

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

OUR MOB: SHIPWRECK SURVIVORS AND WA ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

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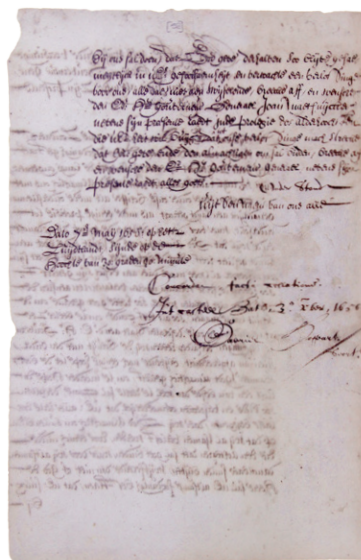
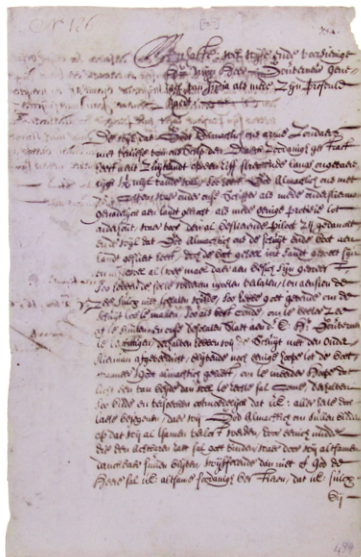


Figure 1
Survivors letter written on the WA coast at Ledge Point in 1656 and sent to Batavia with the longboat crew who were sent there to obtain a rescue ship. The letters were copied and forwarded to the Cape to inform rescue ships where to look.

Courtesy: Steve Caffery of the *Gilt Dragon* Research Group.

Over 200 survivors from *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* VOC shipwrecks are estimated to have been marooned forever on the coast of Western Australia (WA). A single copy of one of the only two letters known to have been written by the 68 survivors of the *Vergulde Draeck* (Gilt Dragon) wreck – who were left on the shore near present day Ledge Point – was found recently by archivists at the Western Cape Archives in Cape Town SA who are working with Steve Caffery from the “Gilt Dragon Research Group”.¹

The letter imploring the Governor General in Batavia to send rescue ships was taken to Batavia by the seven other survivors of the ‘Gilt Dragon’ chosen to make the onerous journey to Java to seek help in the one remaining longboat. Copies of the letters were subsequently sent to the Cape of Good Hope to inform VOC ships, en-route to the Indies, of the last known coordinates of those left behind. Despite a number of rescue attempts, what exactly happened to them still remains a mystery.

The Gerritsen chapter in Section I speculates further on the possible fate of all those stranded forever on the desolate Western Australian shore during the 17th and 18th Centuries from shipwrecks of the *Batavia*, *Gilt Dragon*, *Zuytdorp* and *Zeewijk*, as well as those left behind from the ships sent to rescue them.

Aboriginal folklore tells that some of the fortunate shipwreck survivors cohabited with the local Aboriginal people. Aboriginal oral history tradition indeed links the fate of those marooned from the *Vergulde Draeck* to the *Noongar* People. Specifically the sub group *Yued* whose traditional ‘country’ butts onto the shore where the ship sank, but also possibly the *Wadjuk* and *Belardang* whose country was closeby.

The survivors of the *Zuytdorp*, that went down against the steep cliff faces (now known as the *Zuytdorp Cliffs*)- north of the *Murchison River*- are linked to the *Yamaji* peoples particularly the subgroups: *Nanda*, *Malgana* and *Wadjarri*. It is possible, but less probable, that those from the *Batavia* and the rescue ships *Sardam* and *Goede Hoop* may also have ended their lives with indigenous Australians.² This is supported by *Nanda* oral history, which claims one or more of the many castaways fathered children with Aboriginal mothers. Barry Maguire, of *Noongar* Aboriginal descent, recalls that his family told stories about the “tall men from the North” – referring to the *Yamaji* peoples from the *Murchison-Gascoyne* regions.³

Australian newspapers have at various times carried compelling articles about shipwrecks, Albino Aboriginals or those with European features - from the beginning of European settlement in Western Australia. In March 1833,

in a *Perth Gazette* newspaper article – the Aboriginal man Yagan⁴ is noted as being with his two sons, Narli and Willim (a very Dutch name) whom the journalist estimates are around 9 and 11 years old. Born thus before the British settled there four years earlier. The journalist’s portrayal of Yagan is also thought-provoking:

a subject of terror to the white people, yet commanded their admiration with his... greater stature than the average aboriginal’ and ‘head and shoulders above his fellows, in mind as well as in body.⁵

A myriad articles in the 1890, from papers around Australia describe Jungun an Albino Aboriginal as being on show at Wax Museums and the like in various States.⁶ An article in the *West Australian Newspaper* on Saturday 3 February 1934, by a journalist who only identifies as E.H. recounts the recollections from 40 years earlier of Miss K. McPhee, the daughter of Mr Alex McPhee - the owner of La Grange Pastoral Station. Who claims her father had ‘discovered’ Jan Gun (Jungun) the Albino Aboriginal. Moreover, that she owned an enlarged photo of Jan Gun that had a lock of his reddish brown hair attached to it.⁷ Folkloric tradition of the times also reported groups of Albinos as purportedly seen on the plains behind Hall’s Creek and Wave Hill.

