

# 'Imaginography': sensational pseudo-discoveries

W. A. R. Richardson

The latter half of the 20th Century has witnessed a veritable spate of reports in the press about the finding of historical artifacts concerning whose significance sensational claims have been made.

In Australia, the most persistent of these, periodically revived from the last century, is the so-called 'Mahogany Ship' at Warrnambool. Despite its sighting a century and a half ago, even a vast reward offered by the Victorian government has failed to bring it to light for examination. It therefore provides plenty of scope for its romantic identification as a 16th century Portuguese or Spanish vessel, and is an excellent bait to draw tourists to the Warrnambool maritime museum. Again from the last century are the 'Geelong Keys', but they also have conveniently vanished. Then there are the 'Portuguese' 16th Century cannon which rather inconveniently survived, for metallurgical investigation showed them to be 18th Century SE Asian copies, probably left on the Western Australian coast by Macassan trepang fishermen. Kenneth McIntyre's Bittangabee 'fort' turned out to be the remains of a never completed building erected by the Imlay brothers in the 1830s or 1840s.

Several years ago there was a report of the discovery of 'Portuguese' coins by an Italian migrant fisherman off the South Australian coast. However, he returned to Italy with them before they could be reliably examined. Nearly two years ago, an old 'Portuguese' coin was reportedly found on the Victorian coast by someone who declined to properly identify himself, and it was suggested that his find was 'proof' that a 16th Century Portuguese vessel had been responsible for leaving it there. However, its coats of arms were undoubtedly Spanish, not Portuguese. Analysis has shown it to be made from a low silver alloy, and therefore it is almost certainly a copy of a Spanish coin of the reign of Philip II, probably from a Spanish American mint. The anonymity of the finder makes one suspicious of its origin and the supposed circumstances of its finding. Some enthusiasts are not averse to planting 'evidence'.

Carl von Brandenstein has claimed that some Western Australian Aboriginal languages contained words of Portuguese origin. Even if this should prove true, it could well be explained by aboriginal contact with Macassan trepang fishermen who were long in contact with the Portuguese. Nevertheless, he has also been quoted by the Portuguese language press as claiming that the Portuguese had a colony on the West Australian coast for some 70 years in the 16th Century, together with African slaves.

Similar, though in many ways more extravagant sorts of claims have been made, both in North and South America, by Barry Fell, for example, and in Australia by Rex Gilroy. Most recently, a New Zealander, Ross

Wiseman, has cashed in on the apparently boundless market for historical sensations, attaching romantic, speculative significance to a helmet, a stone bird, rats, a Tamil bell, etc, thereby asserting claims that Arabs, Phoenicians and others reached New Zealand long before the Maoris.

## Map 'interpretation'

Map 'interpretation' has produced some of the most astonishing conjectural claims, all based on perceived similarities between coastlines on old maps and imagined 'corresponding' coastlines on modern maps.

Three Argentine authors, Dick Edgar Ilbarra Grasso, Paul Gallez and Enrique de Gandía have stated that what appears to be an extra, nonexistent, SE Asian peninsula, on world maps of c. 1489 by the German cartographer Henricus Martellus is really a representation of South America, dating from before Columbus. This claim is presented as proven fact by the Colombian, Gustavo Vargas Martínez, yet the inscriptions clearly disprove its validity. Another Argentine, Demetrio Charalambous, has recently claimed that two river systems, in North and South America, on one world map of 1527 by the Portuguese cartographer, Diogo Ribeiro, are so accurately depicted that they must have been the result of centuries of exploration. As no such maps were produced by native American civilizations, he claims that Ribeiro must have somehow laid hands on Phoenician maps which were removed from King Solomon's library in Jerusalem and later taken to Portugal by the Templars. An American, Mark A. McMenamin, has recently claimed that minute maps including America are depicted on some Carthaginian coins. Charles Hagood's claims in connection with the Piri Reis map of 1513 are well known. So also are those maintaining that the southern 'continent' on Oronce Fine's world map of 1531 is such an accurate depiction of the outline of the underlying land mass of Antarctica that it must have been copied from a map or maps made during the times of 'the ancient sea kings' before it was covered by ice.

