

17TH CENTURY VISITORS TO THE KIMBERLEY COAST

On 7 June 2006, Dr Cathie Clement, a consulting historian, spoke to the Kimberley Society on a topic selected to mark the 400th anniversary of the first authenticated European sighting of the Australian continent. Her notes, which are presented below, provide an overview of the evening's PowerPoint presentation.

When I proposed the topic "17th century visitors to the Kimberley coast", one member jokingly observed that it would be the shortest talk ever. After all, how much could be said? Plenty! Those visitors contributed a lot to the writing, art, voyages, and maps that revealed Australia to the outside world.

Their arrival is best understood in the context of when non-indigenous people first set foot on the Kimberley coast. That context, by tackling the vexed question of who "discovered" Australia, highlights the challenges that faced the 17th century visitors.

Abel Janszoon Tasman and his men arrived in 1644 but, if we accept the claims made by some authors, they were far from early arrivals. In *Pyramids of the Pacific*, Rex Gilroy cites folklore, mythology, archaeological finds, and ancient texts as evidence that Bronze and Iron Age people sailed to the Kimberley from the Mediterranean. He maintains that the Sumerians used the placename Purnululu and undertook mining in the region before 1930 BC. He also points to the likelihood of the Kimberley experiencing:

- Colonisation by Phoenician miners (in King Solomon's time),
- Colonisation by Japanese pearl divers (in 9 BC),
- Visits from Indians (in about the 7th century) and Khmer (in the 13th century); and,
- Another Japanese visit (around 1425).

The date range for those activities extends beyond the indigenous peoples' painting of Wandjina art and into the era of the earlier Gwion Gwion or Bradshaw art. It also covers the time when barbed spear points gave way to pressure-flaked stone spear points, with no sign of other introduced materials.

Gilroy's work influenced Gavin Menzies' book, *1421: The Year China discovered the World*, but Menzies has the Chinese mining lead in Arnhem Land—with a slight Kimberley connection. Drawing on Kenneth Gordon McIntyre's book, *The Secret Discovery of Australia*, he takes George Grey's sketch of the Glenelg River Wandjina, transposes it to Arnhem Land, and links it to 'the Chinese arriving in red

robes reaching to their ankles'. In doing so, he ignores McIntyre's premise that the painting could be evidence of a 'man in holy orders' accompanying a Portuguese expedition to the Kimberley in 1599 or 1600. Gilroy takes another tack. He likens the Wandjina 'garments' to 'those once worn by ancient Egyptian and Phoenician seafarers'.

Other 'evidence' put forward as proof of ancient contact with Australia involves knowledge of things that are uniquely Australia. Gilroy and Menzies both claim the presence of kangaroos in the imperial zoo in China before 338 BC as proof of early visits to Australia. Gilroy also mentions the sighting and/or acquisition of kangaroo-like creatures by the Egyptians (before 2300 BC) and the Celts (before the first century BC). There is, however, a need for caution. As Ian Crawford and Ric How noted in the discussion that followed the talk, historical references to animals that jump and/or carry their young in pouches can apply to marsupials found in parts of South East Asia.

The various claims about early visitors to the Kimberley coast range from the carefully argued to the clearly fanciful. To test the credibility of those claims, it is necessary to examine a massive amount of documentary evidence. The ancient maps are fascinating but also open to a wide range of interpretations. In a *1421* Web site discussion of an early 15th century Venetian map, Menzies claims that the south-east segment of Albertin de Virga's work shows:

