

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

TRACING YOUR DUTCH ANCESTORS IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

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Figure 1
Bly mum & baby
Courtesy: M.Bly.

While academic researchers and historians have long been aware of the wonderful resources to be found in Archives, the average family historian is only just becoming familiar with the wide range of records that can throw some light on who our ancestors were and what they did.

Migration records in particular are rich sources of information as detailed entries are kept for individuals and families at the different stages of entry, residency and citizenship. They can make fascinating reading, with every page telling a story.

The National Archives of Australia holds an abundance of material of relevance to researchers interested in Dutch migrants, especially family historians tracing their Dutch heritage. While the Archives hold some colonial records, most records were created after Federation in 1901, reflecting the growing involvement by the Federal Government in the lives of individuals since then. This period also coincides with the great wave of migration after World War II. Here are the stories of two people of Dutch origin who made this journey of discovery through records held by the Archives.

MY STORY

I came to Western Australia as a very young child with my parents, who felt they had to leave an ailing post-war Europe for the ‘promised land’. My father had heard about Australia’s wonderful opportunities while he was serving with the Dutch army in Indonesia during the Indonesian War of

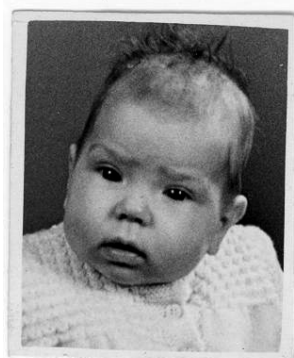


Figure 2
Passport photos Blijlevens family
Courtesy: M.Bly.



Independence. In 1951 he returned to the Netherlands full of enthusiasm and managed to talk my mother into emigrating. There was a delay as my mother found she was pregnant and approval to travel was deferred, until after I was born and could pass a mandatory health check¹. Finally, when I was seven months old my parents packed up their belongings, (one small crate and one suitcase²) and set sail in the *MS Fairsea* in February 1953 under the Netherlands Australia Migration Agreement (NAMA). This agreement, which involved financial assistance to qualifying migrants, was one of several developed with various governments and international organisations, in order to encourage mass migration to Australia and to help bolster its defence and development capabilities after World War II.

Upon our arrival in Fremantle on 14 March 1953, we were sent to the Holden Immigration Camp at Northam, about 100 km east of Perth. During this post war period of migration there was a critical housing shortage. This led to the leasing of Department of Defence camps, which were no longer required for the war effort, and their conversion into migrant accommodation by the State and Commonwealth Governments.³ Unless migrants were fortunate enough to have friends or family with whom they could stay, they could expect to spend their initial ‘settling in period’ in their new country in such camps. We stayed in the ‘Holden’ Camp for six months, before moving into our first rental house on the outskirts of Northam. As required by the conditions of the assisted passage, my father worked for the then State Electricity Commission for two years, after which he became a mechanic at Page Motors.

For my parents, their new life in Northam was not as rosy as they expected, although there were positive aspects. They had little in the way of possessions; luxuries were few, the Northam summers were very harsh and two boys were added to the family, increasing the financial pressures. However, after living in tenement style housing in Rotterdam, the wide spaces, including a large garden, were amazing and there was always the knowledge that with some hard work, the possibility of advancement and improvement of their standard of living was very real.

By 1959 my parents were ready to make the commitment of becoming Australian citizens and my father took advantage of the naturalisation process to abbreviate the surname, as it was causing significant pronunciation and spelling issues.

Nine years after arriving in Northam, our family moved to Perth where my parents were looking forward to both better opportunities and lifestyle, which were realised in the remaining years of their lives. Difficult as some of the early times and conditions were, my parents never regretted their move away from the Netherlands; Australia had become home.

I was delighted to discover that the National Archives holds the official government records documenting our family’s migration and that access to them could be requested, when they entered the open period under the provisions of the *Archives Act 1983*.

Figure 3
NAA PP208_1, W1959-529 AR
Courtesy: M.Bly.

Figure 4
NAA PP208_1, W1959-528, alien registration
Courtesy: M.Bly.

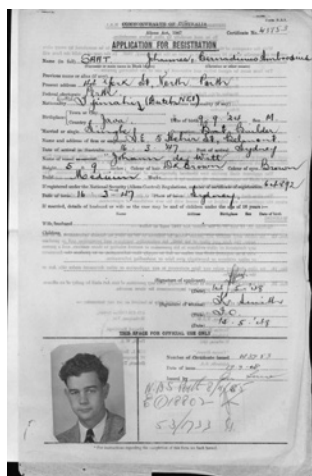


Figure 5
K1331, 1955 SAAT JBA application for registration as Alien. Courtesy: M.Bly.

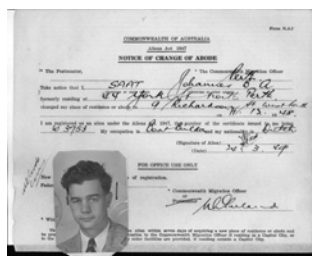


Figure 6
K1331, 1955 SAAT JBA change of abode. Courtesy: M.Bly.



