

Ian Hughes

Antecedents: The Low Countries: Prologue



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Ian Hughes

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On my virtual bookshelf:

Something About The North

Version 1.0

Recollection, Reflection and Reminiscence

(in preparation)

Origins, Indigenes and Antecedents

- **Origins:** Outlining the physical environment:

In The Beginning

(in preparation)

On the Surface: Shaping the Land

(in preparation)

On the Surface: Vegetation and Climate

(in preparation)

- **Indigenes:** The human and biological environments

Fauna and Megafauna

(in preparation)

The Human Environment

(in preparation)

- **Antecedents:** The historical background:

Ancient Greece

(in preparation)

Contact?

(in preparation)

Iberians

(in preparation)

The Low Countries

This volume

Englishmen and Frenchmen

(in preparation)

Australia

(in preparation)

Queensland

(in preparation)

Mapping The North:

- **Prelude: Towards An Outline**

(in preparation)

- **Six Voyages**

(in preparation)

- **Adding Detail**

- **Northern Queensland**

Themes and Variations

- **Discounting the Notion of Discovery**

- **The Minimalist View of Australian History**

- **A Radical, Republican, Multicultural North? Really?**

- **'Discovering' Australia's East Coast: Why Did It Take So Long?**

Sources and Readings

- Perceptions and Misconceptions
 - Terra Australis Incognita
 - The Iberians
 - Australia
 - Queensland
-
- **Texts**
 - Anonymous, **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea**
 - Jan Carstensz, **Journal kept by Jan Carstensz on his voyage to New Guinea, 1623**
 - George Elphinstone Dalrymple, **Reports And Narrative Of The North-East Coast Expedition, 1873**
 - Ian Hughes, **A State Of Open Warfare: Frontier Conflict In The Cooktown Area**
 - J Beete Jukes, **Narrative of the Surveying Voyage of H.M.S. Fly, Commanded by Captain F. P. Blackwood, Volume 1**
 - T. D. Mutch **The First Discovery of Australia: With an account of the Voyage of the "Duyfken" and the Career of Captain Willem Jansz**
 - **Report of the Proceedings of the Queensland Government Schooner Spitfire, in Search Of The Mouth of the River Burdekin (1860)**

Illustrations:

Cover: Philip de Koninck (1619–1688) *Panoramic Landscape with a City in the Background* (1655; [Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum](#); Public domain; [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Map of The Netherlands (including the special municipalities of Saba, Saint Eustatius and Bonaire; the Caribbean Netherlands), showing provinces, large cities, rivers and lakes. (English version) ([Wikimedia Commons](#); [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) license)

Map of the North Sea, including sea depths ([Wikimedia Commons](#); [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) license).

Version History:

1.0 incorporating *This Title in Context; Setting the Scene: Australia and the Dutch; Shaping the Land; A Matter of Monikers*. Earlier draughts that appeared hereabouts were re-edited using Grammarly.

This Title in Context

A cursory glance at Australia's pre-settlement history reveals two dichotomies. We know but often choose to ignore the forty-thousand-year First Nations history. It is frequently siphoned off into *prehistory* as if there is a disconnect between the distant past and what happened after James Cook encountered the continent's east coast in 1770.

I hope to avoid doing the same by exploring the human landscape Cook encountered during his stay at *Wabalumbaal* ¹ and later explorers and settlers dealt with as they set about **Mapping The North**.

So **Indigenes** sits alongside **Origins** and **Antecedents** on this section of my virtual bookshelf.

We also know and need to acknowledge the Dutch navigators' role in charting Australia's outline. As James Cook tracked along the continent's east coast, he filled in missing, and in some ways, relatively minor, details. Dutch navigators had already delivered an outline of the continent from New Guinea's 'bird's head' to somewhere near Ceduna on the Great Australian Bight.

Abel Tasman showed that the land mass on Dutch charts was separate from the undiscovered continent that armchair geographers insisted had to lie in the southern hemisphere's unexplored portion. Four of the **Six Voyages** discussed in **Mapping The North** involve Dutch navigators.

Cook was also aware of rumours concerning a strait between continental Australia and New Guinea. Another of my **Six Voyages** ² established that the strait was there over one hundred sixty years earlier. However, the Spanish did not care to advertise it. With his ship badly needing dry dock facilities, Cook needed to find his way through the passage and get himself to Batavia ³ *a.s.a.p.* That meant Cook needed to sail *through* something Willem Jansz and Jan Carstensz sailed *past*.

To Dutchmen tracking a couple of *mijlen* ⁴ offshore, the islands in the strait seemed like the continuation of West New Guinea's low, swampy coastline. At least, that was what I taught students in Year Four and Six. That was what the Social Studies syllabus said.

¹ *Guugu Yimithirr*: the Endeavour River.

² Chronologically, the second. It begins the **Six Voyages** sequence because it marks the culmination of Spanish activity that preceded the Dutch arrival in the East Indies.

³ Modern-day Jakarta.