So far as supposedly early maps of Australia and New Zealand are concerned, there was George Collingridge's pioneering book (1895), followed in the last quarter of this century by the publications of Kenneth McIntyre (1977), Roger Hervé (1982), Lawrence FitzGerald (1984) and Eric Whitehouse (1994). There have been numerous articles from well before Collingridge's time. The two most recent books of this genre are those by Ross Wiseman (1996 and 1998), understandably concerned mainly with New Zealand. His claim of a discovery of New Zealand by Juan Fernández in 1567 is based mainly on an imaginative interpretation of part of a book by the



Chilean author, J. T. Medina, which he apparently had to have translated from the Spanish.

## Europeans in Australia

The first reliably documented evidence of the presence of Europeans on the Australian coast is the arrival of the Dutch vessel, the *Duyfken*, under the command of Willem Janszoon, on the west coast of the Cape York Peninsula in 1606. The same year, Torres passed through the strait that bears his name between Cape York and New Guinea. If he did see the tip of Cape York, it would merely have appeared to be yet another island. Also in 1606, Pedro Fernandes de Queirós discovered land which he named *la Australia del Espíritu Santo*, in punning homage to Philip III of Spain, who was of the House of *Austria*. During the last century, Cardinal Moran, utterly disregarding Queirós's own statement regarding the latitude of his discovery, proclaimed it to be Australia, and managed to get this 'fact' into school textbooks of the time. It was actually the island of *Espíritu Santo* in what is now Vanuatu. Yet such is the influence of Cardinal Moran that a Spanish migrant association here has called itself 'The Brotherhood of the Land of the Holy Spirit'.

The Portuguese appear to have got to Timor, some 450 kilometres from the north-west coast of Australia, in 1516. This proximity has suggested to some that they must have discovered at least that bit of Australia. However, since exploration was only of interest to them if it had prospects of commercial profit, there was no conceivable motive for their having come here, even supposing they learned about it from the Timorese.

Suggested strategic motivation is unconvincing conjecture. There is not a single surviving map or document of Portuguese origin that gives any evidence that substantiates their early arrival here. There was not even any Portuguese claim to have been the first Europeans here until well after the British hydrographer Alexander Dalrymple implied it in 1776, six years after Captain Cook's voyage along Australia's east coast.

The most apparently convincing claims about the supposed arrival of Europeans in Australia before the Dutch are based on the so-called Dieppe maps, made in France in the mid-16th Century. However, before examining their 'evidence', two other commonly accepted misconceptions regarding supposed early depictions of Australia should be briefly mentioned. One concerns the land mass bearing an admittedly remarkable resemblance to Western Australia that figures on Heinrich Bünting's world map of 1581. In view of the appallingly bad depiction of the then known world, it is utterly illogical to maintain that the only 'accurately mapped part of the world at that time was Australia's west coast.

The second misconception concerns that part of Mercator's southern continent south of Indonesia. It has been known for well over a century that Mercator's

*Locach, Beach, Java Minor*, etc., have nothing whatsoever to do with Australia, but are his imaginative representations of places in SE Asia which, owing to printers' errors in Latin editions of Marco Polo's *Travels* published in 1532, appeared to be south of Java, rather than south of Champa (Central Vietnam), as they were originally correctly described.

## Wishful thinking

Eric Whitehouse makes claims concerning many maps, including the Dieppe ones, but his book is the most extreme example of uninformed wishful thinking on the subject. It abounds in misprints and erratic dating. Any attempt to correct the plethora of misinformation provided would require an article of substantial length.

The most obviously incredible feature of the book is the author's ability to 'see' Australia on dozens of early maps, utterly ignoring all the inscriptions. He just superimposes Australian names wherever his imagination suggests. For example, he interprets what is clearly identified as Java on several maps as Arnhem Land, while several versions of Ptolemy's *Taprobana* (Sri Lanka) are presented as Australia. The whole length of Mercator's southern continent, in several different versions, is identified as parts of Australia's coastline, despite the fact that it has long been known that all of it is fictitious, except for the north coast of Tierra del Fuego, the inscriptions on which Whitehouse ignores. His 'Toscanelli map' of 'Australia' is actually a vast enlargement of one minute part of the 'Genoese' world map of 1457. The identification of 'Australia' is sheer fantasy. The attribution of the map to Toscanelli is almost undoubtedly false, and the date given, 1474, is definitely wrong, owing to the author's careless misreading of his source text. Ross Wiseman actually reproduces this figment of Whitehouse's imagination, presenting him as an authority, a clear case of the visionary leading the visionary.

