A Dutch Home in Australia: Dutch Women's Migration Stories

Wendy Walker-Birckhead

Introduction

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic study of Dutch assimilation and 'invisibility' in Australia (Walker-Birckhead 1988). It argues that migration has different meanings - for Dutch men who saw it as being about 'adventure' and assimilation, and Dutch women who understood migration mainly in terms of home and homesickness. Dutch women's experience has gone largely unheard in the research literature; if anything, Dutch women are more 'invisible' in Australia than Dutch men. Why they came, the meaning of migration in their lives - these are questions which this paper sets out to explore. However, before moving on to their individual stories, one first of all has to place Dutch women's migration within a wider policy context, that of Dutch 'family' migration to Australia. The middle section of the chapter is organised around the following themes: the decision to migrate, arrival and the Dutch home in Australia. The final section presents a case history describing a husband's homesickness, and considers what this reveals about men and women's different meanings of migration.

Dutch Family Migration to Australia

Compared to other post-war migrant groups, Dutch migration to Australia was overwhelmingly family compared to individual migration (*Emigratie* 1957: 30).

Family migration might be described as ‘characteristically Dutch’, however, it happened largely because both Holland and Australia saw it as a solution to their respective population and economic problems. Australia has historically seen itself as under-populated, and relied on Britain for population and skilled workers. In the 1950’s it turned to Europe for the first time. As ‘blonde’ northern Europeans the Dutch were considered racially and culturally superior; as ‘model’ migrants or even ‘surrogate’ Britons’ (Harney 1983: ix). Their ‘large’ Dutch families (and the larger, the better) offered a positive alternative to the families of ‘darker’ migrant groups, and they were offered correspondingly, preferential terms and conditions in Australia (Walker-Birckhead 1988: 100).

The Netherlands approach to ‘organised’ or government sponsored migration was profoundly assimilationist, that is, emigrants were to fit in or disappear into the receiving country *(Emigratie* 1955:79). Migration was intended as a permanent solution to its perceived over-population problems, and ‘successful’ migration meant not returning to the Netherlands. Family migration was considered by *Emigratie,* the official mouthpiece for Dutch emigration policies during the 1950’s, to be an efficient means of shedding excess population because more people left at a time or ‘per unit’. Intending migrants were encouraged through offers of assisted passage and subsidised housing, and promises of a ‘better future’ for children. Family migration was seen also as a more permanent solution because men with families were more tied down and less likely than single men to return to the Netherlands. Children leaving with families was also considered desirable because it offered a solution for ‘future’ as well as present unemployment problems (Hofstede 1964: 65).

Catholic and Calvinist Dutch had the highest birth-rates in the Netherlands during this period. Emigration was also a politically acceptable solution to over-population given both churches longstanding opposition to birth control (Hofstede *op. cit.*: 54). Dutch migration to Australia was for various reasons predominantly Roman Catholic while Protestant Dutch mainly went to Canada (*cf* Beltz 1964, Julian 1989).[1] The Dutch Catholic Church was strongly committed to the notion of family migration (Kampschoer 1954) and Australia with its well established system of Catholic parishes and schools was considered a good receiving country for Catholics, where families could practise and maintain their faith (Hofstede 1964: 125). It was considered crucial also for Catholic men's spiritual welfare that wives migrate with them rather than they leave as single men. Women, more specifically wives, were the lynchpin then of Catholic migration to Australia. However, being more tied to their immediate environment, they were seen as 'naturally' opposed to migration and less 'emigration minded'. The challenge was to redefine migration as a worthwhile, praiseworthy activity for Dutch women as well as men:

> *Attempts should be made to achieve a disposition of the female youth of such a nature, that it is looked upon as a higher vocation to depart as the wife of a man from an emigration-country to an immigration country, to perform in that latter country the role of a mother to children who help in the development of a young society and in the expansion of the Church in the immigration country where one lives* (van Campen 1954: 132).

