

My Kiwi Connection

*In sixteen forty-two
Tasman sailed the ocean blue*

This little rhyme taught me when Abel Tasman discovered New Zealand. Somehow it's stuck in my memory, which is strange because when I was a kid I couldn't have cared less about New Zealand's historical connection with the Netherlands. Nor would I have dreamed that one day I'd be living evidence of a not so hidden connection between New Zealand and old Tasman's homeland.

Yet that's not as far-fetched as it sounds because, after all, my parents were Dutch. Our family moved to New Zealand during the 1950s exodus. Once we got there, Mum and Dad continued using their own native language at home, while my brother, sister and I grew up understanding Dutch but speaking only English. I soon turned into a proper little New Zealander, a good little 'Kiwi', which is what New Zealanders call themselves. It is not the same as that furry brown fruit you might know. In fact both are named after New Zealand's national bird, the kiwi, a flightless nightwalker.

And while we're on this fruity subject, did you know *Actinidia deliciosa* was originally called the Chinese gooseberry? It was rebranded by Kiwi growers who wanted to market their produce to the world. This they have done with such élan that you can't go into a Dutch veggie shop these days without seeing piles of juicy kiwis just waiting to be scooped out with a spoon. But I think the success of this marketing strategy just sucks. I mean, who'd want people to think you're a hairy little fruit, sour green inside, when in fact you're a sharp-nosed but fluffy little bird? But who else gives a hoot what a kiwi really is? So do you, hey?

Ahem. I digress. Like any good Kiwi I wanted to see the world and on applying for a passport found I had a choice of nationality. Automatically, according to length of residence I was a New Zealander but following birthright I could stay Dutch. Feeling disloyal to my Kiwi upbringing I chose the nationality that would let me live and work in Europe.



Not long after, I left *Aotearoa* - the Land of the Long White Cloud, the Maori name for New Zealand - and landed at Schiphol, Amsterdam Airport. Now, nearly 28 years later I speak Dutch well but still haven't lost my foreign accent. It's not unusual to be asked where I come from and people usually guess, the United States or England. In the past, whenever I answered 'New Zealand' they used to say, 'Oh, where's that?' That's all different now. Some great Kiwi films have launched New Zealand's cinematic landscape onto the wide-screen world and put the country slap-bang in the middle of the global map. People understand at once when I say I come from Middle Earth. I mean, Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* was filmed in many parts of the land I've actually lived in or at least spent my summer holidays in herding sheep. But before this and other Oscar winners (think of Jane Campion's *The Piano*) was made, most Dutch folk I met knew little of 'God's own country' or, as Kiwis like to pronounce it, 'Godzone'. Even now some confuse good old Godzone with Tazzie - Tasmania, that triangular chunk located beneath our neighbours in Australia. I can't hold that against them. Look at how New Zealand, even now, gets depicted on TV weather maps, as a mere squiggle! People can't be blamed for not knowing just how Long that White Cloud is. But listen to this: it's long. From the top of Cape Reinga to the bottom of the Bluff is the same distance as from Amsterdam to Barcelona. All those clean miles, all that fresh space for only four million people and forty million sheep, give or take a few.

So okay, the Netherlands may be tiny and crowded compared to the rugged land of rugby, racing and beer, but who cares? I'm rarely homesick for my old homeland. Before moving to Groningen, to a small village near Abel Tasman's birthplace, I did miss the wide open space of New Zealand at times. But I've found that again where I live now, in the wide open Ommelanden. In 1980 I came to the Netherlands needing to work out the irony of being Dutch yet inescapably non-Dutch. I settled here with some vague ambition of searching out my roots and now I've found them growing deep in the Groninger clay. Now I've lived here long enough to accept that I'll never be as Dutch as my passport says I am. But hey, that doesn't matter. I still feel a deep sense of connection with my new 'omeland.

Soon after my arrival in Amsterdam I discovered that nearly everyone in that cosmopolitan city speaks fluent English. I've been told by a sensible Dutchman that there's a sensible reason for this. Dutch is a minority language and, practical as always, Dutch people don't expect foreigners to be able to speak it. This helpful attitude is terrific for tourists but, for learners trying out the new language, it can lead to unsettling situations. Like the time I was at the main post office trying to buy an airmail stamp for my very first letter home. Possibly put off by my lousy accent, the man behind the counter gave me a weird look and sold me a stamp for something like 8 cents. At the time I hadn't come to grips with the value of guilders compared to the Kiwi dollar, but even to me it seemed a cheap price to pay for a stamp that would fly my letter all the long way to New Zealand. However I was too shy and embarrassed to check and just took the stamp the man gave me, stuck it on and posted my letter. Only when Mum complained about how long that first letter had taken to arrive - three months by boat - did I realise what had happened. The man had sold me a local stamp for the Dutch province of Zeeland, the very place from where in 1642 Tasman sailed the ocean blue and bumped into New Zealand.

So there you have it: Zeeland, New Zealand, my personal connection. But hey, what's the difference? It all gets there in the end.



Uitsmijter Ask your average Kiwi where the Netherlands is and most likely they won't have a clue. This sucks considering 100,000 Kiwis can lay claim to some sort of Dutch descent. Thanks to all those Dutch migrants now living Down Under, New Zealand exports tulip bulbs to - wait for it - the Netherlands.