

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS:  
AN AUSTRALIAN WAR BRIDE WRITES HOME

Christina Houen

It is estimated that thousands of Australian women married British, American or Dutch servicemen during or just after the Second World War. The Second World War was a time of great uncertainty for many in Australia, but also a time of great excitement, particularly when Allied troops visited Australia. Many young Australian women were quite taken with “those handsome young men in uniform from so far away” and inevitably, relationships were formed. Some couples married during the war itself. Others became engaged during the war and married afterwards. These liaisons, were not always looked upon favourably by the Australian families of the women concerned or by the wider Australian community. In many cases, towards the end of the war or immediately post-war, many of these Australian women undertook a long sea voyage to either the USA, UK or Netherlands in order to be with their husbands or fiancés, aiming to make a new life thousands of miles from Australia and their own families. The majority had little or no knowledge in advance of either their husband’s families or what their new homeland would be like.

The story which follows, reverses the perspective of many of the chapters in this book; it tells of an Australian woman who emigrates from Australia to the Netherlands to join her Dutch husband there, and writes letters home, describing the nature of her new life to her family. It is written from the letters of Margaret Kruimink, née Stokes, and from conversations with her and her sister Stephanie.

**Figure 1**  
Margaret Stokes and Klaas Kruimink -  
22 December 1943: Courtesy: M. Kruimink.



In 1946, a young West Australian woman left Fremantle on the *MS Volendam* with hundreds of other Australian war brides, sailing to the Netherlands with her baby son. Margaret Stokes had married a Dutch naval officer, Klaas Kruimink, when he was on shore leave in Perth. Although World War II had ended in Europe in May 1945, and in the Pacific and the Far East on August 15 the same year, Klaas’s job was not over; he was not allowed to apply for discharge from the Dutch navy for several more years. He had graduated as an engineer before the war, and when the Netherlands fell to the Nazi Germany, he and another man managed to get an old Danish ‘tramp steamer’ operational and escaped in it to the British coast. Upon arrival there they were held as potential spies, but then released. The steamer was subsequently donated to Britain, and Queen Wilhelmina, whose court had taken refuge in Britain, decorated Klaas for his bravery. He was assigned to the destroyer *Van Galen*, which was based at Fremantle. Margaret then met him at a party, and so began a love match, which lasted until his sudden untimely death at the age of 61.

For most of the decade of her life spent in the Netherlands, Margaret wrote to her family regularly. Her letters were usually no more than a couple of

pages: to send more than this was far too expensive. They chronicle the busy domestic life of a young mother, whose days are taken up with childcare, housework, sewing and shopping. She and Klaas sometimes go to balls and dinners, when he is home on leave, and exchange visits with other young couples. Margaret develops a network of friends, mostly Australian girls whom she had known in Perth, and some English girls who are married to Dutch officers. From time to time she and Klaas go to stay for a few days with Klaas's parents, who live in a coastal town in North Holland - a five-hour train trip away from Rotterdam or receive visits from them. The Netherlands has 11 provinces and North Holland is one of them although many people incorrectly refer to the whole country as Holland.

To read Margaret's letters is rather like gazing at a Rembrandt painting, or looking through a family photo album, where we can see the details of dress and appearance, home furnishings and utilities, food and festivals and the friends and relatives who visit. Sometimes we can glimpse the wider setting - the countryside, the canals, the cities and the public buildings. The letters however do not give us much idea of the great changes and upheavals happening in Western Europe in those years of postwar reconstruction — the politics, the tensions of the Cold War and the movement towards greater unity and co-operation between independent nations.

Margaret was born in Perth, Western Australia in 1925 and she married Klaas (born in 1919), when she was 18. Her parents liked the handsome naval officer, but were against the marriage; her father said she could not marry until she was 21. However, when Margaret found out that Klaas had to go to sea for an unknown period, she told her father she would get pregnant if he did not agree to the marriage. He gave in, and they had a small festive wedding with friends and naval officers at the Palace Hotel then spent a few days in Pemberton, where she recalls sailing in a dinghy on the river.