## *Jave-la-Grande*

The Dieppe maps all show, south of Indonesia, what appears to be a large land mass, named *Jave-la-Grande* on some, but by no means all of them (see map). Its north coast is composed of the north, east and west coasts of Java and Sumbawa. Its west coast trends generally southward from the western end of Java, from which it is separated by a strait. Its east coast extends roughly southeastwards from the east coast of Sumbawa. There is admittedly some similarity in outline between the upper part of *Jave-la-Grande*'s east coast and the 'corresponding' Australian coastline. However, there is nothing on Australia's east coast even vaguely resembling the vast, triangular *cap de fremose* promontory that constitutes the lower section of that coast on the Dieppe maps. *Jave-la-Grande* has no south coast on any of them, but some, for reasons which are explained below, join the land mass up, both eastward and westwards, to the north coast of Tierra del Fuego, via an obviously hypothetical coastline.



The names on the north coast of what is perceived by many as being Australia are those of places on the north coasts of Java and Sumbawa. The names on the east and west coasts are either in French, Portuguese, Gallicised Portuguese, or in a few cases, are not in any immediately identifiable language. Since Portuguese ships were almost certainly the first European vessels to reach SE Asia and Indonesia, it seemed self-evident to Dalrymple that *Jave-la-Grande* was Australia, charted by the Portuguese before the appearance of the Dieppe maps in the mid-16th Century. Since his day, a sometimes heated debate has continued between the 'believers' in the Portuguese priority theory and the sceptics. The 'believers' have had to try to explain why what they maintain is Australia is some 25° too far west, so far, in fact that Timor appears off its NE coast, several degrees too far north, and why it is 'merged' into Java and Sumbawa. They suggest that French cartographers obtained a Portuguese map of Australia and, in trying to incorporate it on a world map, confused Arnhem Land and Cape York with Java and Sumbawa.

No less than four different 'solutions' have been proposed by the 'believers', in their attempts to explain away the inconvenient anomaly of the huge *cap de fremose* triangle. Roger Hervé in 1955, suggested that it was the southern tip of Tasmania misplaced, but in 1982 changed his mind, and opted for the East Cape of New Zealand's North Island. Lawrence FitzGerald suggested the NE part of Tasmania. Ian McKiggan and Kenneth McIntyre, though for different reasons, declared it to be Cape Howe, on the border between Victoria and New South Wales. Ross Wiseman, being a New Zealander, has followed Hervé's second option, though elaborating upon it in inventive detail. This interesting lack of consensus demonstrates clearly the active imaginations and wishful thinking of the 'believers'.

Kenneth McIntyre's book has undoubtedly been the most influential one, for he succeeded in getting its revised, paperback edition set as a history text in Victorian secondary schools for a number of years, no serious countervailing evidence being provided for students. His identification of *cap de fremose* as Cape Howe and SE Australia required some ingenious explanation, because the angle of the former significantly failed to correspond to that of the latter. So he invented, and dogmatically propounded a made-to-measure explanation. He maintained that Portuguese cartographers used to place all new information initially on globes. Then, he states, to make their charts, they peeled off the individual gores, laid them flat, and 'vamped in freehand links' to join up any coastlines broken in the process. McIntyre applied this method, which he astonishingly stated, on no authority whatsoever, had had 'a long and honoured place in the history of cartography', to one part of the world, and one part only, namely the base of the problematic *cap de fremose* triangle. To his own satisfaction, he succeeded in making the angles of *cap de fremose* and SE Australia

more or less coincide. It seems incredible that his readers can have fallen for this explanation. Does he, do they, really believe that Portuguese cartographers can have been so stupid? Three of the foremost historians of cartography whom I have consulted unanimously state that they do not know of one single map or chart that can be shown to have been constructed in this ridiculous manner. McIntyre's 'explanation' is utterly fictitious, manufactured to explain away a problem which confounded his proposed identification. He traded on the trusting nature of his readers, and by no means only in this case.

