

THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY A RELUCTANT DISCOVERER

Author(s): Femme S. Gaastra

Source: *The Great Circle*, 1997, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1997), pp. 109-123

Published by: Australian Association for Maritime History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41555332>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Australian Association for Maritime History is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Great Circle*

JSTOR

THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY A RELUCTANT DISCOVERER

The fact that Willem De Vlamingh, master of the *Geelvink*, discovered and charted the coast of Western Australia three hundred years ago, seems to make the subject of this lecture an easy and obvious choice. But that is not the case. After all, we know, thanks to the studies of Schilder and others, so much about the voyage of the Vlamingh that it will be hard to add something new to our knowledge.¹ The same is true for that other great voyage of discovery to the "unknown Southland" as Australia was called in the Dutch sources of the 17th and 18th century, the voyage of Abel Tasman.²

However, you might be expecting me to present a rather more general introduction to the history of the Dutch East India Company, the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC). After all, that was the organization, which for nearly two hundred years was the vehicle of the Dutch expansion in Asia, and was also responsible for most of the European encounters with Australia in the 17th century – either by accident or planned. It is a fascinating history, because the Dutch Company grew to be the largest commercial enterprise in the 17th and 18th century, and became one of the most important factors in the globalisation of the trade in this period.

Finally, I shall concentrate more on the impact of the Dutch voyages of discovery to Australia and raise the question, why this impact was limited and why the VOC did not use its resources for a more systematic and thorough exploration of the new land for which the De Vlamingh voyage seems such a good start. Why did the Dutch part in the discovery of Australia sink into oblivion and why did the scholarly interest in the Dutch explorations grow again in the course of the nineteenth century? The answer to these questions will bring us to such themes as the relation between a growing feeling of nationalism in the Netherlands and the glorification of the past. It may well be that on this topic more new things can be said than on the other just mentioned themes. But, on the other hand, it would bring us far from the Australian shores into the realm of Dutch national history.

Confronted with these possible three themes for my lecture, I chose a very Dutch solution for the problem: I made a compromise. In my lecture I will sketch the history of the Dutch East India Company, but I will pay special attention to the question of why the VOC was so reluctant and perhaps halfhearted in organizing the expeditions to Australia. I will shortly extend my lecture to the nineteenth century. But I promise that at the end I will return to Australia.

1 THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY

It is perhaps not generally known, but the year 1696, the year that Willem De Vlamingh sailed from Holland on the voyage that brought him all the way to these shores, has been considered a turning point in the history of the VOC. At first sight, this might be conceived as artificial. In 1780, the director or *bewindhebber* of the VOC, Cornelis van der Oudermeulen, analysed the decline of the Company in the eighteenth century.³ Although the Company had been founded in 1602, he started his analysis in 1613, because since that year the Company had set up a new bookkeeping system in Asia, separate from the books kept in Holland. He considered a 166 year period, ending in 1779 and divided it into two separate periods of 82 years; consequently 1696 became the start of the new period.

But 1696 proved to be more than an artificial interruption. In order to understand the immense consequences of the shifts in Dutch-Asiatic trade just before 1700, it will be

necessary to go into the growth and the changing character of trade and into the relation between the Dutch and the Asian part of the VOC as reflected in the bookkeeping. However, before doing that I will, say something very briefly about the organization of the VOC.

Crucial to the understanding of the complex organization of the Dutch East India Company is the fact that it was a result of a merger of six smaller, private East India Companies, and that this merger was the result of pressure from the state. It was the government—the *Staten-Generaal*—that had forced the merchants to enter into one united (*verenigde*) East India Company. That explains the division of the VOC in the Netherlands into six chambers: Amsterdam, Zeeland, Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn and Enkhuizen, as well as the distribution ratio according to which the chamber of Amsterdam was allotted half of all the activities in shipbuilding, equipment and in sales etc., the chamber of Zeeland one quarter and the smaller chambers each one sixteenth. The total number of directors was put at 60 and the composition of the central governing body of the *Heren Zeventien* ("Gentlemen Seventeen") reflected the distribution ratio in the activities between the chambers: Amsterdam had eight representatives in this body, Zeeland four and the smaller chambers each one, the total being sixteen. However, in order to prevent the chamber of Amsterdam from being dominant, the seventeenth member was a director delegated alternately by Zeeland and one of the smaller chambers. Indeed, the regulations in the charter, granted by the *Staten-Generaal* had been made not so much to provide the Company with the most adequate system to deal with Asian trade and shipping, but rather to prevent the directors and chamber of Amsterdam from overruling the others. In short, the organization was the result of a political compromise. It meant, however, that within the chambers as well as on the highest level, the directorate was a collective one; there was not one single manager at the top, and the decision-making process within the Company reflected that.⁴

But the merchants or directors of the former private companies were rewarded for having yielded to the pressure from the state and having united into one large enterprise: they got a monopoly from the States-General. Nobody in the Dutch Republic outside the new Company was allowed to trade with Asia.

The initial success of the VOC resided in its rather large share-capital and in its power to ignore shareholders for the first twenty years, paying them less dividends than were expected and promised in 1602, thus enabling the directors to invest their capital in Asia. There were also other factors, which contributed to the phenomenal growth of the VOC in the 17th century. It is important to realize that European-Asian trade at this time was based on the demand in Europe for Asian products. Europe had nothing or nearly nothing to offer Asia and that the European companies had to pay for the pepper, the fine spices, the Indian textiles, the Arab and Javanese coffee, the China tea and porcelain with silver and gold. The management of the VOC, however, recognized that once an intra-Asian network of trade had been developed, this network could generate enough profit to pay for the "return commodities", the products for Europe. And secondly, it was understood that on the market for fine spices the elasticity of demand was such, that only a cartel or a monopoly would guarantee a profitable trade.