Women were central then to both Dutch and Australian migration policies. Their role was to accompany Dutch workers and their children to Australia and ensure that they stayed there, by making homes in the reception centres, hostels, garages, caravans and houses where they were to live. Yet, very little is known about these women who made family migration possible. They show up in the official records only as 'dependents' accompanying Dutch workers; and little attention has been paid to their

subsequent experiences in Australia, except in terms of their role in 'unsuccessful' or return migration. We have some idea about who the men were and why they came - if only in economic terms - but the women remain shadowy and incidental figures. With apparently so much to lose, why ever did they migrate?

The Decision to Migrate

Like most migrant women Dutch women 'followed' men and their ideas to Australia (Jupp 1966:33). Most of the 48 cases in this study involved family rather than individual migration, with the decision to migrate attributed to a husband, father or son. The migration started with men - it was in their 'character' (they were restless or loners or not close to their families) there were work opportunities - and they, not women, take responsibility for its outcomes.

'Only a matter of distance', 'It was easy', 'OK with me': this kind of understatement recurs throughout men's migration stories. They emphasise the straight-forward and rational aspects of migration, in line with the 'rationalistic' stance taken by the Dutch government towards emigration (Petersen 1955). Women, on the other hand, describe how 'hard' it was, and their homesickness at leaving home and family (especially mothers and sisters). Some say that their mothers have never really 'forgiven' them for leaving; one refused to leave the Netherlands until both her parents were dead. Frederika describes her parents' reaction to her leaving the Netherlands with her husband and two daughters in 1948:

> *I felt good about it [coming to Australia] but I had a very hard time in the first years because my mother and father were terribly opposed to it. They couldn't settle their minds in their thinking - they were not domineering - but the idea*

> *that I was so far away they couldn't get. My father offered my husband the business in order to have us stay. He said 'Are you not satisfied with what you have? Well, if you are satisfied with what you have? ... Why go and search so far away for the unknown'. And it took years [to get them to understand].*
>
> **How did you answer that sort of question?** *Well we had to tell them very diplomatically that - well we were married and adults and - we had to live our lives ... She still couldn't get over it. She never - even to the point of nearly disliking my husband - he was the one who took me away.*

Her mother was correct; her husband had taken her away from them. Frederika was now someone's wife, and that outweighed her loyalty to her parents. This is how migration 'happened' for many Dutch women - they were taken by husbands away to Australia - but they still had to make the hard decision to leave their parents. Women describe how as daughters, they had heavy responsibilities in their families, which ranged from caring for ageing parents to dropping by for coffee every morning after shopping:

> *When I was in Holland ... and went to the shop I had to go past my mother for a cup of coffee or tea. She would say 'God! You went past and didn't come in.'* ***And I missed that here.*** (my emphasis)

This woman's account captures the ambivalence various women felt about what was expected of them by their families and what they lost coming to Australia. The severe post-war housing shortage may well have tipped the balance in favour of emigration for some. Another describes how she and her husband had to live with her mother because they could not find a house of their own:

> *So my mother said, 'You can take the upstairs room and live upstairs'. So we did ... and so that is how we got married but after four years and one baby, you know, we were still living upstairs ...* ***and then he came with (the idea) to go to Australia.*** (my emphasis)

About one quarter (five out of the 21) of the women interviewed who left the Netherlands as adults were living with their parents or next door to their parents before emigrating. One woman describes how the prospect of such an arrangement

made her feel:

> *You get married and you live in with Mum and Dad. Then as soon as you can, you make a baby because you get your own apartment ... By the time you get three kids, you get a three bedroom apartment ... But what happens? They have a flat two blocks further down from Mum. So they have coffee with Mum every morning - and its a closed circuit and I could see this happening - I could seem myself being sucked in. And once things have gone too far, you can't get out.* ***So I up and left because it scared the hell out of me.*** (my emphasis)

I am certainly not suggesting that this future which she saw, *'scared the hell'* out of all these women, so much that they all ran away to Australia or even that they saw their lives in Holland that way. (One has to bear in mind also that they are looking back at a decision made over thirty years ago.) But it does seem that their role in the family, combined with housing shortages, may have predisposed some women to view emigration as a way of freeing themselves from family pressures, at least to the extent to having a home of their own.

