

DUTCH SOCIALIST PIONEER LINKS WITH DUTCH LITERARY GIANTS

Alet Doornbusch and Family

In the last decade of the 19th and first two decades of the 20th century, the Dutch in Western Australia (WA) were predominantly deserters from the Merchant Navy or Dutch Military Convoys, farmers looking for a better life and members of the Royal Netherlands Consular Corp. Less known were the members of Dutch Socialist families looking for a country more tolerant of freedom-of-speech, than was characteristic of the Netherlands (NL) at that time. On the eve of mass migration in 1949, around 250 residents of WA were recorded as Dutch. By 1954 the number had risen to 10,000.

This vignette is about the Dutch Socialist couple, Berend Jan Kornelis Doornbusch (1886-1956) and Hermina Doornbusch nee Langeler (1903-1993) who settled in WA in 1928. Berend was one of twelve children born to first cousins of a farming family in Almelo the Netherlands, of whom six survived. His sister Janetta Jacoba (1892-1959), who travelled with him to WA in 1913, was the youngest of the survivors. The children grew up in a household divided by religious and secular ideals. Half of the children were indoctrinated into Calvinism, the religion of their devout mother. The other three, who included Berend and Janetta, were atheists and Communists like their father.

Dutch Socialism was a popular movement at that time. Socialists had been advocating for better economic and social conditions for the working classes, who had long-standing histories of family hardship, meager diet, premature family death, and of living in overcrowded, damp houses and having minimal education. The period was also witness to conflict between the unions of the two major religions: Calvinism and Catholicism. The political repercussions of this clash divided many families and friends¹. The worsening situation had driven some Socialist farming families to initiate a chain migration from Amsterdam to Queensland in 1910.²

Berend and Janetta's sojourn in WA was to observe the 'collective lifestyle' of Australian Aboriginals, a particularly seductive aspect of Socialism at that time.³ However the greater incentive driving their journey of discovery half way around the world was indeed the strong tradition of Socialist and Communist political ideals, into which they had been indoctrinated by their father, a farmer and committed member of the Socialist Movement. Their father also occasionally contributed to *Het Parool*, a Communist weekly established to raise the Dutch public's consciousness about the highly conspicuous inequalities in their society. Induced by the major rural urban shift known as the Agrarian Depression of 1878-1895, it had forced large numbers of people to leave behind family, community and religious loyalties in pursuit of a city livelihood, only to be confronted with high unemployment and industrial unrest.

These conditions had the working classes flock to meetings at Trades schools to listen to leaders such as the social anarchist Pieter Jelles Toelstra, a Frisian Lawyer and powerful, inspirational leader of the Social Democratic Labor Party (*Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij*). The movement was conceptualised by a former *predikant*, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846-1919) turned social anarchist and anti-militarist. He is also credited with having established the first socialist newsletter (see also Foley's Chapter). A zealous speaker, he championed the negative effects of the five K's: Kerk, Koning, Kapitaal, Kazerne, en Kroeg (in English - church, king, capital, militarism and pub). His success was his capacity to articulate the working public's strong feelings about the inadequate measures taken by the government of the day to reform the labour situation. Hence the growing interest in Socialism and Communism. Even suffrage for working class men and women was not realised in the Netherlands until 1917.

The siblings, Jan Kornelis (gardener) and Janetta Doornbusch (servant) travelled to Australia together, arriving in Fremantle on the *M.S. Osterley* on 24 June 1913.⁴ Janetta returned to the Netherlands in 1915, without Berend, who had instead opted to extend his stay after acquiring a job at Yardi Creek Station catching and breaking-in wild horses (brumbies) for use by the 10th Light Horse Brigade of the Australian Army. It was a lonely job, but, as Berend often told his children in later years, made tolerable by the large sums of money he was able to realize from the sale of his horses to the Light Horse Brigade. It was, he would add, the only time in his whole life that he had any real money to spare. Berend's favourite distraction from the isolation of this existence was to take two horses and a cart to Ajana, the town nearest to Yardi Creek Station. There he would spend time picking up fresh supplies and chatting with the locals.