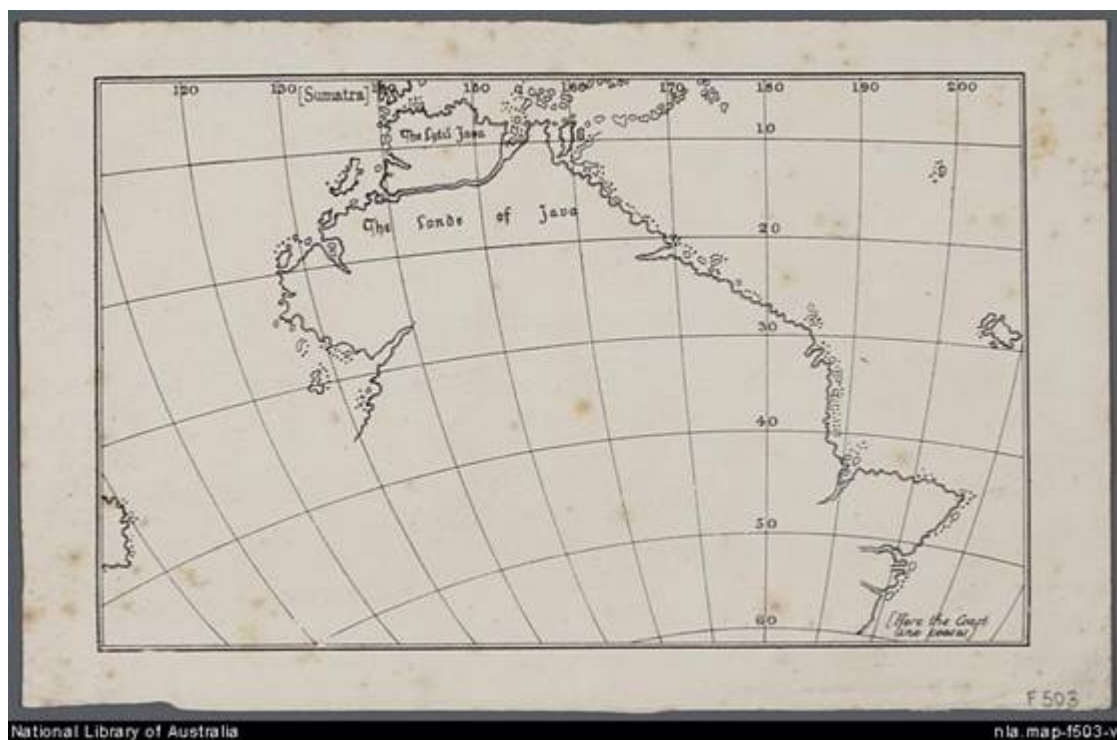
Australia's northern coast drawn with precision and power from Courier [sic] bay in the West to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the East – more accurately drawn than on the Jean Rotz which is clearly a derivative. Australia is accurately positioned relative to China (Zaiton).

He does not say which part of the map supposedly shows the northern coast. He is similarly vague in connection with his Web site claim that Australia is visible on a recently discovered Chinese map. It was reputedly drawn in 1418, and redrawn by Mo Yi Tong in 1763.

Maps from the early 16th century, eg the Portuguese work known as the Cantino map of 1502, show India and the mainland portion of South East Asia with outlines not unlike those on current maps. That change coincided with a decrease in the tendency to show the Indian Ocean, in keeping with the logic of Claudius Ptolemy, as an enclosed sea. Then, as the cartographic detail in the area of South East Asia became more detailed, major contradictions occurred. In 1541, a Mercator map, said to be inspired by the published tales from Marco Polo's travels, showed a landmass identified as 'Beach' to the south of Java. The following year, Jean Rotz drew a different landmass—'The Londe of Java'—to the south of 'The Lytil Java'.

Those depictions, and others that derived from the Rotz chart, gave rise to much conjecture about a possible Portuguese discovery of Australia. The position of the Rotz landmass was, however, about 2000 km too far to the west.

Bill Richardson, fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, studied the Mercator and Rotz nomenclature and concluded that errors had resulted in the mapmakers mistakenly placing information relevant to the coasts of Java and Vietnam too far to the south. Helen Wallis, a former keeper of maps at the British Library, concluded that the Rotz chart constitutes 'impressive testimony' within the inconclusive 'evidence in favour of a Portuguese discovery of Australia'.



Section of the Jean Rotz circular chart, 1542. Courtesy of National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.map-f503>. It is noted that Jean Rotz also drew a plane chart, which apparently shows in greater detail the northern portion of the land mass depicted here.

The assertions and denials relevant to a possible Portuguese charting of parts of the Australian coast warrant a separate talk. Here, it is enough to state that early charts and maps vary greatly in shape, nomenclature and cartographic detail. Drawn by cosmographers (depicting the world) and hydrographers (mapping the earth's surface waters), they contain an array of outlines that may or may not

depict parts of Australia. Within those outlines, some also contain illuminations (sketches) that are definitely not Australian.

Nicholas Vallard, Pierre Desceliers and others present superb examples of the cosmographer's craft in their illuminated versions of the "land" shown on the Rotz chart. Desceliers (1550) extended that "land" almost to the Antarctic. Some of his illuminations, which George Collingridge copied to illustrate his 1906 book, *The First Discovery of Australia and New Guinea*, show clothed people who were possibly at worship. Others show palm trees, rudimentary shelters, and animals that resemble elephants and camels.

