Historian scrutinises Tasman’s voyage and visit to Wainui

In June 2012, a seminar was held in Nelson to investigate the possibility that one of Abel Tasman’s boats came to shore when the Dutch explorer discovered this country in 1642.

The idea, had it taken hold, could have shifted popular belief of the earliest European footing in New Zealand from that of Cook’s men, near Gisborne, to Tasman’s in Wainui Bay, 127 years earlier.

While researcher Rudiger Mack’s claims were set honestly, his methods left many of his contemporaries doubting. Local historian Robert Jenkin has given a brief account of why Mack’s propositions were rejected by national scholars, including him. Some have also rejected Mack’s more recent discovery of a canoe landing site at Taupo point - claiming it to be the oldest maritime structure in New Zealand. This interpretation was first publicised by The University of Canterbury and was published in a peer-reviewed article.

Robert refers to Mack’s earlier research as “a red herring”, but says the hui that brought the Dutch Ambassador, Arie van der Weel, to the region three years ago has inspired further enquiry by himself and others.

The author of Strangers in Mohua says he’s interested in the ‘real’ mysteries, as opposed to mistaken ones,” and is currently researching the entire leg of Tasman’s 1642-43 voyage around the coast of Aotearoa.

The scene in Wainui Bay on 19 December 1642 was one of unique naval engagement between Māori and Europeans. The two ships, Heemskerck and Zeelaen, while anchored about 6km offshore, were approached by at least seven waka. One open boat, the Zeelaen’s “little prau” was rammed. Four of her crew were lost in this attack. Another three escaped by swimming, as cannon and musket fire from the ships forced the waka to retreat. Soon after, as the Dutch sailed away, they counted 22 waka close to land, with crews of 30 each according to one of their accounts. Eleven of the 22 came after them, but once in range of cannons these were also fired on and so turned back to rejoin the rest.

Given there are no independent Māori oral traditions concerning Tasman, researchers rely on reconstructing events with their best efforts, says Robert. During the seminar historian Dame Anne Salmond commented that an explanation of the “attack” on the 19th could well have been that Māori trumpets on the previous night amounted to a “ritual challenge rather than the onset of hostilities”. A reported “stiff hollow voice”, could have been played through a vessel and appearance of...
Vessel and appearance of the inhabitants of New Zealand (1705) reveals what Mack interprets as a Dutch boat near land. Robert says this later engraving was more likely a reinterpretation of existing images and therefore should not be used as a new source. Other researchers were not even able to verify that the boat resembled a Dutch craft, he says.

Robert sees no decisive evidence that channels cleared of rocks at Taupo Point were once a Māori launching site. "It happens to coincide with coal seams...that probably made it easier to move the rocks off the surface. I tend to think they could be Māori launching sites and always did. The coal seams might have helped in clearing the channels...but the idea that they date back to 1642 is completely unsupported."

Robert's most recent research toward a publication about Tasman's voyage is based on a detailed reading of every available contemporary resource "and an awful lot of work on Google Earth", he says with a chuckle. His final account will also be told partly in pictures. A reproduction of one of Robert's paintings of the Heemskerck and Zeehaen passing Cape Farewell on December 17 1642 has a realistic quality, yet imparts a "story-tale" feel – one of adventure on the Southern seas.

A more Māori perspective and narrative is still needed though, he stresses.

"For this to be written as history I would really like there to be a hui-style gathering where these ideas could be put, and probably historians need to describe better than they have so far what the evolution might have been from waka like the Anawhata waka [found in Golden Bay in 2011 and last caulked around A.D. 1400] to the monohulls that we see today."