Berend was eventually able to purchase a farm in Northampton from the considerable savings that the job afforded him. However, this was soon reversed by the 1918 drought, which left him virtually penniless. It forced him in fact, to walk off his property with only the clothes on his back. Shortly thereafter Berend applied to the Commonwealth Government for British Citizenship. This was granted on 27 August 1929. Another 20 years would elapse before the Australian Citizenship Act was passed in 1949. However, for Berend there was also a down side. Having gained Australian Citizenship, he could now be called up for mandatory military service. A pacifist, Berend registered as a conscientious objector, citing his incapacity to kill – even the sheep on his farm - as his reason for objecting to conscription.

He returned to the Netherlands in 1919, where he moved in with his sister Janetta and journalist, writer Gerardus Johannes Marinus van het Reve, the man she had married the year before. Janetta and Gerard eventually had three sons. Tragically, one died at a few months of age. However, the other two became renowned, albeit controversial, Dutch literary giants. Gerard Reve⁵, who started writing as Simon van het Reve, adopted the shorter Gerard Reve in 1973. Gerard who, 'came out' later in his life, is also associated with



Figure 1
Prof Karel van het Reve receives the PC Hooft Prize in Muider slot; Karel van het Reve (right with glasses) in conversation with his brother Gerard Reve in the courtyard of the Muider slot, 19 May 1982. Gerard won the same highly prestigious prize in 1968. Photographer: Croes, Rob C Croes. Courtesy: Nationaal Archief Fotocollectie Anefo: Access No. 2.24.01.05. File Number 932-1721.



Figure 2
Anne, Kon and May as children.
Courtesy: Doornbusch Family.

gaining recognition for the rights of gay men. Karel van het Reve⁶ his brother, is better known as a Slavist historian academic.⁷ Both (Gerard 1968; Karl 1981) were recipients of the P.C.Hoofd prize, considered the chief literary accolade in the Dutch language press.⁸

In the years 1925 to 1927, Berend organized a study tour of middle European languages, because it gave him access to Central European countries where he was keen to evaluate the socialist lifestyle. His travels were to eventually take him as far East as Western Siberia. He was particularly impressed with the Russia's hospital system, which treated an illness he had contracted during his six weeks sojourn there - free of charge!⁹

While back in the Netherlands he met the much younger Hermina Langelier. Youngest of seven children of the blacksmith in the town of Lochem, she was a very progressive kindergarten teacher who shared his socialist ideals.¹⁰ The couple decided to get married and settle in Western Australia. Both were highly educated and spoke both Dutch and German. Hermina could also communicate in French and Berend had a smattering of Flemish and Prussian.¹¹

Berend returned to WA in 1928. Hermina followed a few months later, arriving here on the *MS Esperance Bay* on 29 March 1928.¹² The couple were married at the Perth Registry Office five days later on 3 April 1928. Friends of Berend's, H. and F.V. Wilkie, were witnesses at the wedding. Family folklore has it that the honeymooners' favourite pastime was riding their horses bareback through the bush, sometimes getting lost, and letting the horses find their way home.

The newly married Doornbusches moved to a vacant bush block in Yarloop, which Berend had been able to purchase inexpensively, probably because it was without running water.¹³ Here they lived in a tent until that burnt down when a log fell out of the fire, destroying all their wedding gifts packed in the tent. Following this tragedy, Edward Ash – an old bachelor in Harvey – offered them accommodation in his home.

Their first three children: Kornelis (1929), Augusta (1930) and May (1932) were born there. In 1932, the family of five moved to a twelve-hectare farm bordering the railway line, one kilometre out of Harvey that they purchased from savings. Three more children were born on the farm: Abel Tasman (1938), Herman Jan (1941) and Leo Tolstoy (1943).

Life on their Harvey property seemed idyllic until local government authorities reclaimed ten percent of their land to build a 'diversion drain'. Designed to stop the Harvey River from flooding, it had unexpected and drastic consequences for the Doornbushes as the 'diversion drain' removed all the permanent water supply in the billabong, leaving their property without water in summer and flooded in winter. Furthermore, when Berend registered a compensation claim with the local authorities, it was rejected on the grounds that six months had passed since the completion of the drain,

even though the family could prove that the damage had not manifest until then.