I was born 15 years after Margaret, and to read her letters is to enter a 'looking-glass world', where things are recognisable, but unfamiliar in many ways. In Lewis Carroll's story *Alice Through the Looking-glass*, when Alice and Kitty manage to pass through the mirror above the mantelpiece, Alice notices 'that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible.'<sup>1</sup>

When I enter Margaret's world, I find a domestic scene that has a great deal in common with the middle class life into which I was born, and I can identify with many of her hopes, her pleasures and her dreams. However I also see many differences; not just a different country and culture, but a young married woman who happily accepts that her place is in the home. Gifted, intelligent, a good writer, a good manager; she marries not long after leaving school, has her first child the following year and does not finish her Arts degree. The marriage is happy and for the first few years of her married life, she does not seriously consider having a life outside of the home, marriage and motherhood.

**Figure 2**  
Margaret and Robert in Australia - 1946:  
Courtesy: M.Kruimink.

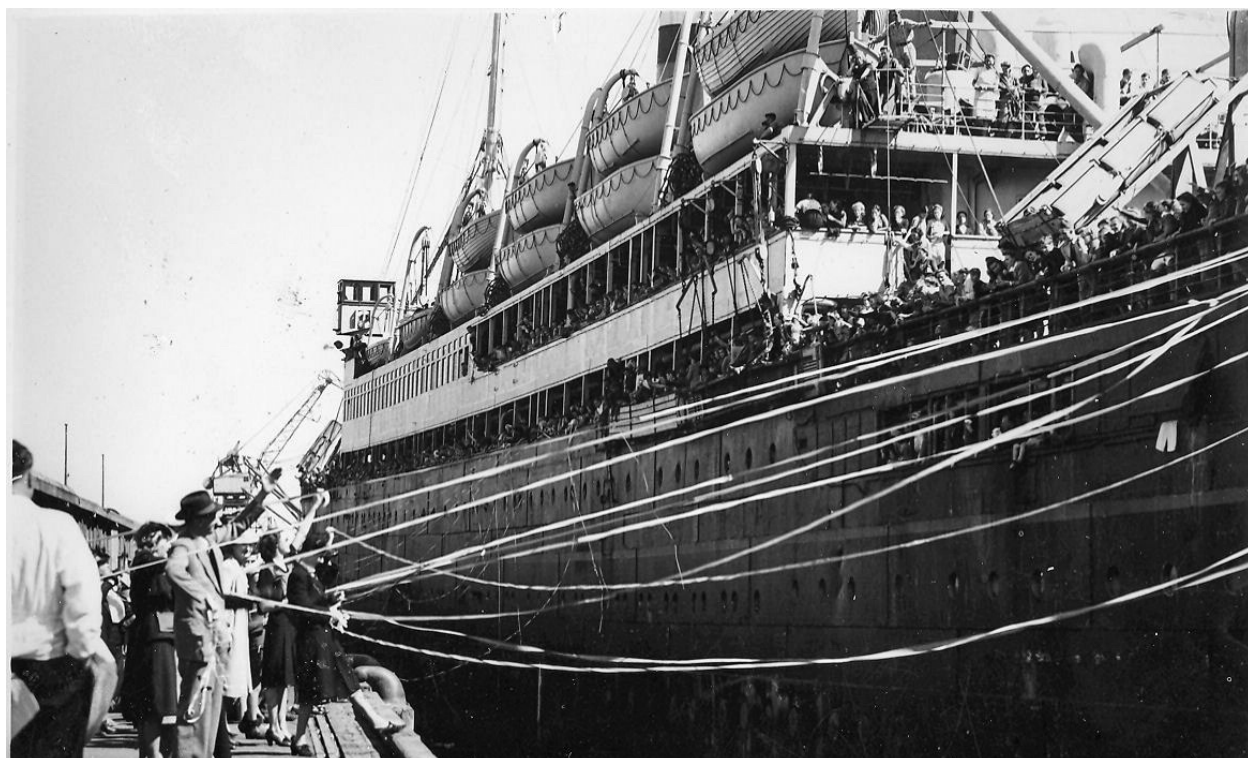




The voyage to the Netherlands on the *Volendam* in 1946 is not a pleasant experience for Margaret and baby Ricky. Built as a passenger ship in 1922, the *Volendam* was commandeered for the Allied war effort. She survived a torpedo attack in 1940, then served as a troop carrier, and after the war, is used for troop transport to the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), and to carry evacuees, who had been rehabilitated in WA from Japanese internment camps and the violence of the Indonesian Independence Revolution in Java, to start a new life in the Netherlands. She carries over 1600 passengers on the voyage, which Margaret takes.<sup>2</sup> Including many war brides with children, some pregnant; there are several babies born on the voyage, and at least two miscarriages. Margaret has a group of friends, about six, whom she knows from her hometown. The long days and nights in tropical heat are very trying, and Ricky becomes ill with a severe heat rash. He is hospitalised, but Margaret is horrified when she visits him:

“He had been put in a men’s ward in an ordinary bed, with only a male nurse. He was lying on an oil proof sheet — no sheet over it — had a dirty nappy — and was terribly miserable. I asked what he’d had for lunch — and was told they’d tried to give him fish salad with mayonnaise. I asked for boiled water, for he hadn’t had a drink all day — but they said they had none. I was mad as hell and told off several doctors and then picked him up and walked out.”