Both these aims were realized in the course of time, although not completely. The monopoly in nutmeg and mace was won after the brutal conquest of the Banda Islands in 1621. It was only much later, around 1670, that the Dutch established the world monopoly in cloves (the cultivation was centred on Amboyna) and the Ceylonese cinnamon. There is much debate among historians about these monopolies and whether they brought in as much profit to the VOC as always has been said they did, or if the costs of achieving and maintaining these monopolies were so high that profits were not

as good as they seemed to be on the basis of the gross sales prices. Keeping the prices at such a high level as the directors did, should have been self-defeating because it prevented an increase in consumption. In short, the directors had not been able to find the optimum balance between price and consumption. Moreover, maintaining the spice monopoly would have "diminished the ability to manoeuvre in a changing world", as large investments were sunk into the the eastern Archipelago, while textile and tea became much more important in the European-Asian trade.⁵ That should go some way in explaining the problem, but I think that it was the monopoly which brought the VOC high profits.

"We have the Moluccan spices, they have not" was the self confident remark of the *bewindhebbers* in 1682, when they had to face the first serious attack by the English East India Company in the European-Asian trade.⁶ It gave them room to manoeuvre in the fierce competition of the day and there is no reason to suppose that this was different after 1700. At the end of the eighteenth century the monopoly spices still formed an important share in the total sales of Asian products in Europe.⁷

Already earlier, in 1636, the intra-Asian trade of the VOC had reached the point that it generated more earnings than the high expenses overseas, thus turning the Asian arm of the Company into a profitable branch. Part of this profit was added to the trading capital in Asia, part of it went to the Netherlands, just as the directors had foreseen. How important the contribution of the intra-Asian trade was for the VOC can be demonstrated as follows:

Between 1640 and 1688, the VOC received from Asia 150 million guilders in return commodities (that was the invoice value, more or less the same as the price for which these products had been bought). The chambers in the Netherlands had sent out only 120 million guilders in cash and European products during these years. They had thus received 30 million guilders or 1/5 of the total value from the Asian factories for which they had not paid. The sales of these Asian commodities in Amsterdam and the other chamber cities had yielded about 420 million guilders, 1/5 of that is 84 million guilders. During the same period of 48 years, the Company had paid out 67 million guilders in dividend to the shareholders, an amount that was possible thanks to the profits in Asia.

But the situation did not stay so favourable. The directors of the VOC had reason to be worried about the developments in the 18th century. Their enormous investments in the trade gave them relatively lower returns in the eighteenth than in the seventeenth century. If one considers the *equipage* and the sales as shown in Table 1, this development can be easily followed. In the decade 1660-1670, the Dutch chambers of the VOC had to invest 80 million guilders to realise or earn an amount of 12 million guilders (the sales being *f* 92,3 million). In 1770-80 they had to invest *f* 198 million to earn *f* 13 million. In analyzing these figures, one should bear in mind that the *equipage* covers all the expenses, for instance the buying of the silver and gold for Asia as well as for the building of the ships. These expenses include thus the capital investments as well, and the difference between the *equipage* and the value of the sales cannot be considered as the profit or loss. But at least the figures say something about the cash flow and explain the enormous problems of the VOC after 1780, when the Company became dependent from loans and financial support by the state.

TABLE 1: THE *EQUIPAGE*, INVOICE VALUE OF THE IMPORTS AND THE VALUE OF THE SALES OF THE ASIAN PRODUCTS OF THE VOC, 1640-1795 (IN GUILDERS)

	Equipage	Imports	Sales
1640-1650	42.700.000	25.600.000	78.400.000
1650-1660	71.100.000	26.800.000	84.200.000
1660-1670	80.400.000	31.400.000	92.300.000
1670-1680	77.000.000	33.700.000	91.300.000
1680-1690	87.600.000	45.300.000	103.400.000
1690-1700	106.900.000	44.200.000	127.200.000
1700-1710	122.600.000	55.100.000	139.500.000
1710-1720	135.200.000	65.000.000	163.700.000
1720-1730	172.900.000	87.200.000	185.600.000
1730-1740	159.000.000	68.900.000	167.000.000
1740-1750	148.700.000	72.300.000	159.700.000
1750-1760	184.900.000	88.200.000	188.000.000
1760-1770	198.900.000	89.800.000	213.600.000
1770-1780	186.500.000	78.100.000	199.600.000
1780-1790	212.300.000	55.600.000	145.900.000
1790-1795	86.700.000	19.700.000	61.200.000

Source J.R. Bruijn a.o., *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping*, Vol I, 190; J.P. de Korte, *De jaarlijkse financiële verantwoording*, app. 1.

N.B. The term equipage covers all expenses: for building and fitting out the ships, for the goods and treasure for Asia, for salaries paid out in the Netherlands, for interest payments etc.

The causes for this development were many. The changing structure of the intra-Asian trade and political developments in Asia played an important role. But it was also the consequence of the new conditions in the European-Asian trade. From about 1680 onwards, Indian textiles became very popular in Europe, and this "Indian craze" took the directors of the VOC more or less by surprise. Demand for coffee, from the Arabs first, later from Java also, and tea from China increased enormously around 1700. The VOC did not have a monopoly in these products, and while trade and shipping was growing, the international competition in these products brought profit margins down.

Things got worse, because the intra-Asian trade of the VOC experienced at the same time a marked deterioration. Trade in Asia had relied heavily on the exchange of Chinese, Bengal and sometimes Tonkinese silk for Japanese silver and copper. This silver and copper was mainly used to buy Indian commodities, especially textiles, and these textiles were sold in the Indonesian Archipelago where pepper and spices could be bought. The "Japan connection" lost much of importance after 1680. And in the west of Asia, in the Persian Gulf and at the west coast of India, the Company lost its former position because of political turmoil. However, this does not mean that the Company's trade in Asia as such turned into an unprofitable business. On the contrary, the Company

succeeded in maintaining a reasonably high level of profit of about six million guilders per year up to 1760. But this was no longer sufficient to cover the expenses. And thus, the Asian arm of the VOC as a whole suffered a loss every year from 1692 onwards.⁸

It was this development, that seemed to our director Van der Oudermeulen especially dramatic around 1696 and that made this year more than an artificial turning point. And the figures seem to confirm this change. During the ten years from 1692 to 1702, the Company in Asia made a loss of 18 million guilders. To maintain the capital in Asia on the same level, the chambers in the Netherlands now needed to send more than they received. And they did. They were able, in fact, to do far more, by shipping 25 million guilders more in goods and cash than they received in Asian products from Batavia. As result, the balance sheet of the VOC in Asia showed the capital growing from over 25 million guilders in 1692 to more than 32 million in 1702.⁹