⁴ If that seems a tad far-fetched, it is worth remembering that the Dutch used several different *mijlen* of varying (non-standardised) lengths. One was a geographical mile, with fifteen *mijlen* equalling one degree of equatorial longitude (around 7,157 metres). As a result, three or four miles offshore might equate to almost thirty kilometres.

Abel Tasman did much the same on his largely overlooked second expedition. Tasman's earlier voyage, which discovered Van Diemen's Land and New Zealand, is widely regarded as much more significant. And perhaps it was, but not for the reasons a minimalist view of Australian History might suggest.

Tasman's voyage established an eastward limit for New Holland and a possible westward limit for *Terra Australis Incognita* or *Terra Australis Nondum Cognita*.⁵ That's a significant theme in **Perceptions and Misconceptions**.

What lies in that (gradually diminishing) unexplored chunk of the southern hemisphere?

The minimalist view suggests Tasman's voyage was significant because it *discovered Tasmania* and gives a cursory nod to our cousins across the ditch. The Queensland Social Studies Syllabus remained largely silent on what Janszoon, Carstensz and Tasman sought.

They were *exploring*; that was all we needed to know.

Several other Dutchmen encountered Australia's west coast.

Some were shipwrecked.

Others advised caution when approaching the coast⁶ or left pewter plates to record their presence in the neighbourhood. Then, one thing became evident as I started looking at those voyages in the Gulf of Carpentaria: Each expedition slots into a specific phase of a broader chronology.

Janszoon's *Duyfken* was part of the first combined Dutch East India Company fleet. His reconnaissance in search of *the island called Nova ginnea, which, as it is said, affordeth great store of Gold*,⁷ was the first item on a to-do list.

When it drew a blank after an encounter with what turned out to be Cape York's west coast, Janszoon turned his attention to the next task. Seventeen years later, Carstensz established commercial arrangements east of Amboyna and investigated a possible passage to the Pacific. The Carstensz journal, which has survived, suggests the Dutch knew there were two significant waterways beyond Aru. One led to the Pacific; the other was a gulf and a dead end. Their informants, whose canoes had no difficulty negotiating the

⁵ "the unknown southern land" or "the southern land *not yet known*" (i.e. "we haven't *found* it yet, but we know it's there").

⁶ In 1619, Frederick de Houtman, with the *Dordrecht* and *Amsterdam*, encountered the islands we know as the Houtman Abrolhos. He noted "... a low-lying coast, a level, broken country with reefs all round it. We saw no high land or mainland, so that this shoal is to be carefully avoided as very dangerous to ships that wish to touch at this coast. It is fully ten miles in length, lying in 28° 46." (Houtman to Managers of the East India Company, 7 October 1619 quoted in J.E. Heeres, **The part borne by the Dutch in the discovery of Australia 1606-1765**.)

Abrolhos is a contraction of the Portuguese *abre os olhos* ("open your eyes" or protect yourself ([Wikipedia](#))).

⁷ John Saris, in **Purchas His Pilgrimes** (1625), Vol. I., Book 4, p. 385). See the complete text [here](#) or in my collection of **Sources and Readings: Dutchmen**. One notes that the Portuguese and Spanish had been in the neighbourhood for more than eighty years without finding a *great store of Gold*.

shallows in Torres Strait, may have failed to consider the European vessels' greater draught.

Alternatively, a desire to keep the visitors moving means they may have chosen to ignore that factor.⁸

And, unlike the impression I had gained from the **Queensland Social Studies Syllabus**, Carstensz conducted a lengthy investigation along New Guinea's south coast. When that investigation drew a blank, he decided to try his luck further south. However, circumstances⁹ forced him to turn back. So perhaps the passage to the Pacific lay still further to the south, best approached from the other side. Carstensz made repeated landings, looking for firewood and water. In the process, he thoroughly investigated the region's commercial prospects. If the coast offered anything of interest to the Dutch, Carstensz would have found it.

In the meantime, the Dutch had established a permanent base in Java. They were in the process of eliminating their European competitors in the East Indies. They also established themselves in China and Japan and continued their eighty-year struggle against Spain. So, who can blame them if they choose not to investigate dead ends?

Still, the prospect of *Terra Australis Incognita* dangled in front of them. If the armchair geographers were right, it would have been worth "discovering".¹⁰ *Terra Australis Incognita*'s proponents seem unconcerned that the continent's inhabitants had failed to establish contact with the rest of the world.

Still, Dutch Governor-General Anthony Van Diemen and pilot Francois Visscher made a detailed proposal for a thorough investigation. Their superiors in Amsterdam scaled the project back. Instead of leaving Europe and starting with an investigation of the South Atlantic, the expedition would depart from Batavia, refresh at Mauritius and investigate what lay south of New Holland. It should only investigate the part of the southern hemisphere within the Dutch East India Company's charter.

This expedition is the Tasman voyage that encountered Tasmania and New Zealand but failed to deliver its primary purpose. Tasman was supposed to find the passage between the East Indies and the Pacific from the Pacific side. When his first voyage failed to do so, Van Diemen sent Tasman out again to try it from the other side. However, as it turns out,

⁸ Reading accounts where explorers show the local people samples of the goods they sought, I noticed an apparent undercurrent: "We don't have any of that, but there's plenty over *there*. [Indicates further horizon] Keep going. You'll find it. Best of luck."

