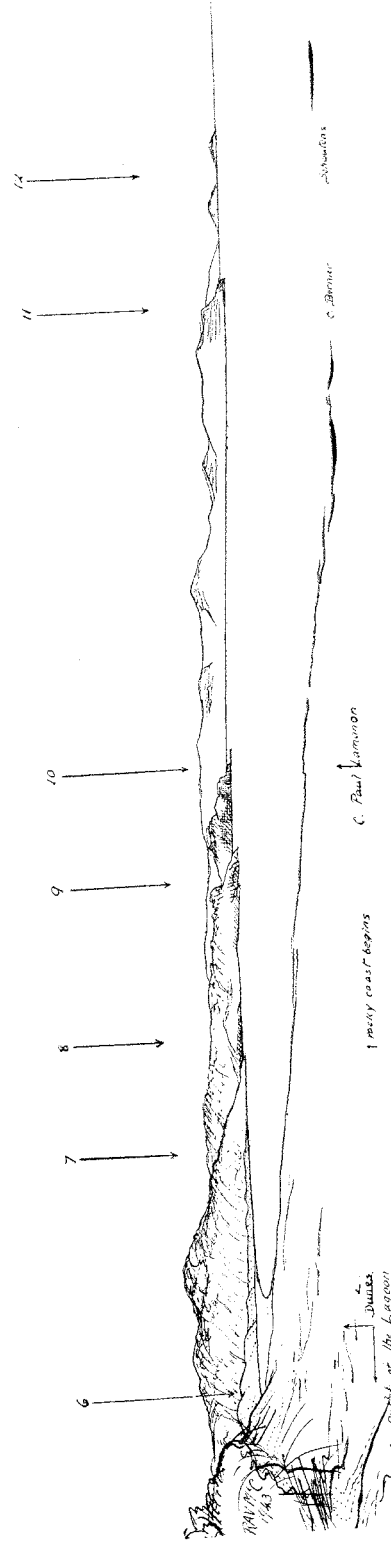


FIG. 4

ANNEXATION OF THE TERRITORY

In the afternoon Tasman again took the two boats in the same direction, with the intention of landing there, hoisting the flag of his Prince on a pole with the Company's mark carved into it and taking possession; but the northerly wind, which had been blowing all day, had so increased in force that no landing was possible and the cockboat had to be pulled back to the ships while Tasman ran on with the pinnace to a small inlet which bore west-south-west of the ships. The surf being too high to admit of a landing the carpenter was ordered to swim ashore with the flag, which he did, planting the pole "about the centre of the bay".

The location of this "small inlet" has been the subject of much discussion. The opinion has been held generally that it was on the shore of Prince of Wales Bay that Master Carpenter Pieter Jacobsz set the Dutch flag (e.g., Gell, 1845; Walker, 1891; Lord, 1927); and it is there that the Tasman monument stands. Halligan (1926), however, decided that North Bay was the site. It has been considered also that Tasman's charts are very conventional and that it is hopeless to expect to get anything definite from them. It is worthwhile to pause here and recall Matthew Flinders' comment that "a chart is the seaman's great, and often sole guide": of what use would it be if inaccurate!

As we have already seen, Tasman's sketch is, in fact, remarkably accurate, and it can tell us a great deal about the place where the flag was set (Fig. 1). Not only is the flag shown on the chart but its position can be determined. Take as starting point Cape Paul Lamanon, marked by its reef extending seaward. Just to the south of the cape is a bay across which a reef is marked. This is clearly Prince of Wales Bay, protected by its wall of boulders. To the south of this bay is shown another, on the shore of which the flag is set. This is North Bay and here, on a shore protected from the northerly wind that was blowing so strongly that afternoon, the flag was raised.

Lastly, some further indication of the reliability of Tasman's map is obtained by comparing it with our sketch of the coastline as seen from the S.E. corner of North Bay (Fig. 4) where the lagoon makes its egress to the sea, and where the search for water failed on December 13th of 1642. The comparison is close, and it is sufficient to validate what has long been dismissed as conventional cartographic symbolism.

Figure 3: Blackmans Bay, seen from sea-level at the entrance through the Narrows. Compare with Chart showing the Watering-place, Dec. 1642. Jan. 1943.

Tasman's "Fredricq Hendriqx Bay". (Figure 2).

1. "high but level land" at the head of the bay.
2. position of creek and salt-marsh.
3. Boomer Island.
4. position of inner bay and isthmus, not discernible from this point.
5. The Spit.