The fact that the VOC was more than able to compensate the losses in Asia, is an indication that the financial situation was still healthy. And that was true indeed. A close examination of the figures in the Company's bookkeeping reveals that the losses in Asia in 1696 were partly caused by corrections and remedies in the administration: losses suffered years ago were now properly accounted for. But the Company prospered thanks to the growing returns from the sales in Europe. The success of the VOC at the end of the seventeenth century has to be ascribed for a large part to the commercial and financial policy of the board of directors of the chamber of Amsterdam. It was mainly due to their merit, that the VOC managed to cope with the financial crisis of 1672, when the Dutch Republic was attacked by the English, the French and some German states, and that afterwards the VOC won the first confrontation with the English East India Company in the struggle for the European market for textiles. In 1702, when the VOC celebrated its centenary, its finances were sound and its prospects bright.

The leading person in the directorate of the chamber of Amsterdam was Johannes Hudde (1628-1704, director of the VOC since 1679), who was at the same time the most powerful burgomaster of Amsterdam – and who was a world famous mathematician. Hudde had promoted the experiment, by which the clocks of Christiaan Huygens were tested for their usefulness in measuring the longitude at sea on a voyage of a Dutch East Indiaman to the Cape of Good Hope.¹⁰ But he also had an eye open for more commercial and financial matters using, for instance, his statistical knowledge to predict the movements on the European peppermarket that made the Company successful in anticipating on a shortage of this commodity in the 1690s.¹¹ But there were other outstanding directors, such as the statesman Coenraad van Beuningen, or Joan Huydecoper, collector of rarities and one of the supporters of the botanical work of Hendrik van Reede van Drakestein, the author of the famous *Hortus Malabaricus*. Nicolaas Witsen, the man behind the De Vlamingh expedition, is of course the best known of all. Witsen was the author of a book on shipbuilding (for which Hudde had supplied the calculations on how to assess the volume of the ships) and he was, just as Huydecoper, a collector of rarities and Asian art, as well as a geographer etc. Witsen, however, was not as prominent on the board as is sometimes supposed. He was only three times, in the beginning of his career in 1694, a delegate in the meeting of the Gentlemen Seventeen.

The *bewindhebbers* were not praised much in the eighteenth century. They have been called "rentiers" rather than "entrepreneurs", paying out too high dividends and following a risky financial policy. They had been unable to maintain the dominant position of the VOC in the European-Asian trade against its competitors and reacted too late on such important changes as for instance the growing demand for tea in Europe. It seems to me, that this criticism is not always justified, and I have argued elsewhere, that

the VOC did not enter its "final phase or erosion" after 1713¹², nor that there was a "marked deterioration in the Dutch competitive position *vis-à-vis* the English, French, Danish, Swedish and Ostend Eastindia Companies" putting the Dutch far behind the others.¹³ One cannot speak only in terms of doom and gloom, of deterioration and failure about the eighteenth century trade of the VOC. New initiatives were taken, such as the introduction of the coffee culture on Java, and the directors succeeded in creating an impressive machinery to cope with the needs for the growing trade. The VOC played an important role in the 18th century economy of the Dutch Republic and it was able to get hold of a major share of the export of Indian textiles and Chinese tea despite the fierce competition of other European companies.¹⁴

But, on the other hand, there were times, when the management seems to have reacted too late, that dividends were paid when it was not wise to do so, or that things were perhaps assumed to be too easy. The "rentiers" might have prevailed, during certain periods, over the merchants. Especially during the 1720s and 1730s the momentum seems to have been lost, in a period long before the Company fell into financial difficulties and when there was still a great trust in the Company by investors in the Dutch Republic—not the least because of the high dividends paid out to them. It might well be that during these booming years the directors were put to sleep by the easy profits.

A combination of the long process of declining returns on its investments in the course of the eighteenth century and an acute shortage of liquidities after the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war in 1780, proved to be deadly for the Dutch Company. The Company managed to restore the losses of ships after the war with England in 1780–1784 and succeeded in bringing the shipping and trade back to pre-war levels, but at a great cost. It could only finance its efforts because the State was willing to interfere and to guarantee the payment of interest and the redemption of the loans. Gradually the Company was driven in the hands of the state.

2 THE COMPANY AND THE DISCOVERY OF AUSTRALIA

Among the new initiatives of the directors of the VOC in the 18th century one cannot find any important expedition or voyage of discovery, either to Australia or to any other place in the Pacific.¹⁵ The VOC organized two smaller expeditions to the north coast of Australia, one in 1705, as a response to the voyage of William Dampier and one in 1756. Apparently, the directors of the Company were no longer interested in these voyages of discovery, that had given such disappointing results.

The items *Zuidland* and *Nieuw Holland* figure only three or four times in the index on the resolutions of the Gentlemen Seventeen and of the directors of the chamber of Amsterdam after 1700. I was surprised to find that, in 1708, the directors of the chamber of Amsterdam expected to receive two *Zuidlanders* with the return fleet from Batavia. The directors made preparations for the housing of the two exotic human beings. But the disappointment was great when it turned out that the men were from Ceram, not from Australia.¹⁶

Jan Pieter Purry submitted, in 1718, in two printed treatises a proposal to explore and colonize the Pieter Nuytsland for the Gentlemen Seventeen. Purry was of Swiss origin—he came from Neuchâtel—and had entered the service of the VOC, working in one of the lower administrative ranks. He had tried, in vain, to convince the Governor-General Christoffel van Zwoll in Batavia of the good prospects for a European settlement in South Africa ("Kaffaria") or in Pieter Nuytsland. He returned to Europe in 1718, hoping to find more support for his plans among the directorate in Holland. His proposal was referred to the chamber of Amsterdam by the Gentlemen Seventeen and finally turned down.¹⁷

Less known is the fact that in 1728 another person, Karl Friedrich Behrens, again put a proposal for an expedition to Australia to the Gentlemen Seventeen. This time the proposal was referred to the directors of the chamber of Zeeland, but I could not find any reference to it in the resolutions of this chamber, nor in its correspondence with the Gentlemen Seventeen.¹⁸ Behrens had had some experience as an "explorer": he had been on one of the ships of Jacob Roggeveen, who (in the service of the Dutch West India Company) had sailed around the world in 1721-22. He had a book published in 1732 in which explained his plans for the directors of the VOC. Later, he published a travelogue of his voyage to Germany.¹⁹ It is a remarkable coincidence that in the same year that the chamber of Zeeland should have decided about Behrens' proposal, the Zeeland ship *Zeewijk* was wrecked on the Australian coast.