Arrival

'*You and your looking for adventure all the time. Look what you have got us into!'*
What comes through women's stories about the early days are feelings of loss and loneliness, and the need to overcome these feelings. This is how one man remembers his mother's horrified reaction to conditions in the migrant camps (where most government assisted migrants were accommodated on their arrival in Australia). Other informants tell a similar story: the mud and rain, all the various nationalities mixed up together, the fighting, and how the camps resembled concentration camps (Walker-Birckhead 1995, cf Wijnen 1983). They describe eating 'inedible' food surrounded by *'dirty, ill mannered'* people, and parents sleeping in one small room with children several huts away *'running wild all over the place'*. Women recount their efforts to

keep their families separate in their own cramped sleeping quarters and cooking their own meals over small primus stoves. Such conditions would have been a special affront to women who saw themselves as ‘a shining symbol of cleanliness and order’ (Haase 1958: 90, also Schama 1988).

> *That is why they are so rotten for... So they make them so especial, so rotten, that you should get out as quick as possible.*

The only solution for the Dutch was to get out of the camps. That meant Dutch men finding work wherever they could, and this they did. It was in the workplace where Dutch men made their first real contact with Australia; on far-flung industrial projects at Geelong, Newcastle, Wollongong, the Warragamba Dam, and the Snowy Mountains as well as on farms and railways. The work often took men away from their families who remained behind in holding centres, or it involved locating families in small rural communities where there were few other Dutch but there was a house available.

Clearly, the masculine motif of migration as ‘adventure’ and a new beginning, had little relevance for these women. Faced with temporary and inadequate housing in migrant camps or garages, feeding their children ‘properly’ and keeping them clean and disciplined, would have taken up all their energy and left little over for ‘exploring’ Australia. Dutch women’s entry into Australia seems to have been much more gradual and incomplete, in that they largely stayed at home, to raise children and keep house. Workforce participation rates generally are quite low for first generation Dutch women, which is consistent with traditional Dutch working patterns (de Kruyf 1995: 236). About one half of the women in this study who came to Australia as adults have never worked in Australia. Their most common explanation is that their

husbands would not allow it, although they are not complaining about this. Several 'defied' their husbands and went to work. Indeed, their knowledge of Australia seems largely second-hand through their husbands and children who have gone out and 'assimilated' into Australia. Their role was quite different, it was to make a Dutch home 'inside' Australia.

A Dutch Home in Australia

Dutch women came to Australia not as workers but as homemakers whose task it was to compensate for the losses entailed by migration and re-build homes and families in Australia. This entailed dealing with emotions of migration too:

> *I remember only in the beginning, when we had moved to Canberra and life was getting a little more settled because we had a house ... And sometimes that, it all of a sudden struck you to (the heart) the utter loneliness. Because everything was so different - and it made you sick. It really made you sick and* ***the only thing how I could compensate was (to) get out and mix with the rest of the family.*** (my emphasis)

The first, important milestone in their migration stories, when things started to improve and they felt more settled, was establishing their own home. The 'typical' working class story involves a series of moves along with job changes from migrant camps to caravan parks, garages, and shared flats. Hopefully, each move was a step closer to the ideal of a home of one's own. Once there, the task was not just to furnish it but to make it as 'Dutch' a home as possible. Their homes were to be more decorated, more homely, than the Australian homes they saw. They wanted their homes to be *gezellig* (cozy, intimate, hospitable; *cf* Pauwels 1980) like a Dutch home should be. Women I interviewed can readily explain what this means and also why an Australian home is not *gezellig*. For example:

> *Because we are living more inside at home (in the Netherlands) the houses are*