## Map

My map superimposing *Jave-la-Grande* on the modern map is based on the need to assume that one coast which the two maps are known to have in common are on the same scale, namely the north coasts of Java and Sumbawa. This inevitably entails the presumption that the latitude scales of both are also the same. In fact, they are not. On the superimposition, Cape Howe and *cap de fremose* appear to be nearly in the same latitude. They are not. *Cap de fremose* on the Dieppe maps is actually some 9° further south than Cape Howe. In the early 16th Century Portuguese navigators could measure latitude to within one degree, yet McIntyre, citing a 7° difference, cursorily glosses over even that huge discrepancy as 'a tolerable error'.

Two specious explanations are frequently cited for the lack of any hard evidence to justify the claim of Portuguese priority in the 'discovery' of Australia. One is the destruction of the *Casa da India* records in the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Since there is not one iota of proof that an such evidence had existed there prior to the earthquake, that excuse is obviously invalid. The other supposed explanation is the Portuguese government's policy of secrecy. Significant numbers of 16th Century Portuguese charts and sailing directions covering the coasts of Brazil, Africa and Asia have survived to this day. If the policy was so conspicuously unsuccessful on such strategically and economically important routes, it is hardly logical to claim its complete success in 'Australian' waters. In any case, many foreign sailors worked on Portuguese ships, diplomats succeeded in acquiring such 'top secret' information as the 'Cantino' world map of 1502, while the Dutchman, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, actually published Portuguese pilots' sailing directions which he presumerably obtained by bribery. What is more, a number of Portuguese cartographers went abroad to work for foreign governments, especially in Spain and France.

Any hypothesis, such as the assumption that the land mass of *Jave-la-Grande* is Australia, should be tested by honest, creditworthy scholarship. Sensationalism, wishful thinking, circular argumentation, fabricated or doctored evidence, and the ignoring or suppression of contrary evidence will not do.

The identification of enigmatic coastlines on early maps



is not reliably achieved by an examination of coastal outlines alone. Many were extremely inaccurate, many misplaced, and a number fictitious. Only a critical examination of the inscriptions can hope to establish what the cartographers involved were depicting, or thought they were depicting. Such an examination demands of the researcher expertise in two specific fields, a knowledge of palaeography and the historical linguistics of the languages concerned. With one or two naive exceptions, all the 'believers' in the *Jave-la-Grande* = Australia equation ignored the inscriptions.

Kenneth McIntyre went so far as to specifically dismiss place-name evidence as being too difficult, both for himself and for his readers! If the inscriptions cannot be read correctly, or cases of copyists' errors identified, the potential evidence cannot be detected. Palaeographic expertise is needed even in the case of early printed maps, for many contain errors due to the printers' inability to decipher their manuscript copy. The transference of lower case letters to capitals was a significant cause of error. Detailed knowledge of the historical development of the languages involved is

necessary because most have changed enormously over the years, not least in spelling, which until very recently was notoriously erratic. There are other vital requirements. One is a close acquaintance with potential manuscript and printed sources, such as travel literature and sailing directions, from which the cartographers may have derived information. Variant versions need to be examined, and all read in the original languages. Furthermore, one always has to bear in mind that such information was frequently highly dubious, if not actually fictitious. Very few early maps were surveyed as we understand the term, and many were the cartographers' imaginative, graphic interpretations of written descriptions.

The west coast of *Jave-la-Grande* was identified as being part of SW Java, from coastal similarities alone, by Edward Heawood in 1899, and by Andrew Sharp in



The outline of *Jave-la-Grande* and offshore islands on the Dauphin (Harleian) map superimposed on the modern outline of SE Asia and Australia, assuming that the north coasts of Java and Sumbawa should coincide on both. This inevitably entails the assumption that the latitude scales on both maps are the same. They are not. The headland of *cap de fremose* on the Dauphin map is some 9° further south than it appears in this superimposition. (Courtesy of Jens Smith)

1963, but neither attempted to make sense of the corrupt inscriptions that unquestionably validate that identification. Neither of their suggestions regarding the true identity of *Jave-la-Grande's* east coast, nor the superficially more convincing one made by G. R. Crone in 1972, are supported by the inscriptions. On the other hand, the identification of the puzzling *cap de fremose* promontory and the coast north of it as being the Mekong delta and Vietnam is confirmed by the evidence of the inscriptions.