Figure 7
NAA K1331, 1955 SAAT JBA. Courtesy: M.Bly.

I still remember vividly my excitement when shown my family’s passenger arrival information. As I carefully turned the fragile pages of the *Fairsea’s* passenger list, my family’s details leapt out at me “Schemers disembarking at Fremantle – Blijlevens J J, wife, 1 child”⁴. Further details emerged in the following pages – my father was 26, a driver by occupation, my mother was 25 and a housewife and we all intended to stay in Western Australia as permanent residents. In addition to the passenger list, I found the nominal roll for the voyage, which contained very similar information, but did include some extra detail such as the quantity of luggage and accommodation arrangements after landing⁵. Searching further through the collection, I located our migrant selection documents held in the Canberra office, digitised and able to be read online. In this file I observed the application and approval process for the assisted passage and the delays while my parents waited for my birth⁶. The Perth collection held the alien registration papers completed by my parents upon landing, as required by all non-British persons aged over sixteen years, in accordance with the provisions of the *Aliens Act 1947*. Our original destination was shown as Melbourne, and was crossed out and replaced by Fremantle. This revived the memory of an early family story regarding our change of destination during the voyage due to fluctuations in state immigration quotas, and which resulted in our lives being lived on the west coast instead of the east coast. The alien registration forms and other papers had been collated by the Department of Immigration into a file documenting my parents’ applications for naturalisation. There were in the forms filled out by my parents and other administrative pages, important details relating to our migration story⁷.

JOOP’S STORY

Other Dutch migrants came from the Netherlands East Indies. One, Joop Saat, was a member of the Dutch Merchant Navy serving on ships, which carried Australian and US troops and war materials to the various war zones in the south west Pacific area during World War II. During this period Joop became a frequent visitor to a number of ports on the northern and eastern Australian seaboard.

After the war and the demise of the Netherlands East Indies, Joop decided to emigrate to Australia, arriving on the *Johan de Witt* on 16 March 1947⁸. Like other migrants, Joop had to undergo a medical examination, register as an Alien, notify the authorities of changes of circumstances and comply with other bureaucratic requirements.

Joop’s alien registration papers show that although he arrived in Sydney, he intended to live in Western Australia and his occupation is given as “boat builder”⁹. This file includes also passport-sized photographs, one of which shows him as a dashing young naval officer. By 1953 when Joop applied for naturalisation, he had become a joiner working for The Millars Timber and Trading Company¹⁰. The application forms reveal much information about his life and work before he came to Australia, including his birth in 1924 in

Java, details of his parents, the years spent in the Netherlands, his period of service in the Dutch Merchant Navy from 1941 to 1947 and his marriage in Australia in 1948. Joop recently discovered his records in the Perth collection and he had this to say:

Recently I decided to find out something about my earlier days in Australia, so I approached the Perth office of the National Archives. I was amazed at the number of records they had available. They were able to arrange for me to receive copies of documents, the existence of which I had forgotten about or never knew existed.

These included the name of the ship I arrived in (*SS Johan de Witt*) complete with passenger lists and date of arrival. The Archives had the originals of my application for permanent residency in Australia, my application to become a naturalised British subject (and an Australian citizen) complete with the character references supplied by an erstwhile neighbour, the foreman at my then place of employment and a police constable. There were the results of my medical examinations, even my notification as to changes of my abode; this latter requirement was something all foreigners had to comply with at that time. I was impressed with the amount of information available.¹¹

Joop and I share a Dutch heritage, although we came to Australia from different parts of the world. The records documenting our journeys form part of the Archives' collection, along with those for hundreds of thousands of other migrants, just waiting to be discovered.

Migration and other records are listed on the Archives' online database at www.naa.gov.au. Some have already been digitised and purchasing a copy is easily arranged. The records are generally held in the state where the person lived at the time of their interaction with the Commonwealth Government and the Archives has a head office in Canberra and an office in each state and territory.

ENDNOTES

- 1 NAA: A2478, BLIJLEVENS J J.
- 2 NAA: PP353/1, 1953/63/1694
- 3 Peters, N., *Milk and Honey but no Gold*, UWA Press, 2001, pp117-119.
- 4 NAA: K269, 14 March 1953 FAIRSEA
- 5 NAA: PP353/1, 1953/63/1694
- 6 NAA: A2478, BLIJLEVENS J J.
- 7 NAA: PP208/1, W1959/5528 and PP208/1, W1959/5529
- 8 NAA: K1331, 1955/SAAT J B A
- 9 NAA: K1331, 1955/SAAT J B A
- 10 NAA: PP15/1, 1953/65/1733
- 11 J B A SAAT (personal communication, 7 November 2006)

Figure 8
NAA K1331, 1955-SAAT J B A AR
Courtesy: M.Bly.