> *smaller. The weather is bad, you've got to live inside. The house is tiny, always clean ... They're always ready (for visitors) by ten or eleven o'clock ... As soon as you come, about two o'clock in the afternoon. when you come we make a cup of tea and then have another cup of tea... And then after that, we go <u>home</u> and in the meantime, we talk (laugh). Also, we have more in the surroundings of the house. We have a table in the middle. Really Australian people, they have everything along the side and maybe an ironing board in the middle (we both laugh). Of course, we've got an ironing board too, but we keep it away... It's not there day in, day out. Because that's something - an atmosphere - no we don't like it. (speaker's emphasis)*

Dutch homes are more 'furnished' than Australian homes, especially in the living-room. The windows, typically, are framed by lace curtains and there is often a small rug on the coffee table which is encircled by large, comfortable arm chairs. There is a great deal to look at - copper miniatures, wall hangings, wall tiles, wall clocks, paintings and pot plants - much of which is miniaturised and hanging on the walls, as if otherwise the room would be too 'small' to hold everything. With its indirect soft lighting and armchairs placed invitingly around the coffee table, the living room is the focal point of the house; to such an extent that the Dutch have been described as having a 'living room' culture (Taft 1961, Warmbrunn 1965). However, the 'Dutch home' is more than a well worn assemblage of old fashioned memorabilia and cliches (which some 'newer' Dutch have implied). A middle class Dutch woman whose home definitely does not conform to the stereotype of the 'cosy' Dutch home still knows what a Dutch home - her home - should be like, and recognises the difference between this and an Australian home:

> *Although I'm quite severe (in my taste) - and not have little knick-knacks here and there, many things on the wall. For me the Australian homes look a bit run-of-the-mill. As if they were bought at Norman Ross ... They have no 'sfeer' (atmosphere), so <u>bare</u>. ... Bare is, for instance, there are no plants in the house, There are a few of these formal pictures, chairs along the sides and nothing in the middle. It is all of a colour, has no colour whatsoever. Unlived in - a musty smell - and no lights! ... It is just as if you cannot do anything in that room but sit! And watch television but not read a book or play music...* ***In Holland, it's the living-room where you live. The livingroom is <u>never</u> a room where you (do) not live*** *(laugh).* (my emphasis)

Informants say that Dutch houses are *'gezellig*' because the Netherlands is so crowded and has such a cold climate, whereas Australians live more outdoors. In other words, Dutch people have no choice; they have to live inside in small rooms. What they are really saying is that they <u>like</u> to live this way: and here they are making several kinds of statements. They are talking about matters of taste and aesthetics, and rejecting Australian homes as non-descript, even ugly. They are also speaking metaphorically; that is, the 'Dutch home' is how life should be (Bourdieu 1973). A Dutch home is 'warm', with an inviting cosy atmosphere which is ready for and encourages sociability. Like the furniture lay-out, the household schedule accommodates visitors. More 'happens' inside a Dutch home and socialising - parties, birthdays, anniversaries, Saint Nicholas day, coffee mornings - is home and family oriented.

Informants are describing what various observers claim is a distinctively Dutch 'family oriented' culture (*cf* Keur and Keur 1955, Goudsblom 1967, Shetter 1971) but they are also talking about their feelings about life in Australia, or what it is like to be a Dutch migrant in Australia. 'Really' Australian houses are 'bare' and cold and not very hospitable (a common complaint being that Australians hardly ever invite them into their homes). Living-rooms are not for 'living', they are for guests and for watching television. In Australian homes, they say, a distinction is made between the living room or parlour which is for guests and the more intimate 'family' room or kitchen which is for family, close friends and everyday life: They feel excluded by this. In an Australian house, a guest is made to wait until the middle of the afternoon, when the visit is almost over, for their cup of tea. Cups of tea and coffee are not pressed on guests to welcome their arrival. There are no cups of coffee, chocolate and

cakes to punctuate and prolong the visit and encourage talk. The table is not ready, the chairs are too far apart. It is all so bare, so unwelcoming. By rejecting the Australian house, Dutch people are saying that they do not want to be an anonymous, excluded kind of person with nothing to say: they do not want to be a migrant. They are also prescribing the cure to their predicament, which is to fill (even over-fill) their 'Dutch' houses with cosiness, life and significance.