⁹ At that stage, I thought he followed the same track as Janszoon but progressed further along Cape York's west coast.

¹⁰ In *Themes and Variations: When Is Something "Discovered"*? I point out that "discovery" equated to "we got here first, so we get first dibs on what's here".

Tasman was probably the wrong man for the job. While he tracked from the bird's head to Northwest Cape, he misses Torres Strait (again) and fails to find any sign of the passage.¹¹

Then, a significant event made investigating the passage to the Pacific pointless. In January 1648, the Treaty of Münster ended the Eighty Years War with the Spanish Empire. At that point, the passage to the Pacific, which would have delivered opportunities to attack Spanish interests on South America's west coast, ceased to be a priority. From there, Dutch interest in Australia is limited to investigating the fate of ships that fail to arrive in Batavia. As it turns out, Dutch shipwrecks were relatively few and far between.

So there, in a lengthy nutshell, you have the contents of six titles on my virtual bookshelf.

- **Outward Bound: Dutchmen** traces the early expeditions to the Indies up to the formation of the Dutch East India Company, hereafter referred to as the V.O.C.¹²

Four of the **Six Voyages**:

- [Willem Jansz in the Duyfken](#);
- [Jan Carstensz in the Pera and Arnhem](#);
- [Abel Tasman](#);
- [Jean Etienne Gonzal and Ludowijk Van Asschens in the Rijder and Buijs](#).¹³

Meanwhile, **In the Neighbourhood: Dutch Encounters** slots in somewhere after Janszoon and traces Dutch activity off the Western Australian coast. However, the Astute Reader will have noted a glaring hole in that arrangement. My narrative omits significant detail before the first Dutch excursions to the Indies. Of course, those excursions have their **Antecedents**. That is where this title slots in.

¹¹ To be fair, anyone attempting the passage from the western side would have to work against the tides and the prevailing winds. Torres exploited the tides on his path through the strait in 1606.

Cook's arrival at the eastern end of the passage was a matter of (much-needed) good luck rather than good management.

Of course, working from that side became much easier once the route was charted and the western outlet identified.)

¹² Officially, the United East India Company or *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, combining several rival Dutch trading companies and possibly the largest company in recorded History (according to the **Wikipedia** entry)

¹³ A little-known and largely ignored pair of voyages that fit outside the narrative outlined above.

- ☆ capital city
- ✦ provincial capital
- big city



Saba
 ○ The Bottom

Sint-Eustatius
 ○ Oranjestad

Bonaire
 ○ Kralendijk



BELGIUM

GERMANY

Setting the Scene: Australia and the Dutch

Throughout the virtual bookshelf's **Antecedents** section, my self-imposed task is to deliver the back story to other titles on the shelf. Six of those titles cover the rise of the Dutch seaborne empire in the east and its interaction with Australia's coastline. Put them together, and you have a single narrative.

It starts when a group of merchants float the idea of heading east and collecting spices and other high-value commodities at their source. It ends when the quest for a passage to the Pacific ceases to be a priority, and the Dutch merchants set about close to three centuries of commercial exploitation.

Detailing what happens from there, by and large, is a task for someone else. The Dutch East Indies reappear from time to time in other narratives hereabouts. James Cook's stay in Batavia, while Dutch shipwrights repair the damage to the *Endeavour's* hull, is one of the crucial incidents on his first voyage.

After the First Fleet arrived in New South Wales, the closest accessible sources of assistance for the fledgling settlement were the Dutch outposts in Batavia and Cape Town. A mission to Cape Town for supplies delivers the first pure-bred Merino sheep to Australia.

Although no one realised it then, sheep would transform what was supposed to be a self-sufficient settlement that could resupply passing shipping en route to destinations in the Pacific and East Asia into something entirely different.¹⁴ So, by and large, subsequent events in the Netherlands, South Africa and the future Republic of Indonesia are largely irrelevant in these parts.

However, I must explain why those early Dutchmen set out for the Indies. It's a story that an anglocentric worldview usually skips past.¹⁵

It involves:

- a relatively small population in a marginal, not overly hospitable, and, at times, downright dangerous location;
- a time of unprecedented religious turmoil;
- the continent's superpower and, as indicated above;
- an eighty-year struggle in an era where my historical background knowledge is *sketchy*.

¹⁴ The notion that the settlement of Australia was all about a "dumping ground for convicts" is one of the historical inaccuracies addressed in *The Minimalist Version of Australian History*. Antecedents: Australia: Botany Bay looks at the reasons behind His Majesty's Government's decision to send convicts to New South Wales.

¹⁵ That is my experience, based on what I absorbed from my 1960s Queensland education.

And it needs to start somewhere.

I might have chosen another starting point if I hadn't heard a BBC podcast about Doggerland, a place that disappeared under the North Sea's rising waters in the Stone Age. Once I'd started on the back story, I caught echoes of things that seemed uncannily familiar. The rising waters that drowned Doggerland around 8200 years ago were part of a global flood that also inundated Australia's continental shelf and created the Northern coastline we know today.