The last expedition, in 1756, from Batavia to Northern Australia under Etienne Gozal did not leave a trace in the resolutions of the directors at home. This expedition, which was not very successful, was organized after a report from a Chinese sailor, who had sailed from Timor and by accident had landed on the north coast of Australia and had made contact with the inhabitants.²⁰ Daniel van der Burgh, head of the VOC-factory on Timor, decided to follow up, but he died before he could send a ship. Although the resolutions are silent on this matter, the directors showed some interest in it, asking, in their letter to Batavia of 1754, if something had been done in this case. Governor-General Mossel equipped two ships. Gonzal's expedition is notable for the fact that it brought two natives, who had been kidnapped, back to Batavia. But for the rest the results were as disappointing as the earlier expeditions.

The fact that the VOC did not organize new voyages of discovery seems easy to explain. The two major voyages, that of Tasman and De Vlamingh, had been organized at a moment when the Company prospered and the management in Amsterdam as well as Batavia felt confident about the future. But as soon as prospects became worse and profits declined, the VOC abandoned such expensive voyages of discovery that might please the scholarly curiosity but did not bring any concrete results. After all—and that is the much heard argument—the Company was a trading organization, that had to earn profits for its investors.

This argument, however, seems **too** easy. First, I have already explained that the VOC did not experience financial problems immediately after 1700. Moreover, all smaller and greater expeditions to Australia can be called "disappointing" for the directors of the VOC - and has been so in modern historical literature. When the *Duyfken* returned from her voyage in 1605, it was clear that the discovered land had "nothing of value for trade, ... only a dry infertile coast without fresh water, inhabited by uncivilised people. No gold, only sand".²¹ But new initiatives had been taken, and the directors as well as the staff in Batavia had several motives to do so:

- 1) the investigation of new possibilities for trade,
- 2) the hope of finding precious metals,
- 3) charting the coast where ships on the outward voyage some times ran into trouble, as well as
- 4) looking for survivors of shipwrecks, or
- 5) scientific exploration.

If one considers these motives it becomes understandable that the VOC did not give a high priority to the exploration of Australia. It is clear that the VOC could have had little hope to gain much from exploration of the "Southland" in the short term. Trade possibilities were practically absent. It would have been hard for the Dutch to find the gold that was found in the 19th century. Scholarly interest was a good motive, but even if

this interest was present among the directors, it could only play a role when other circumstances, such as the financial situation, for instance, were also favourable. It was not to be expected that the Company could use the money for such a goal at the expense of dividend payments. Should charting and the expansion of knowledge of the seas and shores around the continent be the only valuable motive? The directors might have felt that De Vlamingh had done enough by charting the westcoast and that further exploration was not necessary any more. At the same time, this voyage should have proven that it was not useful to organize a random search for survivors: De Vlamingh had been instructed to seek for survivors of the VOC ship *De Ridderschap van Holland*, that might have been wrecked on the Australian shores, but he was unsuccessful.

The De Vlamingh expedition has a special place in the history of the VOC. Whereas Tasman's voyage was part of the overall expansion of the Dutch in Asia, organized by Governor-General Van Diemen who extended VOC power from Batavia in all directions, the expedition of De Vlamingh was a true voyage of discovery, organized and promoted by the directors in the Netherlands. It was the only time that the directors wholeheartedly supported such a voyage and that was the consequence of the unique constellation of the 1690s within the VOC. I have already pointed out that during those years the board of the chamber of Amsterdam was filled with a number of skillful *bewindhebbers*, merchants and statesmen, but at the same time men who belonged to the learned world. Witsen might have been the inspirator of the Vlamingh expedition, but he did not act alone. I have already argued that Witsen was not such a prominent director within the VOC as sometimes supposed. He was a relative of Johannes Hudde, and in political terms dependent on him. When Hudde died in 1704, Witsen gradually lost his influence in Amsterdam and was put aside by the new faction headed by Joan Corver.²²

The VOC prospered in the early 18th century and the Company could easily have financed new voyages of discovery. The directors paid high dividends - from 1714 to 1720 40 per cent each year! - resulting in shareprices rising as high as 700 per cent. The directors even sought means to lower the results on the balances, apparently because they would not pay as much dividend as their position in certain years would allow them to do. For instance, stocks were valued at a lower price, real estate, such as the East Indiahouse, that were rented, were bought. But no money was wasted on exploration. Witsen complained bitterly in 1712 and 1713 about the lack of interest in science and scholarship among the directors and "his words fell on deaf ears" when he tried to promote his views.²³

It might well be that scholarly interest was growing again during the last quarter of the 18th century among directors at home as well as among the higher officials of the VOC overseas. Batavia, after all, was not completely untouched by the new winds of enlightenment. But by then the VOC did not have the means to undertake such an enterprise. The Company was financially shaken, it had a great shortage of sailors and soldiers, and, in Batavia the atmosphere was depressed because of the high rate of malaria. In short, there was no climate for new initiatives of the sort that were made in 1696. Exploration of Australia had to be left to English and French navigators.