In another article by E.H. in the same edition of the *West Australian* on page four, he speculates about Pieter Ngarras of Shark Bay, an aboriginal who he describes as displaying “European features and behaviours”. In fact, he proposes, as evidence of Pieter Ngarras’ *Dutchness* his physical presence and his obsession with fishing as quoted below:

With a great blonde beard, not white but bright golden, sturdy sinuous limbs decidedly bandy, a noble, girth and a passion for the sea – none of these aboriginal characteristics; Provided that there is the same ‘strong.- atavistic tendency among white races as there are among the Negroid and Asiatic, Pieter is quite possibly, an amazing throw-back over 14 or 15 generations to the early Dutchmen, it may be to the two desperadoes marooned by Pelsart near Champion Bay in ‘1627. The supposition is not an absurdity in that Mendel himself allows the passing of 17 generations for the verification of his theories.

E.H. also noted how the:

Residents of Shark Bay have assured me that Pieter’s forebears were all typical aborigines, and his ancient sister *Mithie*, the only, other full-blood



Figure 2
Nonja Peters interview with Uncle Clayton Drage, Northampton 2016.
Courtesy: Geert Snoeijer.



Figure 3
Rodney Ogilvy. Photo: Geert Snoeijer.



Figure 4
Lily Kickett. Photo: Geert Snoeijer.



Figure 5
Cathy Kickett. Photo: Geert Snoeijer.

that now exists there, is unremarkable. With a hollow nose and black skin incongruous with his white characteristics, this man spends his life cruising the shallow waters of Hamelin Pool ... His most cherished possession is a little dinghy, which he has fitted with a mast and sail, and in which and on which he is eternally working – a trait in itself most un-aboriginal, harking right back to the *Eendracht*, the *Vergulde Draeck* and other adventurers who scoured those seas in the dawn of our history, with many crews marooned and shipwrecked there.⁸

A genetically identifiable disease – Ellis van Creveld (EvC) syndrome – is also linked to possible cohabitation. This autosomal recessive gene syndrome is distinguished visibly by polydactylism – the growth of extra fingers and toes.⁹ WA medical researchers Goldblatt et al 1992, noted that the feature has a vastly increased incidence among persons of the Old Order Amish and people of WA Aboriginal descent.¹⁰ The Amish incidence is estimated at 5 cases per 1000 live births. The Aboriginal population in south west WA having a purported carrier prevalence of 1/39 live births.¹¹ The existence of the Ellis van Creveld syndrome among the *Nanda* and their many light-skinned, blue eyes and fair-haired offspring, boosts their belief in the cohabitation legend notwithstanding the great admixture of UK colonists post settlement.

Although conclusive evidence to support the claim to cohabitation would be exceedingly hard to find, the connection here is that a particular portion of the 17th and 18th century Dutch population from which the crew of the *Zuiddorp*, *Batavia* and *Gilt Dragon* were recruited, included Mennonites. Mennonites were important players in the culture, economy, intellectual and social life of the Netherlands from the 17th Century 'Golden Age'.¹² They were also some of the largest investors into VOC Spice Trade voyages. Mennonites were also among the Skippers and sailors on VOC ships, but unlikely to be soldiers given that their religion opposed all forms of violence. However, they were purchasers of the natural science goods that the ships brought in from countries around the Indian Ocean Rim. Moreover, large groups of Mennonites lived in the towns of *Franeker* and *Harlinger* in the bay opposite Texel - the departure harbour in the Netherlands of many VOC vessels.

The Aboriginals depicted in the portraits accompanying this vignette are all related; albeit sometimes distantly.

Rodney Ogilvy

The Ogilvy family claim their Dutch heritage is from survivors of the *Zuiddorp*, which sailed from the Cape of Good Hope in April 1712, and later disappeared. No survivors arrived by boat at Batavia (Jakarta), and no search of the Western Australian coast was organised. Wreckage was found at the Zuiddorp Cliffs, 60 km north of the Murchison River. Of particular interest in the case of the *Zuiddorp* is archaeological evidence that some survivors lived ashore for an undetermined period of time. Campsites have been located inland from the wreck site, and the possibility of absorption into the local Aboriginal community is feasible.