The ignorant and careless manuscript copying of unfamiliar material from one early chart to another inevitably led to the most astonishing transformations. The material was frequently in a language foreign to the copyist, at a time when no language had a standard spelling, and the handwriting was often difficult to decipher. A copyist would happily render an unfamiliar



foreign word by one in his own language which 'looked' like, or was perceived to 'sound' like it. Examples are legion.

The *Jave-la-Grande* inscriptions have been examined in detail elsewhere.\* A few brief examples may suffice here. The spellings vary from map to map. I have selected here those on the so-called Dauphin, or Harleian map. There are three features on the west coast which identify it. One is the word *gao* attached to a bay. It is a variant spelling of the Portuguese word *jao* 'Javanese'. Another is what appears to read *Quabesequiesce*, though Kenneth McIntyre read it as *Quabesegmesce*. This 'name', as it stands, bears no resemblance to any word in French or Portuguese, nor to any place-name in Java or anywhere else in the vicinity, so at first sight it appears to be nonsense. However, the first six letters appear in an Elizabethan English translation of Linschoten's *Itinerario* in the 1590s, in which he published not only supposedly secret Portuguese sailing directions, but also details of the spice trade. In the Dutch original it appeared as *quabeb*. It is the name of a now rather obscure spice, *cubeb* in English, which was obtainable exclusively in Sunda, the western third of Java. The rest of the 'word', miscopied by the French, must have been the Portuguese words *aqui esta* 'is here'. Several early Portuguese charts, including the 'Cantino', identified the sources of desirable products. The other west coast inscription is not *Hame de Sylla*, as misread by McIntyre, but *Havre* [i.e. *havre*] *de Sylla* 'harbour of Sylla'. This, together with the apparent 'word' *cap*, just below it, attached to a nameless cape, identifies the only significant port on the south coast of Java, now spelled *Cilacap*. Such ignorant joining of adjacent words, or division of long ones was remarkably common.

The miscopied names on the east coast, and those of islands offshore are somewhat more complicated to explain; three may suffice here. Off the NE coast of *Jave-la-Grande* is the *ye de Aliofer*. This is a slightly miscopied version of the Portuguese word *aljofar* 'seed pearl', which was attached to the island of Hainan on numerous Portuguese maps, and later, in very corrupt forms, on Dutch ones, because they were plentiful there. *Coste dangereuse* 'dangerous coast' is derived from the Portuguese inscription *costa dauarela* (i.e. *costa da varela*), *varela* then being the name of the most easterly cape on the coast of Vietnam. Evidently the Portuguese manuscript letters *u* and *l* were misread as *n* and the old long letter *s*, thus suggesting to the French their word *dangereuse*, so 'dangerous coast'. One Dieppe map put *perilleuse*, a synonym, instead. The frequently made assertion that this identifies the Great Barrier Reef coast is sheer wishful thinking. That coast is not the only dangerous coast in the world. *Coste des herbaiges* 'coast of grass lands' is a French rendering of the Portuguese inscription *costa de champa* 'coast of champa'. Champa was a kingdom in central Vietnam. The French apparently thought that the word *champa* was a

miscopying of their word *champs* 'fields', but transcribed it by a near synonym, *herbaiges* 'grass lands'.

A few years ago, in a letter to *The Bulletin*, I was accused of demonstrating 'one of the worst traits of intellectual snobbery—that is, bending the facts to suit [my] beliefs'. The writer was evidently unaware that my research into the place-names on *Jave-la-Grande* was initially undertaken in 1980, in an attempt to substantiate the *Jave-la-Grande* = Australia theory, and that I was somewhat disappointed when the evidence failed to do so. One wonders whether the author of the letter would have approved of my 'bending the facts' if, by so doing, I had managed to confirm his beliefs! He clearly knew nothing of early charts, nothing of palaeography, and nothing of the changes undergone by place names over the years.