**Figure 3**  
MS *Volendam* leaving Fremantle for  
Rotterdam 1946: Courtesy: W. Plink.



Relief from the pressures of being surrounded by screaming children and hundreds of people, of having to queue for everything and having access to fresh water for only three hours daily, comes when she eventually reaches the Netherlands.

At Rotterdam, she is called up to the bridge by the captain: 'See that light winking over on the dark, dark ocean — that's your husband!' Klaas, whose ship was in port, is waiting on the wharf, waving to her when the *Volendam* docks, but has to go back to his ship. While Margaret is waiting for her papers to be cleared, she feels a hand over her eyes; it is Klaas's brother Fritz, who has a jeep and a driver to take her to the family home in Gouda, which she and Klaas share with Fritz and his English wife Dorothy for the first few months.<sup>3</sup> Later they move to Rotterdam, where they have a flat to themselves, unlike most of the young couples they know, who have to share because of the acute housing shortage caused by the widespread destruction of Dutch cities by Nazi bombers. Later, as their family grows, they move back to Gouda to the roomier family home.

One of the things Margaret finds 'as different as possible' and yet similar in some ways, is the food, which is rationed, as it is throughout Europe and in Australia. Soon after they arrive, they have eels for supper — 'the most scrumptious things you could ever imagine' — and for lunch, shrimps, 'tiny ones mixed with mayonnaise and eaten on fresh brown bread. Mmm.' Fish is plentiful whilst meat is scarce, but is eaten three nights a week. They get four ounces of butter each a week, half a pound of margarine and half a pound of dripping. Margaret writes that the typical Dutch breakfast is 'horrible'; just bread with cheese or jam. She and Klaas have Australian breakfasts of cornflakes or porridge and toast. Eggs are only available with special coupons for sick people, or one a fortnight for others. Lunch Dutch-style is bread again, with, 'if you are lucky,' warmed-up vegetables left over from the night before, or salted herrings or sardines. The chickens, the butter and the milk all have a special taste, because of the rich, deep soil of the farmlands. Fruit is scarce, especially oranges, which Margaret says she will never leave lying around again. At Christmas, they have the luxury of coupons for a pound of oranges from Spain — 'delicious!' Margaret's parents send her parcels from time to time with scarce items such as nylons, soap, cigarettes, tinned meat, and on one occasion, eggs. Margaret reports that the eggs did not keep, despite being set in dripping.

'Our attic is full of pears and apples for the winter; all the tradespeople come to the door with their wares, so there is no queuing or carting home large string bags full of groceries etc.'

The building, which they move into in Rotterdam has the luxury of shops of all sorts on the ground floor. Another comfort is the central heating.

Fashion is important, and many of Margaret's letters describe the clothes she is making for the children or for herself. She loves her new black suit made in "New Look" style, and sends sketches of the front and back view:

tight bodice and flared jacket, long skirt- narrow in front with back tucks and pleats. She wears it to a party:

I had a wonderful triumph. I was the Belle. ... Klaas kept telling me I looked wonderful and we danced cheek to cheek and felt as if we'd just met. I wore my hair down — just washed and all shining, and that little black lace cocktail affair on my head.

Later, in 1949, she has her hair cut in the “New Look” coiffure, ‘very short, slightly standing out, it suits me well Klaas says, though he got a shock at first.’

Another difference in the Netherlands is in the way the houses are set in the street, in a long row, joined together: ‘the dining-room looks out over the street, and the windows take up all the front wall. Neighbours pass and wave and call as we eat — but nobody minds.’