3 THE RE-DISCOVERY OF THE DUTCH DISCOVERIES

The VOC was saved from bankruptcy by the state (by then a French satellite state called the *Bataafsche Republiek*) in 1796. The Company formally ceased to exist on the first of January 1800, when its charter expired. Very soon it was realized, that the new voyages of discovery to Australia by Cook and, later in the eighteenth century by a number of other navigators such as Baudin and Flinders, overshadowed the former explorations of Dutch navigators. These were partly forgotten, partly unknown to others because the VOC had

kept its archives closed. Magazines for a well-educated public, such as the *Algemeene Konst- en Letterbode*, published articles in which the English and French discoveries were discussed. In 1807, for instance, the journal signalled that some foreign magazines had raised the question of the role of Dutch explorers of the north and west Australian coast. The *Letterbode* suggested that the opening of the archives of the former VOC and publication of these Dutch voyages of discovery could answer these questions.²⁴

Irritation about the neglect by the English of former Dutch achievements inspired some writers to publish Dutch documents or to write a survey of Dutch exploration. One of the learned societies in the Netherlands, the *Provinciaal Utrechts Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, decided in 1821 to offer a prize for a treatise or essay that could collect and claim old Dutch names on the maps of America and Australia—names that had disappeared from the new English and French maps. In 1822 the Society received one essay, under the very Dutch motto "*O navigation, âme de la Hollande*", but it did not meet the expectations of the jury. In 1824, however, R.G. Bennet and J. van Wijck Roelandsz. wrote the winning treatise, which was published together with an atlas, that had a beautiful map of Australia.²⁵ This work was still imperfect and much material was still unknown: Bennet and Van Wijck didn't mention De Vlamingh at all! Bennet and van Wijck also published in 1824 an article to demonstrate that the discovery of Gerritsland (South Shetland) was a Dutch and not an English discovery, as was claimed by the English. And later they defended Jacob Roggeveen as an explorer against the underestimation of his role by the French writer Fleurieu.²⁶

One of the last publications of this character was of Jacob Swart in 1843. Swart translated an article in the *Colonial Magazine*, that praised Cook and Columbus as great explorers and he added some data about Tasman's voyages to it, thus putting this Dutch sailor on the same level: "Columbus, Cook and Tasman, the three greatest explorers that mankind ever has produced."²⁷ Swart continued his studies on Tasman and his publication of the text of Tasman's journal in 1854-1860 has been called by Schilder "a milestone in research" of this voyage.²⁸ Swart had more success than he himself perhaps had expected. Tasman became one of the Dutch *zeehelden* ["sea heroes"], and many streets in nineteenth century quarters of Dutch cities bear his name, a status never reached by Willem de Vlamingh! But from then on the number of publications was growing and, thanks to the research in the archives of the VOC and discoveries of maps and other sources in libraries and archives, Dutch navigators got their proper place in the history of the discovery of Australia.

4 NEW FACTS OR OLD MYTHS?

Thus, in the early nineteenth century, intellectual interest in the new discoveries of Australia was present and some writers felt the need for rehabilitation of the part the Dutch seafarers played in these discoveries. But if such an interest was present in some intellectual circles in the Netherlands and perhaps even in the Netherlands-Indies, it did not lead to any action, when the harbourmaster of Semarang reported a most remarkable encounter in north-west Australia to the *Governor-General* in Batavia in 1832. In this report it was said that an English expedition in the desert of north-west Australia had encountered a small group of people who claimed to be the descendants of the survivors of a Dutch ship that had been wrecked on the coast some 180 years earlier.

By going into this subject, I am fulfilling my promise at the beginning of my lecture, that I will end up in Australia. I owe this speculation on the possibility of a Dutch group of settlers in Australia well before the settlement at Botany Bay in 1788, to a man who is apparently well-known to you because of his television program: Les Hiddens, or the "bush-tucker man". He made contact and provided me with some material

about this matter, asking me to consult the Dutch archives for confirmation of the reports about such a settlement.²⁹

What is the case? The *Leeds Mercury* published, in January 1834, a short extract from a private journal of a certain lieutenant Nixon, one of the participants of an expedition to north-west Australia.³⁰ The expedition had landed at Raffles Bay and had made a two months excursion into the interior. On a certain day, the explorers arrived at a place that was different from the rest of landscape, "a low and level country, laid out as it were in plantations, with a straight rows of trees". "It seemed as if enchantment had brought me to a civilized world" wrote Nixon when he encountered "a human being, whose face was so fair, and dress so white, that I was for a moment staggered with terror, and thought I was looking at an apparition."

The man could speak some broken Dutch but for our lieutenant Nixon (who said that he himself had been in Holland during his youth) it was understandable. And so, it became clear that this group of people claimed to be the descendants of survivors of a Dutch ship, together some eighty men and ten women ("sisters" as they were called by the informant). Their headman or chief should have been a descendant of an officer called Van Baerle on board this ship. The group had been forced by famine to go inland, where they lived off maize and jams and fish from the nearby river. Finally, Nixon gave some indication of the way of living of these people - "they did not have books or paper, nor any schools, their marriages were performed without any ceremony, they retained a certain observance of the sabbath by refraining from daily labours and performing some sort of superstitious ceremony on that day all together", etc etera.

This report did not go unnoticed in the Netherlands. A short article about this spectacular discovery appeared in the *Nederlandsch Magazijn* in 1837.³¹ Many years later, in 1851, H. van Blommestein wrote in a letter to another Dutch journal, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indië*, that he had learned about these reports in the English newspapers. He himself, as harbourmaster of Semarang, had spoken with the captain of the English merchant ship that had taken the people of the expedition back to Singapore. The captain, whose name he had forgotten, had told him the story of these Hollanders living in a primitive way. Van Blommenstein claimed to have reported the news to Batavia. It had been his intention to call for some action by the Government in Batavia, to provide these people with some tools for a more civilized life. In his letter of 1851 he wrote that he regretted that nothing had apparently been done since then.³²

This material was brought to my attention by Les Hiddens – and there was one addition from another person who had been approached for help by Les. It was a short genealogical survey of the Van Baerle family, published in 1954. A certain Constantijn van Baerle was mentioned there, who was married to Agnes van Zuylen. His wife had died already in 1703, and his three children had died too at a young age. This sad family story might have induced him to take service with the VOC and to leave his home country for Batavia. When Constantijn entered the service of the VOC is not known, but apparently he was not very successful. In this publication, the only reference to his stay in the Indies was the line: "missing with the ship *Concordia* on his return voyage from the Indies in 1708."³³