The storms that caused massive loss of life when they smashed into the Dutch coastline were not tropical cyclones. Still, the storm surges that came with them seemed uncomfortably close to those we watch for in the North's cyclone system. I started thinking about river deltas. In Australia, they're relatively few and far between – the product (perhaps) of an ancient tectonic plate more or less with the ocean on three sides as it slowly drifts northwards. Runoff from rainfall on Australia's east coast deposits sand. Currents and the southeast trades shaped it into the beaches between Byron Bay and Queensland's Sunshine Coast, culminating in the massive sand island known to the [Badjula people](#) as *K'gari* until the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* deposited Eliza Fraser on its shores. The sand that formed *K'gari* might have continued moving northwards. However, the coastline changes direction, starting to run to the north-northwest. If the Barrier Reef hadn't been there, the combination of wind and current might have carried the sand along the coast and deposited it somewhere north of Hinchinbrook Island, where the coastline changes direction again.

If that had happened, we'd have surf at Mission Beach and Cooktown, but almost certainly no Burdekin delta. Deltas tend to appear in relatively sheltered waters. The Mississippi flows into the enclosed Caribbean Sea, and the Nile into the Mediterranean. Where rivers flow into a semi-enclosed body of water like the North Sea or the Bay of Bengal, storms coming from the right direction can bring massive loss of life. Without the Reef's protection, would the Burdekin Delta have formed? Even if it did, would it have survived?

Reflecting on things one hadn't considered casts new light on familiar territory. Things *might* have worked out differently if the Netherlanders or their neighbours in France settled in Australia. While they didn't, that's not the only *might have been* that relates to the Netherlands.

Antecedents: Australia suggests His Majesty's Government's decision to send the First Fleet to Botany Bay was a hastily conceived temporary solution to the disturbing possibility that the French might have been contemplating a settlement somewhere in the South Pacific – possibly, but not necessarily, at Botany Bay – simultaneously removing a portion of the nation's criminal classes.

Unsurprisingly, it took a while for the fledgling settlement to find its feet, and a seemingly reasonable assumption failed to turn out as expected. The [New South Wales Marine Corps](#)

that formed the settlement's garrison refused to supervise the convict workforce. In itself, that was not an insuperable obstacle. Arthur Phillip temporarily solved the issue by appointing convict overseers to supervise their peers.¹⁶

His Majesty's Government replaced the Marine garrison with the New South Wales Corps, creating a rod for several early governors' backs. The colony still wasn't entirely self-supporting when Governor John Hunter sent Captain Henry Waterhouse in the *Reliance* and Lieutenant William Kent in the *Supply* on a shopping trip to Cape Town in 1796. Pure-bred merino sheep weren't on Commissary John Palmer's shopping list, so he wasn't interested when Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon's widow offered him the twenty-six sheep she inherited from her late husband.¹⁷

However, Waterhouse and Kent were interested; they bought the animals for £4 per head. They divided the animals between the two ships, and although a slow, stormy return voyage saw more than half the animals perish *en route*, the colony's first merino sheep reached Sydney in June 1797. When they arrived, the New South Wales Corps' John Macarthur offered Waterhouse 15 guineas a head for the surviving dozen or so¹⁸ sheep, but he wanted them all.

Although Waterhouse initially refused the offer and grazed the flock at his 140-acre property on the Parramatta River, he passed the occasional lamb on to Macarthur, Samuel Marsden, Kent and Captain Thomas Rowley, then sold most of the burgeoning flock to William Cox when he returned to England in 1800. Macarthur bought the rest and became widely acknowledged as the father of Australia's wool industry. When Waterhouse returned to England in 1800, William Cox bought most of the flock, including several of the original sheep from the Cape. The remainder went to Macarthur, who became widely acknowledged as the 'father' of Australia's wool industry.

So, while the First Fleet carried sheep along with cattle, pigs, goats and "a very large quantity of poultry of every kind",¹⁹ their offspring were intended for the table. Fine wool

¹⁶ "On day one, the marines went on strike: they refused to supervise the work of the convicts. They refused to supervise the convicts even when they were clearing the ground for the marines' own tents. So Governor Phillip was forced to appoint convicts to oversee the work of other convicts. Their pay was the freedom not to work." John Hirst, *How did a penal colony change peacefully to a democracy? Australian History in Seven Questions*, p. 18.

¹⁷ The sheep were the offspring of two rams and four ewes from a small flock Spain's King Carlos III presented to Prince William of Orange. William sent the animals to Cape Town, where Gordon cared for them until an order from The Hague recalled them in 1791; Gordon returned the breeding stock but kept the offspring.

¹⁸ A dozen sheep @ 15 guineas (£1/1/-) per head would have returned Waterhouse and Kent £180/15/-: a tidy profit on the £104 they outlaid.