The only effective, convincing counter to my two coastal identifications would be if someone could not merely demolish my place-name interpretations one by one, but also replace them by more convincing interpretations indicating their association with Australia instead. So far no one has done so. Even such an outstanding scholar as Dr Helen Wallis has not always paid adequate attention to map inscriptions. She could declare my place-name interpretations 'ingenious', but did not attempt to rebut them. She just stated that my concept of *Jave-la-Grande* 'as a composite of southern Java and Indo-China' was in her view 'far-fetched and not proven'. Her own theory, however, which disregarded inscriptions, was certainly not proven. It relied very heavily on her own assessment of the supposed 'accuracy' of the Dieppe maps, especially those of Jean Rotz. Yet the mere appearance of an *Islande of ye giants* in the Indian Ocean on a Rotz hemisphere map casts serious doubts upon her claim of his supposed accuracy. The size and shape of that island alone show that it is not, as she suggested, Amsterdam Island. It is a fictitious representation of the Marco Polo derived Zanzibar which appeared on numerous early maps from 1492 onwards, some three decades before Amsterdam Island was discovered. The Dauphin (Harleian) map actually portrays it as Zanzibar/*Ysle des Geantz*. Cartographers who could accept fictitious islands could certainly be misled by unidentified coastlines.

The inscriptions on the west and east coasts of *Jave-la-Grande* clearly identify them as being copies of very early Portuguese sketch charts of the coasts of SW Java and Vietnam, the latter probably dating from about 1516. The French evidently believed that they were genuine, but failed to recognise them, either from their outlines, or from their inscriptions. The originals cannot have had scales, orientation, or latitude marked on them. Their positioning south of Java and Sumbawa was almost certainly due to three factors. Firstly, since trade in Java was restricted to the north coast, nearly all surviving Portuguese 16th Century charts left the south coasts of both of those islands blank, as no information about them seems to have reached cartographers in Portugal.



Secondly, at the time, there was current a widespread, popular belief in the necessary existence of a vast southern continent to counterbalance the land mass in the northern hemisphere. Mercator had first placed his land mass of *Beach* etc, part of his southern continent, south of Indonesia on his globe gores of 1541. It would have been logical in the circumstances for the Dieppe cartographers to place charts of unidentified coastlines which were considered genuine in that same area, and join them up, as some Dieppe cartographers did, to the north coast of Tierra del Fuego which, discovered by Magellan in 1521, was believed to be part of the Great South Land. Thirdly, if, as seems highly probable, the sketch chart of SW Java had on it the inscription *Java Maior*, to identify it, that would have provided a further motive for the French positioning of it. That name for Java was widely adopted from the somewhat illogical Arabic usage by Marco Polo, and passed on by him, in contradistinction to *Java Menor* or *Minor*, by which they, and he, meant Sumatra. Confusion reigned for centuries over the use of these two names, but when the Portuguese used the name *Java Maior*, of which *Jave-la-Grande* is a French translation, they always, with the exception of the hopelessly confused Manuel Godinho de Erédia, meant Java. *Java Menor* was variously taken to mean Bali, Sumbawa or even Borneo. Mercator and the Italian cartographer Gastaldi actually invented an island of that name south of Indonesia.

The varied, imaginative 'interpretations' of the coastlines of *Jave-la-Grande* by the 'believers', and their manipulation of the outlines to make them more closely resemble what they would like them to be, may continue to deceive their readers. The evidence of the place-names, however, is conclusive. The Portuguese may have reached Australia in the 16th Century, but none of the supposed evidence so far produced is valid.

It is a regrettable fact that sensational claims make headlines, and lend themselves to televised 're-enactments', while their reasoned demolition is usually relegated to the back pages, or to journals which the general public seldom sets eyes on.

### Notes

1. W. A. R. Richardson, *The Portuguese Discovery of Australia: Fact or Fiction?*, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1989 (Occasional Lecture Series, no 3).
2. idem. '*Jave-la-Grande*: a case study of place-name corruption', International Cartographic Association, 12th International Conference, Perth, W. A., 1984, Technical Papers, vol 2, 221-248; repr. in *The Globe* (Journal of the Australian Map Circle), 22 (1984), 9-32.
3. idem. 'A critique of Spanish and Portuguese claims to have discovered Australia', *Investigator* (Magazine of the Geelong Historical Society), 30:3 (Sept, 1995), 83-107, and 30:4 (Dec. 1995), 131-147.

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