When they travel to Den Helder to visit ‘Moeder’ and ‘Vader’, Margaret remarks on the tidiness of the countryside:

Holland is all laid out like a garden — so neat, and everything in rows — rows of picturesque little cottages, all the vegetables grow in terrifically straight lines, the cows — all black and white — seem to be dotted in specific places, in the bright green fields, which are always divided by neat channels of water, some narrow and some wide. Small steam boats go right through the middle of Holland in canals, cut through the fields, and from the train all you see is the top of the ship moving along. Then, of course, there are the windmills, which still give me a terrific thrill, and fields full of cultivated flowers in bloom, each colour in squares so that it looks like a patchwork quilt.

Margaret is accepted by her parents-in-law, despite her foreignness and different religion — she is Catholic, they are Protestant. She and her English sister-in-law, also a Catholic, have agreed not to bring the children up as Catholics. She describes Klaas’s parents as doting grandparents. They often have the grandchildren to stay with them for a few days at a time, in order to give Margaret and Klaas a break, or when Margaret has a new baby.

Moeder, like most of the older Dutch women, is very family-oriented and a conservative housewife, dressed in long, dark clothes.

Margaret’s sister Stephanie, who visited Margaret and her family and lived in the Netherlands for nearly a year, describes her, in retrospect, as severe and critical of her daughters-in-law, but good-hearted. Vader she remembers as being ‘a lovely warm, giggly man, who used to smuggle cigarettes to Margaret’. Both sisters remember the Kruimink parents as honourable and patriotic; unlike many Dutch families, they had not given in to the Nazi occupation, and though they had Nazi soldiers billeted with them, they refused to socialise with them or serve them food. Moeder shows the strains of the war; she wears a wig, having lost her hair ‘through the war worries

and lack of food.’ This comment refers to the terrible winter of 1944-45, known as ‘the hunger winter’, when occupied Netherland was bypassed by the Allies on their drive to Berlin. The last winter of the war had brought severe food and fuel shortages, as one historian reports:

In some provinces there was nothing left to eat but tulip bulbs and sugar beets. Eighteen thousand Dutch civilians starved to death and many others never forgot their gnawing hunger in those months.<sup>4</sup>

Moeder is strict in her ways and parochial: ‘...if you mention America, she immediately says “Yes, all American women drink. America is no good. Bah!” but when Klaas teases her about that and her other little ways, she loves it. When Margaret smokes and has a drink with Vader and Klaas, Moeder ‘mutters to herself about women who smoke and drink, and we all laugh heartily and go right ahead — and she doesn’t mind a bit.’

Another difference is the weather: in her first winter in the Netherlands, Margaret reports that when she goes out to bring in the nappies, they are frozen stiff, like so many boards. This was a shock to a girl who had grown up in Perth’s temperate climate, where winters are mild, temperatures rarely drop below freezing and snow never falls. She has been used to a laundry with a washing machine, whereas in most middle class homes in the Netherlands at this time, there are no laundry facilities. Washing is done by hand in a tub and bucket, and heavy washing is sent to a commercial laundry.

After the first night of heavy frost, nappies left to soak overnight in the tub are a solid mass by the morning, and she tries to melt them over the stove, while Klaas and his brother rush to fit into their skating boots. The windows are covered in frost flowers, and Klaas and Fritz go off to skate on the ditches and canals. Margaret dresses for her first skating lesson in many layers, with the temperature at fifteen degrees Fahrenheit outside. In February 1947, she writes that the canals have been frozen for two months, coal has run out, the central heating is off and they are huddled in many layers of clothes over a small electric fire, which they can’t use much, as electricity is rationed.<sup>5</sup>

At Christmastime, she misses her family, and the ritual of present-giving; Christmas day in the Netherlands is a day of religious celebration. A special dinner is cooked, but no gifts are given, because things are so expensive. The main cultural festival is on ‘*Sint Nicholaas Day*’ (5 December), when small presents are exchanged. All day the children (and adults) eat dolls made out of gingerbread, spiced biscuits, sweets and butter cakes. Every now and then the door mysteriously opens a little, and *Sinterklaas* throws in a shower of *Pepernoten* a traditional confectionary.<sup>6</sup> He visits the school in the daytime and gives out presents, assisted by *Zwarte Piet* (Black Peter), who is supposed to take off any naughty children in his bag. At night the children put their shoes in front of the hearth, sing a song up the chimney asking *Sinterklaas* to put something in them, then go to bed. Although he is dressed like a member of the ‘Black and White Minstrel show’, some say Black Peter’s origins are a ‘chimney sweep’.