¹⁹ Alec H. Chisholm,(ed.), *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 4, p. 72, "First Fleet", cited in the [Wikipedia article on the First Fleet](#). "The first sheep in Australia arrived with the First Fleet in 1788. There were 29 fat-tailed sheep listed on the fleet's manifest, collected from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Intended as a source of meat, they were not well suited to the Australian environment and, like the Indian sheep that were later imported, did not produce good quality wool." (National Museum of Australia: [1797: Introduction of the merino sheep to Australia](#).)

did not enter the equation until the Macarthurs and their cronies transformed His Majesty's Government's modest expectations for a self-supporting settlement with a modest footprint²⁰ where the exiled convicts might provide supplies to passing vessels into a much more extensive, land-hungry operation.

Looking at *migaloo* Australia's beginnings, I am confident that Prime Minister Pitt and his offsidiers would have been quite happy with something like the Dutch settlement from which the merino sheep came. The convicts would support themselves and produce a small surplus to resupply passing vessels bound for China or whatever commercial possibilities emerged in the South Pacific.

New South Wales would have developed differently without the pure-bred sheep we acquired by accident from the Cape. Looking towards The North, one can pencil in a cascade of causes and effects:

- The marines' refusal to supervise convict labour prompts His Majesty's Government to despatch the New South Wales Corps to Sydney.
- Without the New South Wales Corps, there might have been no Rum Rebellion, no John Macarthur to clash with Governor Macquarie, no Bigge Commission to inquire into Macquarie's supposed shortcomings and no convict settlement at Moreton Bay.
- While fine wool and merino sheep might have subsequently entered the equation, with pastoralists spilling out across the landscape from the settlement's original small footprint, without the port at Moreton Bay, we would be looking at a different Queensland and (probably) a very different-looking North.

Aspects of those matters shaped much of the content in **Antecedents: Australia**. And provide grist for an inquisitive investigator's mill without answering the questions I started with.

Who were those Dutchmen who encountered Australia's coast?

Why didn't they pay more attention to what they "discovered"?

More significantly, how did a tiny population on Europe's margins sustain an eighty-year war of independence against the continent's superpower?

²⁰ "New South Wales did not begin as a penal colony; it is better to think a bit beginning as a colony of convicts ... British officials in 1786 could not conceive of ... a society of warders and prisoners designed for punishment and control, as the French ran much later on devils island. In Britain in the 18th century there was no institutional treatment of convicted criminals; they were flogged or hanged or sent to the American colonies." John Hirst, *How did a penal colony change peacefully to a democracy?* **Australian History in Seven Questions**, pp. 17-18.

Shaping The Land

Few countries exist where the hand of man has exerted a greater formative influence in the shaping of the landscape. Over half of the Netherlands would be liable to sea or river flooding without dikes, and even the higher sands have been converted into farmland only at the cost of great and long-continued effort.²¹

Since a region's geography significantly influences what happens there, it seems a logical starting point, particularly for those unfamiliar with the lie of the land. The best starting point is the geological basin²² on Europe's continental shelf north of the Netherlands between Norway and Denmark in the east and the British Isles in the west. It covers around 570,000 square kilometres, around one thousand kilometres from north to south and six hundred at its widest point. Since its estimated volume is about 54,000 cubic kilometres, some basic mathematics suggests it is shallow. The same source suggests an average depth of 90 metres.²³ In its centre, between fifteen and thirty metres below the surface, a vast moraine of unconsolidated glacial debris (the Dogger Bank) provides the North Sea's finest fishing location and an ideal starting point for the following narrative.

The North Sea receives water from various watersheds across Europe and the British Isles, with significant river sources running into its southwest corner and Southern Bight.²⁴ The most important is the Rhine, which originates in the south-eastern Swiss Alps, drains an area of 9,973 square kilometres and is central and western Europe's second-longest river (after the Danube) at around 1230 kilometres in length. The name derives from the Celtic/Gaulish *Rēnos*, which Roman-era geographers rendered as *Ῥῆνος* (*Rhēnos*, Greek) or *Rhenus* in Latin. At that time, the river was a significant part of the Roman Empire's northern inland boundary, and the river has been a vital waterway ever since.

After following a northward course for most of its length, the Rhine turns west at the Netherlands' border, then merges with the Meuse and Scheldt to create Europe's largest river delta with an area of more than 25,000 square kilometres and a multitude of islands and branches. As the waters cross the Dutch-German border, they enter an almost bewildering maze of wetlands and water. At Millingen aan de Rijn, the stream splits into the Waal and Nederrijn ("Nether Rhine"). Then, near Arnhem, the IJssel branches off from the Nederrijn to create a third significant stream. From there, the various branches change names.

²¹ Audrey M. Lambert, **The Making of the Dutch landscape: an historical geography of the Netherlands**, ix.)

²² Geological basins are large, low-lying areas or depressions, usually formed by tectonic processes acting on the Earth's crust, that provide space for sediment to collect.

²³ Figures from [Wikipedia](#).

²⁴ With the focus on the Netherlands, the Thames, Humber, and the streams that flow into The Wash are of incidental interest. The focus here is on the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt, with occasional glances towards the Weser and the Elbe.