Was the story a hoax, something to make later historians go astray? If so, then it was a clever thing to bring in the name of Van Baerle. The VOC-ship *Concordia* can be traced easily. The *Concordia* sailed, together with the *Zuiderburg*, on the 15th of January from Batavia and both ships were lost, according to *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping*, a publication where all the VOC-ships sailing between Europe and Asia are listed, "near Mauritius".³⁴ The source that gave the place where these ships were missing is a small booklet, a "List of East India Company ships, since 1604 taken, wrecked or otherwise

missed". The VOC-director Samuel Radermacher (Middelburg) had compiled this list, running to 1747, probably in order to find out the most dangerous places and seasons for East Indiamen on their way to and from Asia. However, he collected his data afterwards and was not very meticulous, for instance, giving for the *Zuiderburg* the year 1707 and the *Concordia* the year 1709, while both the ships went missing in 1708.³⁵ The correspondence between Batavia and the Gentlemen Seventeen in the Netherlands shows how the staff of the VOC first became alarmed and then had to put up with the fact that the ships were lost.³⁶

Some more information about the fate of the ships can be found in a letter from the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope to Amsterdam. It proved that the *Concordia* and *Zuiderburg* had been accompanied by a *galjoot* [small ship], the *Mercurius*, that was destined to the Cape. The *Mercurius* had departed from the roadstead of Batavia on 17 January 1708, and had sailed out of the Sunda Strait on 3 February 1708, "while a day before the two projected "naschepen" ["afterships", that is to say ships that sailed after the departure of the main returnfleet] also had reached the open sea. These bottoms, as well as the *Duivenvoorde*, are still, to our great concern, staying behind." The *Mercurius* had seen the two ships in open sea on 5 February, and the *Zuiderburg* alone again on 8 February. The weather was bad, high waves and "hollow seas". The *Mercurius* lost sight of the ships, the weather stayed bad until 22 February, when the wind laid down and the sea became calm. The letter then continues: "They [those on board the *Mercurius*] saw then several goods in the water, some firewood, a chest of tea, a piece of cotton, some carpenters tools, white candles and staves for barrels, all signs that give rise to concern about the wreckage of the ships." But the Governor and Council of the Cape still hoped that both the ships would arrive safely in the Table Bay. However, the administrators at the Cape decided to make a copy of the letter, which they had received in copy from the Governor-General and Council in Batavia, and that had been delivered by the *Mercurius*.³⁷ The original letter had, no doubt, been carried by one of the missing ships.

In this *copia copiae*, originally dated 15 January 1708, it was said that three ships were departing, the *Concordia*, *Zuiderburg* and *Mercurius*, under command of Joris Visch. The letter give details about the cargo and about some of the persons on board. Data about those on board can also be found in other sources, such as the resolutions of the Government in Batavia and the muster rolls of the ships, that had been made up by their departure some years earlier from the Netherlands.³⁸ The picture that we get from these sources reflects the normal procedure in the preparation of ships at their departure from Batavia. The ships were checked for seaworthiness by the *equipagemeester* [a naval quartermaster] and the masters, and the crew was mustered: The *Concordia* sailed with 130, the *Zuiderburg* with 90 men, which was according to the standards of the VOC.³⁹

TABLE 2: THE NUMBER OF THOSE ON BOARD THE *CONCORDIA* AND *ZUIDERBRUG* AT THE DEPARTURE FROM BATAVIA, JANUARY 1708

	Seamen	Soliders	Craftsmen	Unfit for service	Total
<i>Concordia</i>	90	25	8	7	130
<i>Zuiderburg</i>	65	15	5	5	90

Some people on board had a special status. On board the *Concordia* were a Balinese prince, in Dutch sources called "Prama Jouda" or "Soutenella", his wife, and one of his courtiers, named Ranya Soerang. They came from the defeated and destroyed group of Balinese rebels in the Passarouang (on Java) and were banned to the Cape. The prince was destined for the chain-gang and the courtier for some other form of penal labour. On board the *Zuiderburg* was Aaltje Barendsdaughter van Santen, a former midwife from Batavia and banned for a period of five years because of "bad conduct". Her father, Barend van Santen, had also been sentenced to banishment by the Council of Justice in Batavia, and he sailed home with the *Concordia*.

Some other names could be traced. But it was only in the copy of the letter from the Government of Batavia addressed to the Gentlemen Seventeen – the original letter being lost with the *Concordia* – and received in Amsterdam in autumn of 1710, that I found the name that I was looking for: "With this ship, we send home the assistant Constantijn van Baerle, out of service."⁴⁰

It is possible to reveal more names of those on board the missing ships; it is possible to trace how and when decisions were made about the payment of the salaries of the missing men to their heirs and families, who received this money more than three years after the ships were lost. I can demonstrate, in short, how the whole bureaucratic machinery of the VOC worked, slowly but efficiently, and above all, according to standard rules and regulations. But about what really happened at sea in February 1708, we can only guess. It might be that both the ships went down, but that survivors managed to reach the Australian coast in one of the boats. Or it might be that the *Concordia*, heavily beaten and damaged, was driven to Australia. We simply don't know.

For real evidence about the fate of survivors and crew of the *Concordia* we will have to look elsewhere. It would have been a strange coincidence indeed if in 1708 two "Southlanders" were to have sailed to the Netherlands, while at the same time the survivors of a Dutch shipwreck were blown by a storm on the Australian shore. It is possible this strange story will add a new chapter to the history of the early relations between Australia and the Netherlands. But it won't change the conclusion of this lecture, that the VOC lost its interest in Australia during the seventeenth century and that the De Vlamingh expedition was an exception to the rule that the directors of the Company were not prepared to exert themselves for exploration and voyages of discovery.