After that, life on the Harvey farm became a struggle. In effect it was never to provide them with a regular source of income. To survive they were forced to target niche markets. For example, during World War II they fattened pigs for bacon for the English market and kept poultry and cows. At the same time they used their milking cows to suckle bull calves that Berend collected from other dairy farmers to grow into ‘vealers’. These were butchered and railed to Perth to Nelson’s Meat Market at West Perth Markets.

To be successful as smaller acreage farmers required the Doornbusches to be highly flexible, commercially aware and open to the challenges of changing market trends. This was not Berend’s forte and a major setback came when at the close of WWII, the local market turned to lean bacon, forcing them to sell their ‘fat baconers’ for less than they had paid for them. In this shifting economic environment, child endowment payments were often the family’s only source of stable income.¹⁴

Ultimately, it was Hermina’s inventiveness that kept the family afloat, at least nutritionally if not financially. A vegetarian, she grew her own fruit and vegetables, made her own cheese from cow’s milk, baked her own bread and kept chickens for eggs. Other staples were porridge, peas and potatoes. The dairy cows provided the family with milk. The only meat they ate was offal. Berend collected ‘meat’ for home use from two local slaughterhouses. The family ate the hearts, livers, tongues and brains whilst the rest of the guts were fed to the pigs.

Additional difficulties were created by the couple’s origin culture. Dutch born and raised, both Hermina and Berend had the difficult task of bringing up their Australian-born children in an environment where the cultural heritage, values and beliefs were completely unfamiliar to them. The immigration policies at that time expected newcomers to assimilate to the Australian way of life – whatever that was!

On the other hand, Berend and Hermina’s staunch socialist political views had them dedicated to the children’s education. The need to educate their children ultimately occasioned their move from Harvey to Perth in 1947. This was specifically made to enable their oldest child Kornelis, then 18, to take up the offer of a prestigious Hackett Bursary Scholarship to study Civil Engineering at the University of Western Australia.

In 1948, with the proceeds of the sale of their Harvey Farm, they purchased a four-hectare farm situated a kilometre from the main road on a dirt track in Grand Promenade, Dianella, that the local council was selling in order to recoup unpaid rates. Despite the shift to the city, Berend continued to use horse and cart to transport resources to the farm. He also saved extra money by going to the West Perth markets to pick up greens (vegetable scraps) for the stock. He sent his youngest sons (Herman and Leo) to pick up carrot tops for the pigs at Osborne Park. Hermina learnt to drive their Leyland, an old



Figure 3
The older children 1946 – May, Anne and Kon at Harvey Weir before moving to Morley. Courtesy: Doornbusch Family.



Figure 4
May and Anne at Tante Johanna's place
in Albany – where they boarded to attend
school. Courtesy: Doornbusch Family.

Wesfarmers ex-wheat truck, as did Kornelis, who was allowed to use it for personal transport.

On New Year's Eve 1956, the family was dealt a massive blow when Berend died after fighting cancer. He was only 69, going on 70. It was now up to Hermina, aged 53 to find ways to sustain the family. She did this by purchasing a milk bar delicatessen in a newly built 'block of three' on the corner of Grand Promenade and Walter Road. During the day she managed the shop with the help of her two school-aged sons (Herman and Leo). In the evening, from 5.00 - 9.30pm, Kornelis would take over after his university lectures had finished for the day.

Hermina eventually sold the delicatessen in the early 1960s. By then both girls were married. However, she still had four single males living at home, including Kornelis, who had by then qualified as a town planner at UWA.

Berend and Hermina educated all their children to university standard – the girls as well as boys. The end result was four teachers and two engineers. In the 1930s, giving girls an education was considered very progressive indeed! Educating them all was a remarkable achievement, for which Berend was greatly admired, especially given that he had never earned enough money to even fill in an income tax form!