Cathy and Lily Kickett

They are sisters and they share the same parents, yet Cathy has freckles.

Her response to the researchers' bewilderment prompted her to declare: "You do not have to be black to be Aboriginal."

Jacko Whitby

He notes:

I was one of the [people] that was born with the extra finger so my genes' association with the survivors of the Dutch wreck is probably a little bit stronger ... and there are quite a few people in the area around now with the effects of that disease or what[ever] they call it, the connection of the Dutch ... and the different other things that go with it ... I am probably the only one that has got [it]... of our family because of the extra finger that I was born with.¹³

Bethany Mallard

Aboriginal oral tradition supports the Mallards' claim to an alleged Dutch heritage. Bethany's grandfather, Charles Mallard - who was photographed with the figurine from the bulkhead of the *Zuiddorp* - is among those who passed on the story to his grandchildren. Many stories also abound about how Aboriginal children on Murchison and Tamala Stations used to play with coins found at the *Zuiddorp* shipwreck site.

Peidence Lawson

She is related to the Mallard family. The blonde hair of Peidence Lawson and Cathy Kickett's freckles are considered signs of a purported Dutch heritage by the Mallards.

The information in this vignette is part of a larger exhibition project by Geert Snoeijer and Nonja Peters, together with Bart de Graaff - Historian of South Africa - and Linguist Aone van Engelenhoven (Kisar). Entitled 'The Forgotten of the Dutch East India Company', it is a photographic and oral histories venture to comprehend and gain a clearer understanding of the far-reaching impact - upon the lives not only of indigenous peoples of Western Australia but also of Indonesia and Southern Africa - of the VOC incursion into the Indian Ocean Region during the 'Age of Exploration'.

The researchers are eager to find out what it is exactly that connects the distant 'orphans of the VOC' with their real or imagined ancestors. Also why recognition of this ancient 'umbilical cord' continues to play such a central role in their lives today. The exhibition will be on display in the WA Museum Geraldton, as well as in museums in South Africa, Indonesia, the Netherlands and Brussels.



Figure 6
Jacko Whitby. Photo: Geert Snoeijer.



Figure 7
Bethany Mallard. Photo: Geert Snoeijer.



Figure 8
Peidence Lawson. Photo: Geert Snoeijer.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The letter was translated from ancient Dutch to English by author and novelist Dr Dan Sleight with the assistance of Steve Caffery.
- 2 http://www.nederland-australie2006.nl/geschiedenis/nl/html/ontdekkingsreizigers_scheepsreizen.html
- 3 Geert Snoeijer and Nonja Peters, *Verlander: Forgotten Children of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC)* - October 2016
- 4 *Perth Gazette*, 1 June 1833, p.87.
- 5 <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/yagan-aboriginal-resistance-hero>
- 6 https://www.google.nl/?gfe_rd=cr&ei=s8TWV6SBAevG8Ae3orWYBw&gws_rd=ssl#q=trove+newspapers
- 7 *The Queensland Observer*, 22 October, 1898; *Argus West Australian*
- 8 *West Australian Newspapers*, 3 February 1934, p.4
- 9 Goldblatt JC, Minutillo PJ, Hurst J 1992. Ellis-van Creveld Syndrome in a Western Australian Aboriginal Community, Postaxial Polydactyly as Heterogenous Manifestation *Medical Journal of Australia* 157 pp. 271-272. Disproportionate dwarfism, postaxial polydactyly, ectodermal dysplasia, a small chest, and a high frequency of congenital heart defects characterize this autosomal recessive syndrome, which has increased incidence among persons of Old Order Amish descent.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 Goldblatt JC, Minutillo PJ, Hurst J 1992. Ellis-van Creveld Syndrome in a Western Australian Aboriginal Community, Postaxial Polydactyly as Heterogenous Manifestation in *Medical Journal of Australia*, 157 pp. 271-272.
- 12 Lecture one: Mennonites, Natural Knowledge, and the Dutch Golden Age, Ernst Hamm, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2012). <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/winter-2012/lecture-one-mennonites-natural-knowledge-and-dutch-golden>
- 13 Jackos extra digit was removed soon after birth.

Figure 9

Zuytdorp Cliffs - the Zuytdorp Cliffs mark the western edge of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area. They tower up to 200m high and stretch more than 200 km from Steep Point to Kalbarri, they are the longest fault scarp in Australia. Courtesy: Alec Coles.





Figure 10
A collage of the research travels of Geert Snoeijer and Nonja Peters, 2016.