The roughly contemporaneous Dauphin or Harleian map—also the subject of a Collingridge facsimile—adheres more closely to the Rotz outline. The people in its illuminations lack clothes but they have weapons, roofed huts, and a reined animal identified by Collingridge as a guanaco (*Camelus huanacus*). Also of interest, given Ian Wilson's reference (*Lost World of the Kimberley*) to the "Reindeer Rock" painting, is that the Dauphin map shows deer-like animals adjacent to the bay that Collingridge equates with King Sound. Whether that bay corresponds with King Sound is open to debate but it is noteworthy that Wallis remarks on the Sumatran aspect of the Dauphin map illuminations. One is left wondering whether its deer-like animals, like those in the scenario that Wilson suggests for "Reindeer Rock", represent Sambar deer from Asia.

Claims about the origin and the meaning of the information on the early maps usually reflect people's beliefs about history. Collingridge, for example, argues that discoveries made by Portuguese and Spanish mariners informed the previously mentioned French cartography. Menzies attributes those discoveries to huge fleets of Chinese junks. When it comes to finding proof of a pre-17th century visit to the Kimberley coast, however, one scholar or another has discounted everything on offer.

McIntyre credits the Flemish cartographer Cornelis de Jode with producing 'the only properly interpreted and correctly placed map of Australia before the coming of the Dutch maps in the next century'. He maintains that de Jode re-positioned the continent much further to the east in the 1593 edition of the atlas *Speculum Orbis Terrae*. Yet, if that map is compared to other maps of the period, it can be seen to show little more than a variation in the alignment of the northern extremities of the huge landmass surrounding the South Pole.

One other map that warrants comment before moving on to the Dutch is the Portuguese map drawn by Manoel Godinho de Erédia in 1602. It provides evidence

of voyages in waters south of Timor. Whether it shows, as McIntyre argues, that Erédia or his colleagues sailed from Timor to Collier Bay and/or Brunswick Bay in 1599 or 1600 is open to debate. McIntyre equates Ouro (Isle of Gold) with those bays but Noel H Peters presents a persuasive case for Ouro being Melville Island. Peters argues that Erédia's Luca.Antara (to the west) is Bathurst Island but my calculations suggest that it is just as likely to be the coast and the hinterland between the Victoria River and Collier Bay. If that were to be the case, the two islands shown to the west of Luca.Antara could be the land that defines the mouth of King Sound. It must be acknowledged, however, that "seeing" such things in the map drawn by Erédia may be as fanciful as "seeing" the Australian coast in the outline of Java-la-Grande or other cartographic compositions.

As Erédia drew his map, the Dutch established their East India Company and began to pursue riches in and beyond the islands of South East Asia. They would have believed in the existence of a "Southland" but whether they gleaned any information about it is unknown. The 1605/1606 voyage of the *Duyfhen* contributed to outside knowledge of New Guinea, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York. Subsequent voyages that carried back additional information about Australia included those of the *Eendracht* (Dirk Hartog in 1616), the *Zeewolf* and the *Mauritius* (1618), and the *Dordrecht* and the *Amsterdam* (1619). Other vessels then arrived at intervals of up to three years before De Witt and others mapped 370km of the north-west coast (between Nickol Bay and Cape Londonderry) in 1628. Assigned the name De Witt Land, that country revealed nothing but 'a foul and barren shore, green fields, and very wild, black, barbarous inhabitants'. The investigations continued, with Abel Janszoon Tasman claiming Van Diemen's Land for Holland in 1642.

Whilst best known for his involvement with the island that would later honour his work, Tasman was also the first outsider to make a confirmed landing on the Kimberley coast. No firsthand reports have survived but early accounts show that his 1644 expedition visited localities that included today's York Sound. Only one of his three known Kimberley landings warranted a detailed description of contact:

