William Dampier
a pirate on the west coast

In the 17th century, a number of Dutch navigators took a fairly close look at the west and north coasts of the Australian continent, but all were unimpressed with what they saw. Dirk Hartog, the earliest of these Dutch sailors, went ashore at Cape Inscription on the west coast and left a pewter plate nailed to tree as proof of his visit. The Dutchmen who followed Hartog named this dry, brown land New Holland, even though it looked nothing like the old Holland they had come from.

The pirate explorer
In 1688, the first Englishman set foot on Australian soil, not far from where Dirk Hartog had landed 70 years earlier. His name was William Dampier, and he was not an explorer but a pirate. At that time, many pirate ships roamed the trade routes of the world, plundering ships and towns for gold and silver and anything else they could carry away.

However, William Dampier was probably the most thoughtful and intelligent pirate in history. He always claimed that he took to buccaneering not for the loot, but for the opportunity to see the world. It was not possible to roam the world as a pirate without becoming involved in murder and theft, but Dampier did indeed seem to be telling the truth about his preferences. He kept detailed journals of his travels, and he also took the trouble to learn about the inhabitants of the lands he visited.

Beasts and flowers
Dampier liked the wildflowers of Western Australia, but nothing much else. He wrote in his journal that the wildflowers ‘were sweet and beautiful, and for the most part unlike any that I have seen elsewhere...’ He also noticed odd creatures that had ‘...very short forelegs, but go jumping upon them and are very good meat!’ The stumpy-tailed lizard left him disgusted ‘...both the looks and the smell of them being so offensive.’

Coming ashore
Dampier was in command of the Cygnet, a ship belonging to the notorious pirate Captain Swan when he came ashore on the north-west coast of Australia at a place he named Cygnet Bay. (A cygnet is a baby swan.)

He did not like what he saw. The land was dry and hard, and the Aboriginal people who gathered to stare in alarm at the visitors seemed very primitive to him. ‘They have no Houses, skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry,’ he wrote in his journal. ‘...They are tall, straight-bodied, with small long limbs...’
Dampier meets the Australians

Dampier gave the Aboriginal people cotton garments to wear, hoping that the natives would help him find fresh water. But the Aborigines showed no interest in the clothing, ‘I did not perceive that they had any great liking to them, neither did they seem to admire anything else we had.’

Dampier did not know how to respond to people who were so unlike Europeans, but he made careful observations of Aboriginal society. ‘They do live in Companies,’ he wrote, ‘20 or 30 Men, Women and Children together. Their only Food is a small sort of Fish which they get by making Weirs [small dams]… What Providence has bestowed upon them, they presently broil on the Coals, and eat it in Common; be it little or much that they get, every one has his part, as well as the Young and the tender, the old and the feeble…’

Back to England

Dampier returned to England in 1691 without any pirate booty, but with all his precious journals safe and sound. In 1697, he published the fascinating story of his travels in a book entitled, A New Voyage Round the World. The book became a bestseller and earned Dampier great respect. Instead of being thought of as, ‘an olde Pyrating Dog’, as he had been, he was now considered a great writer.

A copy of A New Voyage Round the World is held at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

The captain returns

The Royal Navy made Dampier captain of his own ship, the Roebuck. In 1699, he sailed once more for New Holland, landing at Shark Bay on the Western Australian coast. He charted the coast accurately for 1600 kilometres up to Roebuck Bay before leaving Australia forever, still unimpressed.