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Robert Drew's latest book is *The Beach: An Australian Passion* published by the National Library of Australia



Dutch courage

THE OTHER SIDE ROBERT DREWE

I FOUND AUSTRALIAN HISTORY confusing as a child. Everyone said that Captain Cook discovered Australia but we West Australian kids had heard about two Dutch visitors landing ages before Cook. Not only that — the Dutchmen had thoughtfully left souvenir dinnerware behind.

Nevertheless, it seemed to us that Australian history was only about English explorers: those intrepid characters who, tiring of inventing spinning jennies or extracting small children from coal mines and chimneys, had launched themselves on the world's wildernesses instead.

Forget the Dutch, or the Portuguese, or the French, or Asians — and certainly not the Aboriginal people, who'd settled in Australia about 50,000 years before any Europeans accidentally happened by — it was the English who'd discovered this place.

Having taken aboard the English-explorer domination of our history, we were then puzzled over William Dampier's role, seeing he was also English, and a great navigator, and he'd beaten Cook to Australia by almost a century without getting any Cook-style applause.

Was this, we wondered, because Dampier seemed a more interesting fellow, a grumpy former pirate turned natural historian and travel writer, who preferred not to cover his lank tresses with a powdered wig, and who wasn't overly impressed with the place?

Meanwhile, Captain Cook became so famous that in the public mind his rank became wedged into his name, despite the fact that he didn't actually have a captain's rank when he landed on the east coast. In 1770 he was still Lieutenant James Cook.

In primary school we even sang a ditty about him: "Captain Cook/chased a chook/all around Australia. Lost his pants/in the middle of France/and found them in Tasmania." There were no playground rhymes about Dampier, and definitely none for Dirk Hartog and Willem de Vlamingh, the first Europeans known to land on the west coast of Australia.

Something else dawned on us: maybe Dampier, Hartog and Vlamingh had landed on the wrong coast for schoolbook recognition. As far as our text books were concerned, Australian history was predominantly east-Australian history.

No longer. Thanks to much work, research and energetic lobbying of governments over 90 years by many local campaigners, including the late Governor-General Paul Hasluck, starting from his time as a

21-year-old reporter on this newspaper, and nowadays, by his daughter-in-law, the president of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society Sally Anne Hasluck, this State's history is now recognised for its richness and difference.

A new RWAS exhibition, *Western Land: A Journey of Discovery and Rediscovery*, marks a major date in Australian history: the 400th anniversary of the first landfall of Europeans on the west coast of the continent. While four centuries isn't much in the timescale of Aboriginal Australia, it's significant in what was to shape the continent's future.

On October 25, 1616, Dirk Hartog in the *Eendracht* sighted the coast near Shark Bay and landed on what is now Dirk Hartog Island. A captain in the Dutch East India Company, Hartog was following the company's prescribed route to Batavia when he accidentally encountered the west coast. To indicate his visit he left a pewter plate nailed to a post.

In 1697 another Dutch commander, Willem de Vlamingh, visited the island, found Hartog's plate and replaced it with another plate which recorded both Hartog's visit and his own. Hartog's plate was sent from Batavia to the Netherlands and eventually placed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

So began the Saga of the Plates. Vlamingh's plate also ended up in Europe. In 1818 the French explorer Louis de Freycinet removed it to Paris where it was deposited in the Academie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. There was delight when France returned it to Australia in 1947, although WA was unhappy to see it lodged in the National Library in Canberra. Paul Hasluck lobbied then prime minister Robert Menzies and eventually the Vlamingh plate became a jewel in the Fremantle Maritime Museum's collection.

Next month will see the complicated Hartog-plate affair well and truly celebrated. The original is returning on loan from the Rijksmuseum and will feature in an international exhibition, *Travellers and Traders in the Indian Ocean World*, at the Maritime Museum.

Simultaneously, a replica Hartog plate, made in 1938, is on display at the society's Western Land exhibition in Nedlands. The exhibition tells the story of WA from early Aboriginal life, through Hartog's landing and the Swan River Settlement, to the present. It includes colonial life, explorations for agricultural and pastoral lands, and the discovery of mineral and energy resources.

Incidentally, the original Hartog plate, so jealously guarded by the Rijksmuseum, has deteriorated somewhat through pewter disease. So the replica, cast in bronze for durability, and heavier and thicker than the original, has become especially important. So there. ■

He'd beaten Cook to Australia by almost a century.