The southernmost branch starts as the Waal but becomes the Boven Merwede ("Upper Merwede"), Beneden Merwede ("Lower Merwede"),²⁵ Noord ("the North"),²⁶ Nieuwe Maas ("New Meuse"), Het Scheur ("the Rip") and Nieuwe Waterweg ("New Waterway") on its way to the North Sea. In the middle, the Nederrijn becomes the Lek, then joins the Noord to form the Nieuwe Maas, while the northern flow remains the IJssel until it flows into the IJsselmeer.²⁷

South of the Rhine, the 925-kilometre-long Meuse or Maas rises in France and flows through Belgium and the Netherlands before draining into the North Sea through the middle of the Rhine–Meuse–Scheldt delta.

The delta's third source, the Scheldt (Dutch: Schelde)²⁸, is shorter again. It rises in northern France and flows through western Belgium and the southwestern Netherlands before adding to the jumble of channels and islands in the delta's three-way confluence.

Human intervention over recent centuries has reshaped and reconfigured the delta to an extent that would have been unimaginable in medieval times. The delta's medieval landscape would have been unfamiliar to a Roman time traveller. The constant interaction of wind, currents, tide, waterborne silt, and the occasional storm modified the delta's landscape. The tide influenced matters as far inland as Nijmegen until the construction of the Delta Works in the second half of the 20th century.

Beyond the delta, the North Sea Basin, formed during the Triassic and Jurassic periods, has received sediment from the streams ever since. For a simplified version of the basin's geography, liken it to the blade of a rectangular shovel, slightly larger than the North Sea (perhaps 1200 kilometres by 750) with raised edges.²⁹

²⁵ The Nieuwe Merwede ("New Merwede") branches off from where the Boven changes to the Beneden Merwede.

²⁶ The Oude Maas ("Old Meuse") branches off where the southern branch changes from Beneden Merwede into Noord. The ordtse Kil, then branches off the Oude Maas.

²⁷ The IJsselmeer (in English Lake IJssel) covers an area of 1,100 square kilometres, with an average depth of 4.5 metres. As the latest incarnation of a complex of lakes Roman geographer Pomponius Mela called *Lacus Flevo* (subsequently the Almere and the Zuiderzee), it was formed in 1932 when a 32-kilometre dyke connected Friesland and North Holland on either side of the former Zuiderzee. After fresh river water flushed out the saltwater, more than half of the remaining lake was drained, creating almost two thousand square kilometres of polders that subsequently became a new province of the Netherlands (Flevoland). ([Wikipedia](#); Encyclopedia [Britannica](#))

²⁸ From an adjective corresponding to Old English *sceald* ("shallow"), Modern English *shoal*, Low German *schol*, West Frisian *skol*, and obsolete Swedish *skäll* ("thin"). ([Wikipedia](#)) Despite the relatively modest etymology, the river was an important strategic and commercial waterway through Roman and medieval times, delivering traders and merchandise to [Ghent](#) and later to [Antwerp](#).

²⁹ The coastlines of Denmark and Norway to the east; the British Isles to the west. As described below, Britain initially connected to the continental land mass.

Our notional shovel's blade would join the handle around the heavily forested rolling hills and ridges of the Ardennes in southwest Belgium and Luxembourg. The Rhine would flow onto the blade on the right-hand side. The Meuse would enter through the handle, with the Scheldt coming in on the left-hand side.

While the three streams deposited their silt in the basin, the sea level rose and fell through the most recent period of extensive glaciation from the beginning of the Pleistocene epoch.³⁰

At least four separate glaciations saw ice caps extend as far south as 40 degrees north latitude³¹ in mountainous areas.

When they did, the North Sea's waters receded to a line north of the Dogger Bank from the mouth of the Humber in England to Denmark's Cape Skagerrak. The sea level dropped as the ice caps expanded, exposing much of the continental margins.

Through the Pleistocene, the Rhine followed a course to the northwest through the present North Sea until around 450,000 years ago, when ice blocked the outlet into the Atlantic. A large lake developed behind the ice dam and eventually overflowed towards the southwest, creating the English Channel. As a result, the Rhine's new outlet was offshore from Brest in France and the Thames, and the Seine became tributaries to the Rhine. At that point, the English Channel, the Irish Channel, and most of the North Sea were almost completely exposed, and the sea level was approximately 120 metres lower than it is today.

The most recent glacial period began around 74,000 BP. It lasted until the end of the Pleistocene with two very cold phases, peaking around 70,000 and around 29,000–24,000 BP. Each time the ice advanced, enormous ice masses descended from the mountains of Scandinavia, Scotland, and northern England as plants and animals retreated southwards ahead of the advancing glaciers, which delivered stones and sand from Scandinavia to what became Gelderland, Overijssel, and Drente. While the North Sea basin began as a relatively flat alluvial basin, pressure from the ice moulded that material into ranges of low hills.

³⁰ from the Greek *pleīstos*, ("most") and *kainós* ("new") to give "Most New" or "Newest" in contrast to the preceding Pliocene ("newer") and the subsequent Holocene ("wholly or entirely new"). (**Shorter Oxford Dictionary**) Since it was the planet's most recent period of extensive glaciation, the Pleistocene is often colloquially referred to as the Ice Age. It lasted from about 2,580,000 years B.P. to 11,700 years B.P.