University of Leiden

Femme S. Gaastra

REFERENCES

- ¹ G.G. Schilder (ed.), *De Ontdekkingsreis van Willem Hesselsz. de Vlamingh in de jaren 1696-1697* (Werken uitgegeven door de Linschoten-Vereeniging, 78 and 79), The Hague, 1996. Also in translation: *Voyage to the Great South Land: Willem de Vlamingh, 1696-1697*, Sydney, 1985. See for an overview of the Dutch explorations: J.P. Sigmond and L.H. Zuiderbaan, *Dutch Discoveries of Australia. Shipwrecks, treasures and early voyages off the West Coast*, Adelaide, 1979.
- ² About Tasman's voyages, see: R. Posthumus Meyes, *De reizen van Abel Janszoon Tasman en Franchoy Jacobszoon Visscher, ter nadere ontdekking van het Zuidland (Australië) in 1642-1644* (Werken Linschoten-Vereeniging 42), The Hague, 1919; G.G. Schilder, *Australia Unveiled. The Share of the Dutch Navigators in the discovery of Australia*, Amsterdam, 1976; A. Sharp, *The Voyages of Abel Jansz. Tasman*, Oxford, 1968; B.J. Slot, *Abel Tasman en de ontdekking van Nieuw Zeeland*, Amsterdam, 1992.
- ³ C. van der Oudermeulen, "Iets dat tot voordeel der Deelgenoten van de Oost Indische Compagnie en tot nut van ieder ingezet en van dit Gemeene Best kan strekken", in Dirk

- van Hogendorp (ed.) *Stukken raakende den tegenwoordigen toestand der Bataafsche Bezittingen in Oost-Indië*, The Hague/Delft, 1801, pp. 43-337.
- 4 J.R. Bruijn, F.S. Gaastra and I. Schöffer, *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën no. 165, 166 and 167), The Hague 1979-1987, vol. I, pp. 1-21; Femme S. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, Zutphen, 1991.
- 5 N. Steensgaard, "The growth and composition of the long-distance trade of England and the Dutch Republic before 1750", in James Tracy (ed.), *The Rise of Merchant Empires. Long-distance Trade in the early Modern World 1350-1750*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 102-152, the citation on p. 123. See also: J.L. van Zanden, "Over de rationaliteit van het ondernemersgedrag van de VOC: enkele empirische bevindingen", in C.A. Davids, W. Fritschy, L.A. van der Valk (eds.) *Kapitaal, ondernemerschap en beleid. Studies over economie en politiek in Nederland, Europa en Azië van 1500 tot heden* (Afscheidsbundel voor prof. dr. P.W. Klein), Amsterdam, 1996, pp. 409-422.
- 6 Femme S. Gaastra, 'The textile trade of the VOC. The Dutch response to the English challenge', *South Asia*, Vol. XIX (Special Issue *Asia and Europe: Commerce, Colonialism and Cultures*) 1996, pp. 85-95.
- 7 Bruijn E.A., *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping*, vol. I, p. 192.
- 8 J.P. de Korte, *De jaarlijkse financiële verantwoording in de VOC* (Werken uitgegeven door de Vereniging Het Nederlandsch Economisch Historisch Archief, 17), Leiden, 1984, table 10.
- 9 Femme S. Gaastra, *Bewind en Beleid bij de VOC. De financiële en commerciële politiek van de bewindhebbers, 1672-1702*, Zutphen, 1989, p. 285.
- 10 C.A. Davids, *Zeezezen en wetenschap. De wetenschap en de ontwikkeling van de navigatietechniek in Nederland tussen 1585 en 1815*, Amsterdam/Dieren, 1985, pp. 136-137; E. Schliesser and George E. Smith, "Huygens's 1688 report to the directors of the Dutch East India Company on the measurement of longitude at sea and its implications for the non-uniformity of gravity", *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, Vol. XII, 1996 pp. 198-214.
- 11 Gaastra, *Bewind en beleid*, pp. 230-232.
- 12 J. Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade 1585-1740*, Oxford, 1989, p. 391.
- 13 Steensgaard, 'Long-distance Trade', p. 391.
- 14 Femme S. Gaastra, 'The Dutch East India Company in national and international Perspective' in Philippe Haudrère (ed.), *Les flottes des Compagnies des Indes (Ves Journées franco-britanniques d'histoire de la marine; Lorient, 4-6 mai 1994)*, Vincennes, 1996, pp. 299-317.
- 15 J.R. Bruijn, 'The Dutch role in charting the Pacific', in Francis A. Dutra and Jao Camilo dos Santos (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on the Portuguese and the Pacific, 1993*, Santa Barbara, 1995, pp. 349-363.
- 16 VOC 307, *Register op de resoluties van de Kamer Amsterdam*, (i.v. 'Zuidland'); VOC 247, *Resoluties Amsterdam*, 1 okt. 1708; 16 dec. 1709.
- 17 VOC 221, *Register op de resoluties der Heren Zeventien*, (i.v. 'Zuidland'), res. 11 Marc 1719; VOC 307, Res. Amsterdam 17 April 1719. See also: Sigmond and Zuiderbaan, *Dutch discoveries*, p. 133. His printed proposal: J.P. Purry, *Aanmerkingen betreffende de Kust der Kaffers, en het landt van Pieter Nuyts: ten opzichte van de nuttigheid die de Oostindische Compagnie van dezelve voor haaren Koophandel zoude kunnen trekken*, Amsterdam, 1718; *Tweede aanmerkingen; betreffende de Kust der Kaffers en het landt van Pieter Nuyts: dienende tot opheldering der voorstellingen in het eerste gedaan, ten nutte van de Oostindische Compagnie*, Amsterdam 1718. The proposal were also printed in French and, in 1724, in an English translation. Purry eventually emigrated to South Carolina, where he founded the town Purrysbourg.
- 18 VOC 221, *Resolutie Heren Zeventien*, 12 Oktober 1728.
- 19 Karl Friedrich Bherens, *Nader onderzoek en bericht van zijne reyse naar de Zuid-landen, gedaan, in dienst der E. West-Indische Compagnie, in den jare 1721. Thans volgens eigen ondervinding ten beste opgedragen aan de E. Oostindische Compagnie van*