To accomplish this, required a great deal of effort as well as cultural knowledge on the part of these women. It was very difficult in the early years to acquire all the necessary props: the furniture, lighting, decorative bits and pieces, the coffee and cakes (let alone all the people). Most would have started out their lives in Australia only with what would have fit into a packing crate. Such goods - even if they could be afforded - were not yet available in Australia. In those days, people came expecting to be 'pioneers', to live in tents and build their own homes: and that must have been just what it felt like. Simply scraping together basic household necessities (often second-hand) would have been a major accomplishment; let alone making a house 'cosy'. More affluent, 'independent' migrants who were not restricted in terms of what they could bring, arrived better equipped:

> *When my husband wanted to migrate, I said 'Listen, the dining-room set is going with me or I am not going'. I have heard so many stories, people living in chicken sheds and sitting on packing cases, fruit crates. Not me! Either the dining room suite is going (laugh) or I am not going. So, we had a sideboard, table and chairs.* (speaker's emphasis)

And not just 'any' dining-room suite but a good Dutch one. This woman was not going to Australia as some poor Dutch migrant who had to 'make do' with furniture made from packing crates or with poor quality Australian furniture. In fact, the only furniture they have bought in Australia, are their beds.

Informants tell me that life in Australia has gradually changed for the better. It has become less 'Australian', thanks to all the post-war migrants, and eventually they could afford to buy the nicer furnishings. However, the best way still seems to be, to buy house furnishings in the Netherlands. As well as ensuring that they are of the best quality and up-to-date, this serves symbolically to undo the original trip, when Dutch migrants came to Australia with little more than the clothes on their back. It shows everyone, here and back home, that they have really made it.

As I have already suggested, good food is an essential part of Dutch hospitality: strong coffee, rich sweet biscuits, tender meat and vegetables. In the early days, finding good Dutch food in Australia was difficult:

> *Like the meat, we were used to refined meat, really nice cut, nice sliced and everything and here when we went to the butcher, well, it was chops ... And all those little pieces of bone through it and everything. We couldn't stomach that in the beginning... The meat here still - I do not like it ... No the food in the beginning I could not [stomach] and then you started to get 'een' (a) Dutch butcher and he came along the door... That was an improvement.* (speaker's emphasis)

Similarly, this woman did not like, 'could not stomach', Australian biscuits and cakes ('all that mock cream') and like other Dutch women, she 'straight away' started to do her own baking, although she had never baked in the Netherlands. It had not been necessary, because of all the excellent bakeries nearby; in the Netherlands, prepared food had been fit to eat. Also, to get more 'refined' (delicate, tender, fresh) Dutch vegetables, seeds were originally imported from the Netherlands; now it is possible to buy them locally from Dutch nurseries in Australia.

The Homesick Husband

This case history describes a husband's homesickness. In doing so, it further explores men and women's meanings of migration, and also questions a generally held idea that women's homesickness is a primary cause of 'failed' or return migration (Beijer 1961, Blauw and Elich 1984, and Hofstede 1964). Mrs V. and I are talking here about how 'assimilated' Dutch men are compared to Dutch women. She then describes the affect on her husband of their first trip back to the Netherlands:

> *Yes, I think so because most of* ***the women stay home and men are more in the outside world****. But, my husband was like that too, until we went to Holland in '75. We were there for six months, and when we got back he was homesick.* ***Not me, but he was homesick*** *...[Before that trip] he was not talking about Holland. No. He was quite happy here. He had a beaut job, really what he liked. It was his hobby and his job. He didn't mind if he worked till ten or twelve at night ... But then we went back and he was homesick.*(my emphasis)
>
> (Self): Any particular thing he was nostalgic about?
>
> *Ja, I think he - there is a sort of 'cosiness' in Holland and he never had that because he was young when he was on his own. So he never really had a home... And when we came back in '75, well - it was really* <u>*nice*</u>*.* (speaker's emphasis)
>
> (Self): It was something he'd never had before?
>
> *Yes..* ***And then he wondered why he ever came****. And we came back, he said to people there, 'We are back in five years' time. He was really - turned into himself ...* (my emphasis)
>
> (Self): So in a sense it was your husband's initiative to come to Australia?
>
> *Ja, and* <u>*I just followed*</u> *(laughs) and also when he would have gone back, I would have gone too.* (speaker's emphasis)

Twenty years after coming to Australia, Mr V. was suddenly homesick and wondering 'why he ever came' (note the single pronoun). Like many Dutch, Mr V. came to Australia for better work opportunities and Mrs V 'followed'. Mrs V. describes her

husband as being, like other men in this study, a ‘loner’ in the Netherlands and not close to his family. Migration was ‘easy’ for him, she explains, ‘he never really had a home (there)’. In other words, he never had a home to miss. It was during this visit, that Mr V. discovered not only homesickness but also the meaning of ‘home’.

Mrs V. considers, nevertheless, that they did the ‘right thing’ in migrating for his professional ambitions were more than realised. What about her?

> *No, not so much for myself. I only wanted to see my husband happy because he had <u>such</u> a sad life (in the War) and I thought, ‘Well, he is <u>not</u> (happy) - and I am happy wherever I am.’ (speaker’s emphasis)*

That did not matter, it was his reasons which were important. She on the other hand could be ‘happy’ anywhere. In the end, Mr V. decided not to return, for the same kind of reason that he left in the first place:

> *He went back to his old job just to see what it was, and he said ‘the same hypocrisy is there’. And he said, ‘<u>no’</u>* (speaker’s emphasis)

Like most of the women interviewed in this study, Mrs V. was not surprised by homesickness; she did not need a trip home to ‘discover’ its reality. Mrs V. also knew its cure, which was her making a home for her family within the enormous, empty ‘landscape’ of Australia. Yet, Mrs V. would have gone back, if that had been his decision (even though this would have meant leaving children and grandchildren in Australia). His homesickness was the problem, not hers; an interpretation which is supported by Harvey’s description of Dutch returnees (1980: 12) as ‘homesick’ men and ‘complaisant’ wives. The reasons and the crisis were his, and Mrs V subordinated herself to them. Migrating, staying or returning - the outcome rested with him.

Summary

My argument is that there are two different 'models' (Ardener 1972: xi) of migration operating; for men migration has been about 'adventure' and going into the unknown, whereas for women it has been about 'home' and 'homesickness'. In this sense, men remain outsiders and women, the 'moral centre(s)' of their families (Beijer 1961: 312) even though they are migrants. The Dutch housewife, we are told, is 'world famous ... a shining symbol of cleanliness and order' (Haase 1958: 90). Emigration seems only to have enhanced her bourgeois virtues. Without her, a Dutch man cannot have a '*gezellig'* home. She has 'followed' her husband to Australia as a good wife and homemaker: but also as a home-breaker by leaving her family of origin behind in the Netherlands. Her responsibility now is to ensure that her family stays in Australia; ironically, she does this by building a 'Dutch home' there. Finally, I would suggest that feeling so poor, alone and 'homesick' made a Dutch home a real necessity for her and that rather than opening the door to 'adventure', emigration has to a large extent 'enveloped' (Goudsblom 1964: 138) the Dutch housewife even more securely in what is left of the family circle.

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[1] 44.7% of all Dutch migrants were Roman Catholic as compared to 38.5% for the general population in the Netherlands during the 1950's (Hofestede 1964: 97).