³¹ That would have brought the icecap well into the uplands of Spain, Italy and Greece: Madrid, Naples, and Thessaloniki lie north of the 40th parallel.

Around twenty thousand years ago, during the Last Glacial Maximum,³² ice covered much of the northern hemisphere, and an enormous tundra with Ice Age flora and fauna stretched across middle Europe, from Asia to the Atlantic Ocean. The mammoths that had previously inhabited the continental steppes made way for reindeer, which could find food on the tundra. Cro-magnon hunters arrived with the reindeer and made their homes on the edge of the tundra, high enough to be protected against floods but close to fresh water.

At that point, the Eurasian ice sheet complex spanned an area from Ireland to Novaya Zemlya, with the southern boundary in Denmark, Germany, and Western Poland. The amount of new land exposed at the lowest sea level on the edges of Europe has been estimated at around 2.5 million square kilometres,³³ including all of the North Sea, except a narrow marine corridor around the coast of Norway.

Much of it was well-watered and well-stocked with plants and animals. It would have been more attractive to human exploitation than the largely icebound hinterlands.³⁴ Then, as northwestern Europe's climate grew steadily warmer, frozen subsoil and alpine glaciers began to thaw and melt. Winter snow that had previously gone into those glaciers now melted in spring. Melting ice freed masses of water, the sea level rose, and the English Channel and North Sea were inundated again. Meltwater, adding to the ocean, drowned the former coasts, and the land began to sink.

Around 13,000 BP, the rate of warming quickened, and tundra gave way to open forest. Four thousand years later, Europe was fully forested. In between, as the Rhine estuary retreated through the Strait of Dover, dry land in the southern part of the North Sea still connected Europe and Britain. But Doggerland's days were numbered. Events associated with the last significant rise in sea levels saw it submerged around nine thousand years ago. By about 7500 years ago, the interaction of tides, currents and landforms, tectonic subsidence, slowly rising sea levels and sedimentation from the rivers were more or less in balance. While the seas were still rising, the rate was slower.

³² "The so-called LGM can be defined variously as the maximum volume of global ice on land, the time or period of maximum reduction in global sea level, the time of the lowest temperature reached in a region, or the maximum extent of continental and shelf ice in a region. These events may have considerable duration... within the maximum range of about 27 ka B.P. to 17 ka B.P. In general, the initiation of final melting and the start of global sea-level rise is usually quoted in the range 21 ka B.P. to 18 ka B.P." (Nicholas C. Flemming et al. (eds), **Submerged Landscapes of the European Continental Shelf: Quaternary Paleoenvironments**, p. 7.

³³ Around 40% of present-day Europe (excluding European Russia).

³⁴ Geoff Bailey et al., *The Archaeology of Europe's Drowned Landscapes: Introduction and Overview*, p. 2; "the human and pre-human occupation of this large land area has a profound impact on our understanding of how the European continent was occupied and exploited by successive hominins throughout the last million years and the origins of early maritime skills and exploitation of marine resources." (Nicholas C. Flemming et al., *Non-Cultural Processes of Site Formation, Preservation and Destruction*, p. 52.)

Although the land was slowly subsiding, ³⁵ the rivers deposited new sediments to help fill a temporary void. Still, the sedimentation could not keep[up with the sea's gradual rise as it submerged the northern Netherlands up to the sandy hills in the country's east. So around 5000 BCE, the waters covered Zeeland, Holland, Utrecht and parts of Friesland and Groningen. They may have reached Brabant and Limburg. Vague references in medieval legends describe Tongeren in Limburg as a coastal village.

In the meantime, the rising seas had introduced a new element into the complex equations of an ever-evolving coastline. As the coastline retreated eastwards along the English Channel, opening the Straits of Dover and turning the valley between the chalk cliffs in Kent and Artois into an arm of the sea, the Atlantic currents had a new inlet into the North Sea. The prevailing westerly winds deposited sand taken up in mid-Channel in long curves along the eastern shore in an uninterrupted line of dunes, forming Holland's Westwall.

On the other side of the dunes, the principal agency distributing sediment across the delta has been shifting river channels to new locations on the floodplain. Over the past 6,000 years, approximately eighty realignments have occurred.

After 3000 BP, human activities added another layer to the mosaic. Upstream, Bronze Age land clearing increased the Rhine's sediment load enormously and accelerated the delta's growth. That, in turn, increased flooding and ended peat formation. Direct human impact in the delta began with peat mining for salt and fuel from Roman times onward, followed by embankments along the significant distributaries and damming of minor distributaries, which took place in the 11-13th century AD. After that, digging canals, straightening bends, and building groynes helped to prevent the river's channels from migrating or silting up.