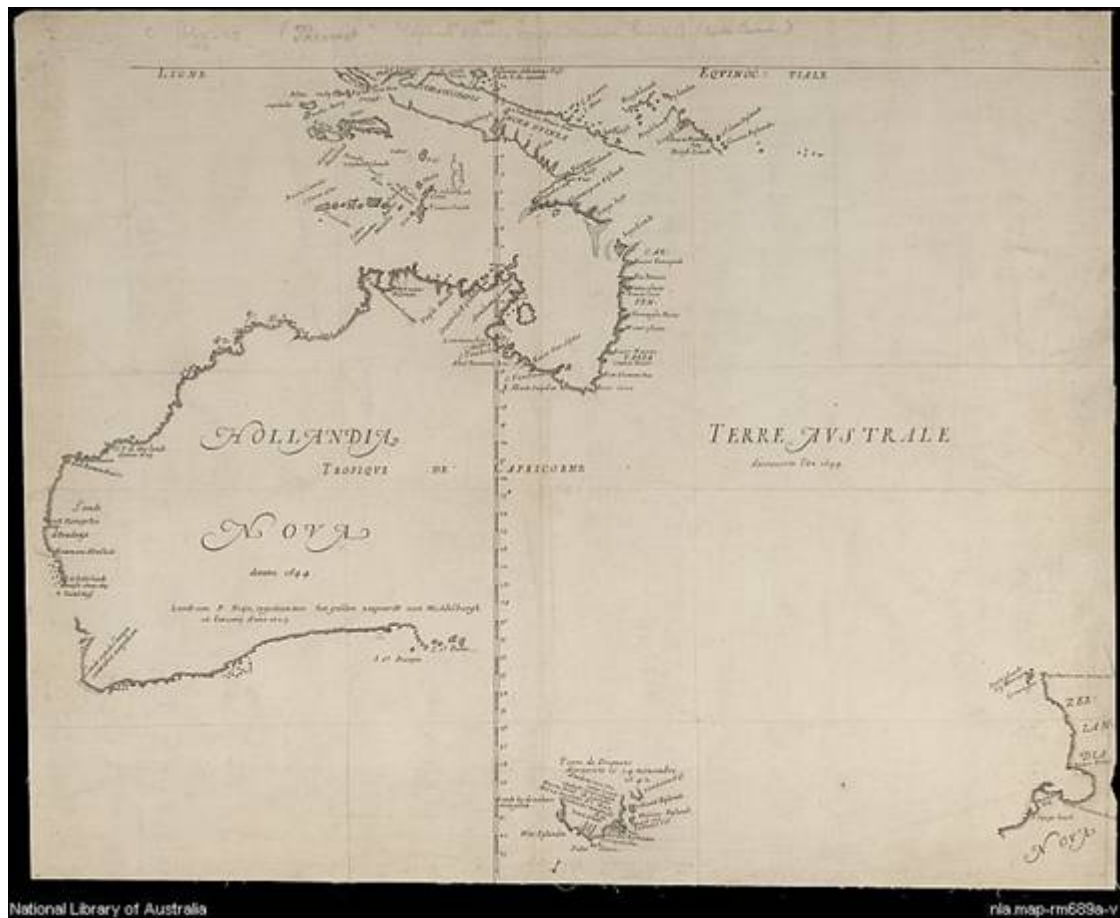
In Hollandia Nova, in 17° 12' S. (Longitude 121°, or 122° E.) Tasman found a naked, black people, with curly hair; malicious and cruel, using for arms, bows and arrows, hazeygaeys and kalawaeyes. They once came to the number of fifty, double armed, dividing themselves into two parties, intending to have surprised the Dutch, who had landed twenty-five men ; but the firing of guns frightened them so, that they fled. Their proas are made of the bark of trees ; their coast is dangerous ; there are few vegetables ; the people use no houses.

The description suggests that the indigenous people (around Carnot Bay) were not only well organised but also in possession of implements (bows and arrows) that were generally seen no closer than the South East Asian islands. The reference to the bows and arrows could be an error in transcription or translation. It could also, when taken in conjunction with several recorded sighting of bows and arrows on or near the northern Australian coast in the 18th and early 19th centuries, be a tantalising hint of very early Asian contact.

Further south (on the Eighty Mile Beach), Tasman encountered only the most basic projectiles (stones) but he still judged it best not to prolong contact. After five months, in which three yachts had carried 111 sailors and soldiers to the 'Southland', the expedition returned to South East Asia with little to show beyond an increased knowledge of seas, tides, coastlines, reefs, and islands.

Tasman's superiors begrudged him having 'done nothing else than to sail along the coast' and 'found nothing of importance only poor naked beachwalkers'. Yet, while his expedition did not identify new commercial prospects for the Dutch East India Company, Tasman had done a great deal. In charting much of the unknown northern and north-western coast between New Guinea and Van Diemen's Land, he confirmed the existence of the continent that would, for almost two centuries, be known as *Hollandia Nova* (New Holland).

The Dutch disenchantment with *Hollandia Nova* curbed immediate interest in commissioning further exploration but a map inlaid on pavement in Amsterdam commemorated Tasman's work. A copy of that map, published in Paris in 1663, showed the extent of the Dutch exploration and, thus, the extent of outsiders' knowledge of the continent. Similar maps appeared elsewhere, eg in *De zee-atlas of water-waerelt* by Hendrik Doncker, published in Amsterdam in about 1669. Further detail became available in 1678 when Jan van der Wall, in the *Vliegende Zwaan*, charted the coast from North West Cape to Roebuck Bay.



Hollandia Nova detecta 1644 ; Terre Australe decouverte l'an 1644. Map attributed to M. Thevenot, published in Paris in 1663. Courtesy of National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.map-rm689a>.

It was around this time that a young William Dampier sailed to Java and back to England. Further voyages took him to Jamaica and Mexico, back to England, and then out to Jamaica again with intentions of becoming a trader. Persuaded instead to join a fleet of privateers at the end of 1679, he embarked on the adventurous life that would result in his visit to the Kimberley coast in 1688.

The privateers—up to 400 men and boys—caused English-sanctioned mayhem in and around South America and the South Seas. They also fought amongst themselves. In October 1684, the armed trader *Cygnét* arrived in the hands of yet more privateers. The fleet continued to attack Spanish ships and towns on the Pacific coast and, in 1685, Dampier joined the predominantly English crew on the *Cygnét*. The following year, the *Cygnét* and a barque sailed to the Philippines carrying 150 privateers, seamen, carpenters, strikers (harpooners), and slaves. There, operating without official sanction, their status changed from privateer to

buccaneer. In 1687, discontented crewmembers absconded with the *Cygnet*, leaving Captain Swan and about forty others stranded at Mindanao. With Dampier aboard, they then spent a year pillaging, fighting and fraternising in South East Asia before deciding 'to touch at New Holland, a part of Terra Australis Incognita, to see what that country would afford'.

Much has been written about Dampier's visit and his opinion of the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley. Yet, to appreciate what that visit entailed, one needs to read Dampier's account. It shows that between 80 and 90 hard-bitten men and boys spent months on the east side of King Sound and adjacent islands. They antagonised and occasionally seized people there but they also seem to have had some amicable contact. Dampier recorded that the local people, who had 'no Boats, Canoes or Bark-logs', sustained themselves by collecting cockles, mussels, and periwinkles at low water and maintaining stone 'wares' that trapped small fish in tidal inlets. The buccaneers fared much better. The highly skilled strikers on English privateering vessels tended to come from the Moskito Coast (Nicaragua and Honduras) and they did nothing but use small canoes to harpoon fish, turtle and other marine creatures. Their skill was such that one or two strikers could provide meat for one hundred men. With work of that calibre, the two or three Moskito men from the *Cygnet* would not have escaped the notice of the local people. It is therefore tempting to associate their techniques with Aboriginal people riding King Sound tides on light log rafts that doubled as platforms from which to spear turtle and other seafood.

The buccaneers left New Holland in March 1688. Dampier and six others were set ashore at the Nicobar Islands *en route* to the Coromandel Coast (India) and, years later, Dampier wrote the book that made him famous. Published in London in 1697, *A New Voyage Round the World* helped to have Dampier placed in command of a British expedition that would reveal more about New Holland. With the *Roebuck* carrying a crew of fifty and a chart compiled by Tasman, Dampier sailed up the west coast in August 1699. The ship anchored in what is now known as Lagrange Bay and, in trying to catch people who might lead them to fresh water, Dampier shot an Aboriginal man who looked as though he might overpower one of the sailors. That sorry incident was the most memorable part of the last of the 17th century visits to the Kimberley coast.

A great deal more could be said about the 17th century visitors but, to gain any real sense of their outlook, their prospects, and their activities, it is best to read the books devoted to such things. This talk has not covered the visits of Macassan fishermen because, like some of the others who have looked into the history of those visits, I believe that they commenced in the 18th century. A brief summary of

those visits is available in Dr Ian Crawford's talk titled '**Kayu Jawa: The Kimberley of the Indonesians**' (April 1995).

Further reading

Dampier, William. *A New Voyage Round the World: The Journal of an English Buccaneer*, James Knapton, London, 1697, edited and revised edition, hummingbird press, London, 1998.

Peters, Noel H. 'Eredia Map 1602: A Case for determining that Ouro and Luca. Antara Islands shown on the Eredia Map are, respectively, Melville and Bathurst Islands of the Tiwi Islands of Australia', *Cartography*, December 2003. See <http://users.tpg.com.au/papag/EREDIA2.html> for a copy of the paper.

Richardson, W A R. *The Portuguese Discovery of Australia: Fact or Fiction?*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1989.

Schilder, Günter. *Australia Unveiled: The share of the Dutch navigators in the discovery of Australia*. Theatrum Orbis Terrarum B.V., Amsterdam, 1975, translated from the German by Olaf Richter, 1976.

Wallis, Helen. 'Did the Portuguese Discover Australia?', *History Today*, Vol. 38, Issue 3, March 1988, pp. 30–5.