**Figure 4**  
Son Robert meeting St Nicholas – December 1951 Courtesy: M. Kruimink.

Childbirth in the Netherlands is also very different; most babies are born at home, without anaesthetic — ‘Doctors don’t give anaesthetics here at all [for childbirth] which I think is awfully cruel and unnecessary’ — but Margaret chooses to have hers in a nearby hospital run by nuns. During her pregnancies, her doctor visits her at home once a fortnight. Boys are not circumcised, and she has to make a fuss to get Ricky’s little brother ‘done’; the sisters all think she must be Jewish. When her fourth baby is born, she has her at home, with a midwife who helps at the delivery and stays for a fortnight, completely caring for house, family, mother and new baby. This remarkable support system is still in place in the Netherlands today.

World events have little impact on her life, apart from Klaas having to stay in the Navy because of ‘the world situation’ (the Cold War). She answers her parents’ question about why she does not mention ‘the Indonesian issue’ (the struggle for independence from Dutch colonial rule):

... it’s such a mess and it seems to me it’s no use worrying. I’ve been so busy having a family it just doesn’t seem to matter. Doesn’t that sound awfully dull and domestic — it’s not though, it’s the nicest thing in the world.

Margaret is happy in the Netherlands, being of a temperament that makes the best of things: ‘Wherever I’ve lived, I’ve just got on with it’, she reflects in old age. She, like most of her friends, is in love and although she misses Klaas when he is away, and sometimes gets depressed, his absences keep their marriage alive. On the other hand, she and Klaas live for the day he can leave the Navy; he is always away, on trips to Spain, the West Indies, the Azores, but ‘longs for home and us. Our ideal is a permanent home and a small car, a decent income and always together.’

Her letters reveal how much she misses her family. Throughout their years in the Netherlands, she dreams of returning home to Australia, and she and Klaas plan for it, asking her parents for help with finding a job and a place to live. He wants to leave the Navy and have a job on shore. He feels that Europe has ‘had it’: ‘it is over-populated and has no prospects for the younger generation; Australia is the place to make money.’

The ‘overpopulation belief’ was actively promoted by government propaganda, both in Europe and Australia. Emigration was seen as a partial solution to the overcrowding and shortage of resources in post-war Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> Margaret comments on the difference in the standard of living between Australia and the Netherlands: ‘Pop’ Kruimink is on a salary similar to Margaret’s father, but ‘he couldn’t think of having a car, and although he has his own house in Gouda, it is old-fashioned, and only has a tiny patch of garden at the back.’ There is no possibility of building your own home in over-crowded Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, she is able to afford to have household help — at first, a girl who comes in two days a week and later, before and after the birth of her third baby, she has a daily maid who ‘does absolutely everything, so I just busy myself with the children.’ In 1949, after baby number three, she details their household budget:



Klaas gets 410 guilders a month now — £41 (English); Rent £2/8/-, insurances [for the children's tertiary education] £6/5/-, food £20, maid £4/5/-, gas and elec. £1, telephone £1/5/-, Ricky's school 10/-, total £37/13/- which leaves £3/7/- for clothes and entertainment. ... So you see we just manage. My four pairs of slacks have become overalls for the boys.

In 1950, she takes to doing the housework herself to save money for clothes, and later for their migration to Australia. In February 1953, Margaret writes of the floods in the Netherlands; Gouda is in no danger, with a strong river dike, but most sea dikes have broken, at least 1200 people have drowned, and nearly a million are homeless with millions of pounds worth of damage to property:

We've seen lots of evacuees walking along the *Krugerlaan*, with prams and wheelbarrows full of possessions, farmers driving cows and pigs, and so on. ... People are still clinging to roofs and sitting in attics since Sunday, and they can't be reached.

Klaas is in the West Indies for seven months, and Margaret writes of her growing depression. After he returns, she writes to ask her parents if they can lend them some money for their passage to Australia.

In December 1953, Margaret's parents and younger sister Stephanie visit at long last, so there is a gap in the correspondence. The parents leave after a few weeks and go to London, but Steph stays behind and lives with her sister's family. She works in the Netherlands for a while, having majored in English and German for her Arts degree and specialised in Philology, she now becomes fluent in Dutch and works as a travel guide, taking visitors from the United Kingdom to visit sites of interest. Stephanie remembers her first impressions of Rotterdam, which had been burnt and bombed to pieces and was not fully restored when she arrived. It was a shock to a girl whose generation had missed out on personal involvement in the war — she being seven years younger than Margaret. Those friends she makes in the Netherlands are more serious, having lived through the war as teenagers. She finds the neighbours critical of Margaret as a housewife, because she does not wash the windows and doors every week, clean the pavement and disinfect the bins, or hang the rugs on the washing line outside on Fridays to beat the dust out of them. Also, because she likes to smoke and swear a little and to sunbake with her sister in the back yard and wear trousers. Margaret recalls a time when she went shopping wearing a green slack suit, and was followed in the street by children chanting 'Missus wearing trousers!'