- Hollandt*, Amsterdam 1732. In 1738, he published *Der wohlversuchte Südländer, dasz ist ein ausführliche Reisebeschreibung um die Welt*; this book was, in 1739, translated into French.
- 20 VOC 2780, f. 101, Daniël van der Burgh aan Gouverneur-Generaal en Raden, 20 September 1751.
- 21 Sigmond and Zuiderbaan, *Dutch Discoveries*, p. 23.
- 22 A. Porta, Joan en Gerrit Corver. *De politieke macht in Amsterdam (1702-1748)*, Assen, 1975, pp. 37-48.
- 23 K. van Berkel, 'Een onwillige mecenas? De rol van de VOC bij het natuurwetenschappelijk onderzoek in de zeventiende eeuw', in J. Bethlehem and A.C. Meijer (eds.), *VOC en Cultuur. Wetenschappelijke en culturele relaties tussen Europa en Azië ten tijde van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, Amsterdam, 1993, pp. 39-58; p. 56.
- 24 NN, 'Aardrijkskundige wenschen en vragen', *Algemeene Konst- en Letterbode* (1807), part I, pp. 356-357.
- 25 R.G. Bennet, J. van Wijck Roelandsz., *Verhandelingen over de Nederlandse ontdekkingen in Amerika, Australië, de Indiën en de Poollanden, en de namen welke weleer aan deselve door Nederlanders zijn gegeven* (Verhandelingen van het Provinciaal Utrechts Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen), Utrecht, 1828. The Atlas was published in Dordrecht 1829.
- 26 R.G. Bennet, J. van Wijck Roelandszoon, 'De ontdekking van het Gerritsland, benevens enige aanmerking op eene nieuwe Engelse miskenning', *Algemeene Konst- en Letterbode* (1826), part I, pp. 324-331. Id., *De eer van de Nederlandsche zeereiziger Jacob Roggeveen gehandhaafd tegen het 'Examen critique' van C.P. Claret Fleurieu*, Amsterdam, 1829. Fleurieu had published this "examen critique" in the introduction of his publication of the voyage of Etienne Marchand (*Voyage autour du monde par Et. Marchand, 1790-1792*, Paris, 1798-1800).
- 27 Jacob Swart, 'Cook en Columbus, naar het Engelsch', uit het 'Colonial Magazine' door R.M. Martin, met bijvoeging van de Nederlandsche ontdekker Abel Janszoon Tasman", *Verhandelingen en berigten betrekkelijk het Zeewezen en de Zeevaarkunde*, Nieuwe volgorde, III, Amsterdam, 1843, pp. 216-243.
- 28 Schilder, *Australia Unveiled*, 152. Swart published the text in the *Verhandelingen en berigten betrekkelijk het Zeewezen en de Zeevaarkunde*, of which journal he was the editor. A reprint of these articles appeared in 1860 under the title *Journal van de reis naar het onbekende Zuidland, in den jare 1642, door Abel Jansz. Tasman*.
- 29 See also: Les Hiddens, *Stories of survival*, ...
- 30 'Discovery of a white colony on the northern shore of New Holland', *Leeds Mercury* 25 January, 1834, p. 7, col 1.
- 31 N.N., 'Ontdekking eener volkplanting op de noordelijke kust van Nieuw-Holland', *Nederlandsch Magazijn ter verspreiding van algemeene en nuttige kundigheden* (1837) p. 179.
- 32 The letter of H. van Blommestein in *Tijdschrift voor nederlandsch Indië* 13 (1851), vol 12, p. 361.
- 33 Jaarboek Nederland's Patriciaat, 40 (1954), p. 14.
- 34 J.R. Bruijn, F.S. Gaastra and I. Schöffner, *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën no. 165, 166 and 167), The Hague 1979-1987, vol. III, pp. 190-191.
- 35 ARA, Collection Radermacher, n. 84, *Lijst van de Oostind. Compagn. schepen sedert den jare 1604 genomen of verongelukt of anders verlooren zijn* (List of East India Company ships, since 1604 taken, wrecked or otherwise missed).
- 36 In W.Ph. Coolhaas (ed.), *Generale Missiven van Gouverneur-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Vol. VI: 1698-1713; Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën 159), The Hague, 1976, the *Concordia* and *Zuiderburg* are mentioned several times. It appears that the *Concordia*, after arrival in Batavia on 6

-
- April 1707, had been used in the intra-Asian trade of the VOC. The ship arrived in Batavia coming from the Coromandel coast (Negapatnam), according the missive on 18 Febr. 1707 [this date seems not in accordance with the arrival at Batavia, it is probably November or December 1707]. In the missive dated 29 Oct 1709: "the 'Concordia' and 'Zuiderburg' did not arrive in patria". In the missive 30 Nov. 1709: "fear, that the 'Concordia' and 'Zuiderburg' has been wrecked".
- 37 VOC 4059 *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren van de Kaap de Goede Hoop in 1709, tweede stuk*. ["Letters and Papers from the Cape of Good Hope, arrived in the Netherlands in 1709"]; *Gouverneur en Raad van Cabo de Bona Esperanza aan Heren Zeventien, 8 juni 1708* (f. 1019; in the Netherlands received per English ship "Rochester"), the copia copiae of the letter of the Governor- General and Council of the Indies to the Cape of 15 January 1708 is on ff. 1020-1022). The same letter, also in copy, is to be found in VOC 948, *Batavia's uitgaande Briefboek* (Batavia's book of outgoing letters), f. 161).
- 38 VOC 12716, *Scheepssoldijboek van de Concordia, 1706*.
[The *scheepssoldijboeken* contain the names of all the members of the crew on board the ships at their departure from the Netherlands. Afterwards the data in these books were used in the VOC-administration as salary-accounts for the individual employee. This source thus gives also the career and earnings of the Company servants on the ship; it tells us on which factory in Asia or on which ship the men were placed after arrival in Batavia; finally, it tells us if they came home or died during their stay in Asia or on board.]
- 39 VOC 723, *Resoluties van Gouverneur-Generaal en Raden van Indië*, 30 December 1707.
- 40 VOC 1767, *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren van Batavia received in 1710*, ff. 160-163: copy of the letter that the Governor-General and Councillors to the directors Chamber of Amsterdam (originally dated also 15 January 1708), f. 161.