“But the Nature of This People is Foul and Full of Treachery” – A Dutch Account of
Australian Aborigines in 1705

The unknown Southland - terra australis incognita - was a truly antipodean world in the
European imagination. Dutch images of the inhabitants, and the distinctive flora and fauna, of
New Holland in the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century have hitherto received
relatively little attention in the literature in contrast to the subsequent ones of British
explorers. In this paper I examine the functions of images of the exotic in the first more
detailed description of Australian Aborigines. The people in question are presently known as
the Tiwi. In 1636, Pieter Pieterzoon named their land (the present Melville and Bathurst
Islands) Van Diemenslant. Another expedition of the Dutch East India Company, led by
Marten van Delft, returned in 1705. Van Delft and his crew spent three months in the Van
Diemenslant discovered but unexplored by Pieterzoon. The resulting account gives a vivid
picture of both romantic idealisation and perceived uncivilised behaviour of the Tiwi
Aborigines with whom the Dutch crewmembers interacted for weeks on end.

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