Figure 4: North Bay and Coastline, as seen from the Outlet of the Lagoon at the S.E. corner of the bay, Jan. 1943. Site of Tasman's Second Landing, Dec. 1642. Compare with Chart, Figure 1.

6. sand dunes and beach.
7. beach ends and shore becomes steeply rocky.
8. position of the Flag.
9. southern headland of Prince of Wales Bay.
10. Cape Paul Lamanon.
11. Cape Bernier.
12. Cape Bouganville.

REFERENCES

- CURTIS, W. M. AND SOMERVILLE, J. (1948).—Boomer Marsh—a preliminary botanical and historical survey. *Pap. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, for 1947: 151-157.
- GELL, J. P. (1845).—On the first discovery of Tasmania, in the months of November and December, 1642. *Tas. J. nat. Sci.*, 2/10: 321-328.
- HALLIGAN, G. H. (1926).—Tasman's landing place. *Pap. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, for 1925: 195-202.
- HEERES, J. E. (1898).—*Abel Janszoon Tasman's journal*. (Amsterdam.) (Reproduced in part in *The discovery of Tasmania 1642*. (Hobart 1942.)
- LORD, C. (1927).—On the planting of the Dutch flag in Tasmania in 1642. *Pap. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, for 1926: 25-34, pls. I-III.
- WALKER, J. B. (1891).—The discovery of Van Diemen's Land in 1642; with notes on the localities mentioned in Tasman's journal of the voyage. *Pap. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, for 1890: 269-284, map.

NOTES

1. The correction of the Old Style Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar was not made in the Netherlands until 1700, although it had been made in 1582 in Catholic countries. All Tasman's dates are therefore ten days less than the New Style dating; this is taken into account in the present narrative.—A. L. Meston.
2. The translation quoted in this paper is that by Heeres, J. E. (1898).—A. L. Meston.
3. I am indebted to the Librarian of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, for the following information about the Gilsemans chart and for the photograph reproduced in Figure 2:—

"It was published in Dr. F. C. Wieder's *Monumenta Cartographica*, volume 4, as plate 97, and described as Original Chart of the Discovery of Tasmania, 24 Nov. to 5 Dec. 1642. The original is in the Atlas Storsch in the National Library of Vienna. In the letter-press Dr. Wieder examines the map to see what it discloses when compared with a special map in Tasman's own journal, the general chart of Jacobsen and that of Tasman and with the Vingboons map. He says:—'It is in the handwriting of Gilsemans who signed it "Isaac Gilsemans fecit"'. In the first place it strikes us that the land first sighted has not been put in longitude 163° 50' according to the resolution of the ship's council, but in 165°. Secondly, the land sighted by the Zeehaen is drawn as a separate stretch of coast in latitude 41°, and is not on Tasman's special map nor on the two general charts nor on the Vingboons map. Thirdly, it delineates the entire field of Tasman's discoveries along the coasts of Tasmania, and therefore it must have been drawn up after 5 December, but it shows it one degree farther north than Tasman showed it on his map . . . The chart of Gilsemans is the original and most ancient map of Tasmania in existence, drawn by one of those who first saw its shores, if not the very person who first sighted land—and drawn most probably some days after the discovery . . . But historically the most interesting circumstance remains that the Zeehaen first sighted land, and that it was very likely Gilsemans himself who first saw it."

'This Gilsemans map is one of five hitherto unknown maps of Tasman's Australian voyages located by Dr. Wieder. The atlas which contains these maps is known also as the Great Atlas of Prince Eugene of Savoy. You are correct in assuming that Heeres did not know of it, because Wieder's discovery was made only a few years before the publication of the *Monumenta Cartographica* in 1932, but Heeres did write this:—"None of the sources known to the present goes to show that it was Zeehaen and not the Heemskerck, that first made the discovery of Van Diemen's Land. Perhaps the reason why this name is found in Visscher's map of the world is that the draftsman used a chart no longer extant, drawn up aboard the Zeehaen, and expressly recording the fact that the discovery had been made on board the said vessel." And so, though he did not know of the Gilsemans map, he made an accurate guess at the existence of it, or at any rate of one by somebody on board the Zeehaen."—A. L. Meston.

4. The Dutch mile of the 17th century was 1/15 of a degree of latitude, i.e., 4 English nautical miles.—A. L. Meston.