³⁵ By about 1-3 cm each century; about a metre over the last three thousand years. ([Wikipedia](#))

A Matter of Monikers

Until the 12th century, the Netherlands did not exist either as a political or as a cultural unit. The area now included within the boundaries of the Netherland state was in no way distinct from the adjacent territories.³⁶

Before the end of the Middle Ages, the *Low Countries*³⁷ generally referred to the low-lying areas around the Rhine-Maas-Scheldt delta. Germany's Westphalia and Lower Rhineland were as much part of the Low Countries as the present-day Netherlands. This situation persisted until the sixteenth century when the term *Netherlands* acquired a more specific meaning: the region adjoining the North Sea whose various parts were under Habsburg rule. Until then, Holland and Zeeland in the north were part of the *Low Countries*. So was Brabant. While Utrecht, Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe, Overijssel and part of Gelderland were only added in the sixteenth century, parts of Limburg remained outside until after the French Revolution. So did Liege.

Today, the three *Benelux* countries³⁸ cover the wider area once referred to as the Netherlands or Low Countries, a corner of the lower Rhine's great plain open to invasion from all sides. Although the name once referred to something substantially more extensive, the modern kingdom of the Netherlands covers just under 35,500 square kilometres³⁹

So, what are the Netherlands?

The name derives from the location. *Nederland* is the lowland, as opposed to the *overland* or uplands in the interior. Initially, the term was used in a general sense.

When an anonymous German poet described the **Nibelungenlied**⁴⁰ epic's hero Siegfried as *helt von Niderland*,⁴¹ he was referring to the great plain around the lower Rhine, as opposed to the river's upper reaches where the hero's adventures occurred.

³⁶ Bernard H. M. Vlekke, **Evolution of the Dutch Nation**, p. 51.

³⁷ Dutch: *de Lage Landen*, French: *les Pays-Bas*; German: *Niederlande*/. In modern Dutch, *de Lage Landen* refers to the Low Countries, with *De Nederlanden* used for Charles V's 16th-century domains (the historic Low Countries). *Nederland* is the regular Dutch name for their country. However, their official name for the Dutch kingdom is still *Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, based on the 19th-century origins of a kingdom which originally included modern-day Belgium.

³⁸ Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

³⁹ 13,700 square miles. By comparison, that's an area roughly equal to that of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut in the northeastern corner of the United States.

⁴⁰ A 13th-century German epic about the Nibelungs (an underground race of dwarfs in German mythology, ruled by Nibelung, king of Nibelheim (the land of mist), who guarded a hoard of gold and treasure, sought and eventually taken by the hero Siegfried.) (**Wikipedia**; **Encyclopedia Britannica**)

⁴¹ "is from/hails from the *Niderland*" ([Google Translate](#))

From there, things shrank. Gradually, *Niderland* or *Nederland* came to refer specifically to the delta formed by the Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt, which Dutch medieval chroniclers called the lowlands along the sea," the forerunner of the later "Low Countries." By 1350, a cleric from the lowlands along the sea "recognised as his fatherland only the country of Holland, a narrow strip of land from the mouth of the Scheldt to the Zuiderzee." ⁴²

A century later, the *Nederlands* were the western coastal provinces of Flanders, Brabant, Holland, and Utrecht. To their inhabitants, the northeastern districts of the modern Netherlands – from Guelders to Groningen – were part of the linguistically different *Overland* or *Oostland*. ⁴³

However, by the 16th century, with the modern-day Netherlands and Belgium unified under Burgundian and, later, Hapsburg rule, *the Netherlands* came to refer to the combined territory of both later states and a substantial slice of modern-day France.

Confused? That's hardly surprising. Names and borders in this part of the world have been fluid.

For example, modern-day Flanders lies entirely within Belgium's borders. However, around 900 CE, the historic County of Flanders extended from the Strait of Dover to the Scheldt estuary, incorporating parts of France and the modern-day Netherlands.

After Julius Caesar's battles with the "Belgae," the Romans used "Belgica" to refer to the whole territory from the Seine to the Rhine.

That name remained in ecclesiastical use until well into the Middle Ages before dropping out of use for a couple of centuries.

When a new geopolitical entity needed a name in 1830, it became modern-day Belgium.

In the interim, "Belgica" gave way to Tacitus' "Batavia." At the same time, outsiders tended to conflate the names of particular provinces with the broader region.

Since Flanders was the dominant commercial force in northwestern Europe through the Middle Ages, "Flemings" came to signify traders and merchants from all over the Low Countries.

That situation persisted until the 19th-century separation, when "Flemings" reverted to the common term for Belgian Dutch speakers.

Similarly, Holland became the dominant northern province after the Burgundian/Hapsburg Netherlands split.

⁴² Bernard H. M. Vlekke, **Evolution of the Dutch Nation**, p. ix.

⁴³ The eastern plain between the Zuiderzee and the Oder, where the inhabitants spoke "Low Saxon" or "Overlandish" rather than "Dutch".

Netherlanders from the north became known as "Hollanders," regardless of their provincial origins.

So, historically, we have a variety of names applying within a region without clear geographic boundaries to the south, where it extends into France and Luxemburg.

To the east, it creeps into Germany.

The western boundary lies beyond modern-day Belgium's borders.

Ethnically and linguistically, the Netherlanders have much in common with their continental neighbours and those on the other side of the North Sea.

The Dutch language slots between English and High German; the local language in Friesland links to old Anglo-Saxon; elsewhere, regional dialects approach the Low German spoken across the eastern border.