However, family mythology has it that Berend did his best deals in death. This came about in 1962, when the Shire Council subdivided their property under Town Planning Scheme 12A - Hermina had no say in the matter. Under this scheme, the Council could resume land, which it then subdivided, and the previous owner(s) were allocated a proportional number of serviced lots. Hermina gave each of her four sons a choice of one of the nineteen lots, which she was awarded. Her eldest son Kornelis was still living on the lot he had chosen, when he died in April 2016. In contrast, and in this instance in accordance with the less progressive thinking of the times, (than with their education), her two daughters were expected to find a husband to provide for them and were thus not given a block of land like the boys. The remaining lots were auctioned off and Hermina used the proceeds to purchase a house in Mount Lawley, half of which she rented out for extra income.

National Archives files show that the Doornbusch family also sponsored numerous other Dutch families to Western Australia over a 25-year time span - a method currently described as chain migration. Consequently, the family were central members of WA's Dutch networks. WA's Dutch at that time all knew each other. They met at the Dutch Honorary Consul's to celebrate the Dutch Queen's Birthday each year and mixed informally on numerous other occasions. These WA Dutch volunteered their help when the Consul was called upon to find accommodation for refugees following the Japanese Occupation of the NEI in 1942, and again in 1945 – to house evacuees brought here for rehabilitation from ill treatment – including malnutrition from Japanese POW and interment camps in the NEI, and the first extremely violent months of the Indonesian Revolution for Independence 1945-1949.



Figure 5
On the bikes are: Anne with Herman,
Hermina with Leo and May with Tas – late
1940s. Courtesy: Doornbusch Family.

Editor's note

Alet Doornbusch's three children: twins – Jaeger and Minaida (2007) – and their sister Mira (2011) are the grandchildren of co-ordinating author of this book – Nonja Peters.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Laurens M.M (1943), 'Labour', in Landheer B (ed), *The Netherlands*, Ch12, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- 2 Gabb, Diane, 'In Search of Utopia', in N. Peters (ed), *The Dutch Down Under 1606-2006*, Perth: UWA Press, 2001.
- 3 Father Kornelis Doornbusch; Mother: Annegien Karp.
- 4 NAA, shipping list for the M.S. Osterley Date of arrival, 24 June, 1913.
- 5 Gerard Reve, in full Gerard Kornelis van het Reve born Dec. 14, 1923, Amsterdam, Netherlands and died April 8, 2006 at Zulte, Belgium. Dutch writer noted for his virtuoso style and sardonic humour. His subject matter was occasionally controversial, treating such topics as homosexuality and sadism. Although Reve invented a fanciful background for himself as the Dutch-born child of Baltic-Russian refugees, he was in fact the son of a Dutch journalist Gerard van het Reve. From 1945 to 1947, Reve attended the Amsterdam school of graphic arts after which he worked as a reporter for *Het Parool*, a national daily newspaper. Unlike his brother Gerard shortened his surname to 'Reve'. Gerard Reve is considered one of the great Dutch post-war prose writers.
- 6 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karel_van_het_Reve
- 7 Karel van het Reve (19 May 1921, Amsterdam – 4 March 1999, Amsterdam) was a Dutch writer, translator and literary historian, teaching and writing on Russian literature. He was born in Amsterdam and was raised as a communist. He lost his 'faith' in his twenties and became an active critic and opponent of the Soviet regime. With his help, work of dissident Andrei Sakharov was smuggled to the west, and his Alexander Herzen Foundation published dissident Soviet literature. He is considered to be one of the finest Dutch essayists, his interests ranging from the fallacies of Marxism to nude beach etiquette. His works include a history of Russian literature, 2 novels and several collections of essays. In 1978 Karel van het Reve delivered the Huizinga Lecture, under the title: *Literatuurwetenschap: het raadsel der onleesbaarheid* (Literary studies. The enigma of unreadability).
- 8 Established in 1947 and named for the Dutch poet and playwright Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft.
- 9 Letter from Berend and Hermina Doornbusch to the Director, Commonwealth Office of Education, Sydney dated 24 January 1948, page 1.
- 10 Lochem is located in the Province of Gelderland.
- 11 B. Doornbusch, letter to Director Commonwealth Office of Education, Sydney written 24 January, 1948.
- 12 NAA, shipping lists Esperance Bay, 28 March 1928.
- 13 Pers.Com. May Doornbusch 2010.
- 14 Pers.Com. May Doornbusch 2011.