

Navigator de Vlamingh— Slandered and Forgotten

By Chris Halls

WILLEM HESSELS DE VLAMINGH, the man who discovered and named the Swan River and drew the first accurate charts of the Western Australian coast, ranks as one of the most capable of the seventeenth century Dutch navigators in Australian waters. Yet, apart from a few coastal features named in honour of his visit to the "Great South Land" and an inscribed pewter plate he left nailed to a post at Shark Bay, commemorating his own and an earlier explorer's (Dirck Hartog) visits, historians have paid him scant attention, perhaps because of the slander and vilification he unjustly suffered, on his return to Holland, at the hands of a self-seeking but influential patron.

Even in Holland, he is little remembered beyond his native village, Oost Vlieland, where recently they named a street after him.

He was born in November 1640, the son of Hessel Dircksz and Trijn Cornelis. Their house and the small fishing village stood on the sandy, low-lying and wind-swept island of Vlieland, off the coast.

Young Willem attended the village school from the age of three until he was 12. He probably enjoyed going with his friends to the waterfront, to watch the ships and herring boats, and the fishermen mending their nets. Perhaps he first went to sea as a ship's boy in one of those herring boats, but of this there is no record.

However at the age of 24, he is referred to in contemporary documents as captain of a whaling

vessel. In 1664 he made a whaling voyage to the Arctic, with the additional aim of ascertaining whether a north-east Passage, across the north of Russia to China, was a feasible proposition. A cruise to Spitsbergen is recorded for the year 1669; of others we lack documentation.

In December 1668 he had married, in the little church at Oost Vlieland, Willemtje Cornelisdochter of Amsterdam. In all, the couple had eight children. Cornelis, the third son, later accompanied his father on the voyage to Australia.

On a whaling voyage to Greenland in 1688, Willem de Vlamingh returned to explore the seas round Novya Zemla, discovered a hitherto unknown island, and named it Witsen Island, after a friend. He seems to have been moving in exalted circles, for Nicholaas Witsen, burgomaster of Amsterdam, was also a director of the United East India Company, and therefore one of the most influential men in Holland. Flattered at having an island named after him, Witsen subsequently arranged that the company should charter de Vlamingh's ship the *Vergulde Vlamingh* for a voyage to the East Indies. De Vlamingh made an uneventful voyage, and returned in May 1690.

Three years later he was appointed to command the *Meresteyn*, a newly built East Indiaman of 36 guns, on her maiden voyage to Java. She was one of the first of the company's ships fitted with water distillation apparatus. It was new and rather complicated equipment, and de Vlamingh, with other

skippers, took a special course of instruction in its care and maintenance. The experience he gained in its use at sea was to prove extremely useful. Along the barren coast of Western Australia he was able to keep his men well supplied with drinking water.

After his return from Java skipper Willem de Vlamingh found himself in command of an expedition to explore and chart the little known coast of the Great South Land.

The initiative for the expedition came from his friend and patron Nicholaas Witsen, who for some years had been advocating a thorough investigation of the unexplored southern continent, but had been unable to arouse any enthusiasm or support. But, when news reached Amsterdam that the ship *Ridderschap van Holland* was overdue at Batavia, and had been presumed lost, Witsen seized his opportunity. He persuaded his director colleagues to send search ships to the South Land, that being the most likely place for the *Ridderschap van Holland* to have been wrecked.

Before long, the directors had revised and expanded the expedition's itinerary to include surveys of the islands of Tristan da Cunha, in the South Atlantic and St Paul and Amsterdam islands, in the southern Indian Ocean. Witsen gave special attention and priority to fitting out the expedition, supervising many details and personally selecting the ships' officers.

On 3 May 1696 the frigate *Geelvinck* with a

Maanden.	da- gen.	courfen.	my- len.	ge- breedte	middel- langte.	be- vondē	langte	scheel	naald- gra. mi.	gra. mi.	gra. mi.	gr. mi.	gr. mi.	gr. mi.	winden.	hoedanigh- heit des we- ders.
May	16	Zt	10	9	61	06	9	32								
	17				61	16	10	00								
Oct	10				61	19	9	49								
	19				61	22	0	40								

Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, Netherlands.

crew of 130 men, under the command of Willem de Vlamingh, the hooker *Nyptangh* manned by 35 men and skippered by Gerrit Koelaart and the galiot *Weseltje* with 14 men and Commander Laurens Zeeman aboard, weighed anchor and sailed down the English Channel and out into the North Atlantic. There they separated, and proceeded independently to the islands of Tristan da Cunha. They "had many gales and foggy, dark, damp weather, hail and piercing cold, and often passed the night on a very rough sea with reefed sails." Leaving these inhospitable islands they sailed to the Cape, arriving there on September 7.

Laurens Zeeman, master of the *Weseltje* died at Cape Town and Willem de Vlamingh appointed his son Cornelis (formerly third officer in the *Geelvinck*, to the command of the galiot. Ten seamen had died on the voyage, thus far, and replacements were signed on, among them three Indonesians, Jongmun van Bali, Mangadong and Adjam. According to de Vlamingh, these men were "experienced in many languages". He hoped that they might prove useful as interpreters when they reached the South Land.

Departing on October 27 from the Cape of Good Hope, the flotilla spent two weeks exploring and charting the islands of St. Paul and Amsterdam. On both islands, de Vlamingh left wooden tablets recording the visit.

Nineteen days later on an easterly course they sighted land, but because of the strong northerly current, variable winds, fog, rain and overcast weather they were forced to beat about off the coast until December 29. Late that afternoon they came to anchor off the southern coast of a large island. De Vlamingh named it Mist Island, but about three years later, this was changed to Rottenest or Rats' Nest Island. To-day it is called, in the singular, Rottnest. The name derived from the large number of "wood rats" or quokkas, a species of wallaby, seen there by the seamen.

For twelve days the flotilla lay at anchor and daily work parties were sent ashore to cut firewood for the *Geelvinck's* water distillery. Skipper de Vlamingh went ashore twice, and was very much taken with the island, which he described as "the pleasantest in all the world", well timbered with sweet smelling trees which he thought could prove of some commercial value to the East India Company. The island was thoroughly explored, circumnavigated and charted. Apart however, from two pieces of driftwood of European origin (probably flotsam from the *Gilt Dragon* wrecked some distance to the northward, in 1656) no traces of shipwreck or castaways were found.

On January 4 a "broad council" of the captains and officers of all three ships decided to land about 80 men on the mainland next day. The landing was duly effected on what is now Cottesloe Beach. The shore party, including a group of musketeers and two of the Indonesian interpreters, numbered 86 officers and men, all well armed. To prevent disorder, they were mustered on the beach while Gerrit Koelaart, who was in command, read them the East India Company's orders.

Moving off in an easterly direction, the party soon reached what is now called Buckland Hill and from there they saw inland water. They pushed on through the bush, passing three neglected native huts and coming eventually to a large stretch of brackish water (Freshwater Bay), which they later discovered was part of a river. About three miles further inland they set up camp.

Next morning, Gerrit Koelaart divided the company into three platoons to reconnoitre the surrounding country, see if they could contact some of the local inhabitants, and then rendezvous



Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, Netherlands.

From "Oud en Nieuw Oost Indien", published 1726.



at the river bank. During their reconnaissance, however, a few men ate the poisonous nuts of the zamia palm, which they thought tasted like Dutch beans and walnuts. Within a few hours they were violently ill, and plans for further exploration had to be abandoned. The company was then divided into two groups: the first, consisting of the musketeers, none of whom seem to have eaten the nuts, was to follow the river to the sea; the second, led by the supercargo, was to make their way overland, back to the beach.

The sick men, among them skipper Gerrit Koelaart, were immediately taken on board the

galiot. Meanwhile, the first party walked southward along the beach, toward the future site of Fremantle, while the galiot cruised along the shore. They were looking for wreckage from the lost ship but found nothing, except one very old piece of planking, probably from the *Gilt Dragon*. Near the river's mouth, they embarked aboard the galiot while a few men took the longboat over the bar and proceeded up stream to collect the soldiers.

In the journey up stream, they captured two young black swans. That night, they camped ashore and in the morning, having embarked the soldiers, put about and returned to the galiot.

“The coastline is of huge sand dunes...”

Dr. P. E. Playford, W.A. Geological Survey Dept.

Sailing back towards Rottnest they met the *Geelvinck* and *Nyptangh* already under sail, heading for the mainland.

On January 10, Willem de Vlamingh led a party of 40 men in three boats, each armed with two small cannon, in an expedition up the river which he later named the “Black Swan River”. By midnight they had covered about six miles and at two o’clock, they anchored for a couple of hours rest.

Next day, at daybreak they continued the journey up-river. On every hand, the silent bushland, slumbering in primordial splendour, stretched away into the distance, as with scarcely a ripple on the shimmering, clear water, the boats moved on. The men observed much wildlife on the way including numerous black swans, nine or ten of which were run down by the boats. Fish were plentiful and once they heard a song bird which they thought to be a nightingale, but was probably a reed-warbler or noisy scrub bird.

About noon, de Vlamingh estimated they were eight or 10 miles up-river. Landing, they found a pool of fresh water; probably the spring at the base of Mount Eliza where Captain James Stirling also obtained water in 1827. De Vlamingh and his men were now in the approximate locality which 132 years later, Captain Stirling was to choose as the site for Perth.

Continuing, they soon found themselves in very shallow water, so shallow in fact that the men had to push and drag the boats along. Then, rounding a bend (in the vicinity of the modern Causeway Bridge), they saw the river spreading away in many small streams; they could go no further. The boats were pushed off the sandbank and they began the return journey. Another night was spent in camp on shore while Michael Bloem led an abortive attempt to capture a few aborigines, whose camp fires had been seen through the bush.

Next day, the *Nyptangh’s* men returned to their vessel, and de Vlamingh to his frigate, *Geelvinck*. Before dawn on the following day, the officers assembled and held council on board the flagship. They decided to get under way and continue the exploration northward.

Two landings were made at what is now called Jurien Bay, but although the seamen walked about five miles inland, they saw only a parched barren land, without any living thing. De Vlamingh wrote: “The coastline is of huge sand dunes like those on the Island of Vlieland. Three miles inland, could be seen a huge mountain of stone, which from the sea looked like an old castle in Holland.” This was probably North Namban Flat, a large conical flat-topped mountain distinctly visible from the sea. Other landings were made on the coast; near Hutt Lagoon and at Gantheaume Bay, where 40 seamen trudged inland for several miles and spent two nights ashore.

In the afternoon of January 30, the ships came



View of Turtle Bay, Dirck Hartogs Island, where de Vlamingh’s flotilla anchored.

to anchor in Dirck Hartogs Reede, Shark Bay. Twelve days passed while the seamen explored and charted the bay. De Vlamingh recovered the old inscribed pewter plate which Dirck Hartog had left there 80 years previously, and in its place, left another, bearing a copy of Hartog’s wording and an additional inscription recording his own visit. They left Shark Bay and cruised northwards to North West Cape, then following the coast, they came to the Willems River, now called the Ashburton. On February 20 stood out to sea, bound for Java.

The flotilla anchored in Batavia Roads on March 20 1697. De Vlamingh and his officers delivered their journals, charts, paintings done by the artist Victor Victorsz, and Dirck Hartog’s plate to Governor van Outhoorn, who despatched them to Holland, with a covering letter. To the Directors of the East India Company in Amsterdam, he wrote: “We beg to forward to you a number of larger and smaller discs of wood, brought over from the South Land by the skipper Willem de Vlamingh, together with a box containing shells collected on the beach, fruits, plants, etc. In the Swaene Rivier they have seen a species of black swans, three of which they brought to Batavia alive, which we should have been glad to send to Your Worships, but that shortly after their arrival here they all died. They have found little beyond an arid, barren and wild land, both near the shore and as far inland as they have been. Nor have they met with any vestiges of the lost ship *Ridderschap*, so that, in sum, nothing of any importance has been discovered in this exploratory voyage.”

This report and the objects mentioned, were in Burgomaster Witsen’s hands by June 1698 and as de Vlamingh did not return to Holland until August of that year, he had a month in which to build a case against him.

Witsen had suffered a blow to his pride. He

had prepared his colleagues and scientific friends, in advance, for spectacular results, which had not eventuated. In his mind, there existed only the possibility of human frailty to account for the expedition’s failure to find fruitful soil and scientific wonders at the South Land. He began a campaign of calumny and criticism against his former protégé, who now became the scapegoat. In a letter to a friend, Witsen accused de Vlamingh of carelessness and of not having completed his task; “in short,” he wrote, “not much has been done because the Commander was too much on the drink. He has mapped the coast well but not done much ashore, he stayed nowhere longer than three days in one place against his Instructions, which I myself set down requesting him to stay long in one place, but he had used up his time at the Cape with drinking and revelry.”

The injustice of these accusations is apparent from a study of the contemporary records based on the ship’s journals; the actual journals, covering the voyage from the Cape, via the South Land to Java, disappeared, shortly after Witsen began his attacks on de Vlamingh.

Willem de Vlamingh did in fact comply with his instructions. He stayed for twelve days at Rottnest Island and a further twelve days at Shark Bay. Also a number of landings of varying duration were made at different places on the coast. Certainly he stayed for seven weeks at the Cape, but this was necessary to allow his men to recover from the scurvy and rigours of the cold weather they had endured off Tristan da Cunha. Moreover his careful and detailed charts of the Western Australian coast remained in use for more than a century. But his career was finished; he resigned from the East India Company’s service in 1698 and although we know nothing of his later life, it seems likely that he retired to the island of Vlieland. Probably he died in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. ▲