Both sisters love the Dutch people for their warm-heartedness and their strong family loyalties and community life. Stephanie remembers that when children came home from school on dark winter afternoons, their mothers would wait for them outside the houses, with welcoming tea lights burning in the windows.

Stephanie has many Dutch boyfriends and girlfriends, and loves riding her bicycle everywhere. She remembers with fondness a visit to Klaas's relatives in Drente on the German border. They live on a farm and are 'real Dutch', who wear clogs and have cattle living under the same roof.

The fourth baby is born to Margaret and Klaas in March 1955, and Margaret makes Ricky (aged nine) a pair of 'plus fours' for school, as 'all the boys wear them here.' For Sunday best, she has made the two boys long trousers with narrow legs — 'very chic!'

Later that year, back in Perth, Steph gets married, and Margaret feels rather left out of all the excitement of wedding preparations: 'I want all the details and a wedding photo. All the friends and neighbours ask such questions too and I know nothing'.

## EPILOGUE

The last letter we have is dated June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1955. Margaret talked to me by telephone of their return to Australia. They left the Netherlands in 1956, with a free passage to Australia, funded by the Postmaster General's Department in Sydney. The voyage home for Margaret was a very different experience from the one to the Netherlands; they came first class on the *Iberia*.

They lived in Sydney for three years, then went to Tasmania, where Klaas took an engineering job (with house provided) at Mount Lyall, on the west coast of Tasmania.

Margaret went back to study when the children were older, completing a Teacher's Certificate and an Associate Diploma in Librarianship. She subsequently worked as a teacher librarian until she retired.

Klaas died 'too young' at the age of 61. He and Margaret were at sea in the yacht which he had bought on retirement, when the wind rose, creating enormous waves. As he tried to start the engine, he collapsed. Margaret attempted unsuccessfully to resuscitate him, crying: 'don't leave me, don't leave me'. She was however able to zig-zag the boat back in to shore. She now lives in a retirement home in Hobart. Stephanie lives in Perth with her husband and they have been together for over 60 years.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Lewis Carroll, *Through the looking-glass*, Project Gutenberg Etext, 1991, viewed 8 October 2007, file:///Users/215295f/Desktop/lglass18h.htm.
- 2 'Volendam temporary 'home' to numerous Dutch North Americans', Godutch.com, viewed 8 October 2007, <http://www.godutch.com/windimill/newItem.asp?id=307>.
- 3 When the Netherlands fell to the Germans, Fritz reported to the German command, and was ordered to serve them or be imprisoned; he chose imprisonment and went on to escape 13 times, including from notorious Colditz prison; he was successful in this last 'great escape' going by train to Paris,

where he worked with the Resistance. From there he escaped to England, and married Dorothy. They still live in the Netherlands.

- 4 Henri A Van Der Zee, '*The hunger winter: occupied Holland, 1944-1945*', viewed 23 October 2007, <http://www.godutch.com/catalogue/bookN.asp?id=640>.
- 5 This was known as 'the big freeze of 1947', the coldest winter recorded in Europe since 1659; harbours froze over, factories and schools shut down, crops and livestock were lost and thousands of people died. See WeatherOnline, viewed 23 October 2007, [http://www.weatheronline.co.uk/feature/s007/01/26\\_ne.htm](http://www.weatheronline.co.uk/feature/s007/01/26_ne.htm).
- 6 *Pepernoten* are a Dutch or Belgian cookie-like kind of confectionery associated with the early December *Sinterklaas* holiday in the Netherlands and Belgium.
- 7 Nonja Peters, *Milk and Honey But No Gold*, UWA Press, 2001.
- 8 The notion of the country being over-crowded. is propaganda sold to the general public by governments trying to rid themselves of people in a depressed economy, where jobs are scarce and lack of housing a serious issue.



**Figure 5**  
*The Feast of St Nicholas* by Jan Havicksz.  
 Steen, 1665 – 1668  
 Courtesy: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam