

LOOKING FOR 25%

Dutch migrants to Australia.

The Problem

It is often noted, in discussion and presentation of this subject by various authors, that 25% of Dutch migrants returned to the Netherlands. [e.g. Jupp; Price; Peters, p.225]
There is a subset of Dutch migrants to Western Australia, namely the members of the Free Reformed Church. This group numbered some 800 individuals in the 1950s. A detailed study of this group of migrants shows a return rate of 3.65%.

The difference between the two numbers, 25% and 3.65%, demands closer investigation.

The Study

The detailed study is initially derived from the narrative of GJ Bosveld. His record concerns the establishment of the Free Reformed Church of Armadale, Western Australia.

Bosveld notes almost 300 individuals in his story, of whom eight returned to the Netherlands. The returnees are:-

- a married couple who left after 18 years [p.118,145] He died in Australia, on holidays
- the first minister and his wife, called to a congregation in the Netherlands, and accepting that call [p.297, & Kleyn p.303]
- a married couple because he was 'burnt out' and his wife was homesick. It later transpired that the man had leukaemia [p.245]
- a young man, blinded by illness at 8 years old, returned to the Netherlands as a young man to increase his chances of blind church friendship and meeting a lifelong partner (and succeeded, twice) [p.247]
- the minister called in 1958 for a six month term who returned when his term expired [p.329]

The number of returnees is very small, and the variety of reasons are basically legitimate, well considered personal reasons, rather than 'failures'. The process of migration has not overwhelmed these individuals, nor the pressures of assimilation.

But ...

There are difficulties with the Bosveld record. These fall into three categories:-

- incomplete record
- incomplete information
- lack of supporting documentation

Incomplete record

The sample in Bosveld's book is the individuals necessary to populate his narrative. What is not known is how many individuals there are in his circle.

The remedy for this is to study the church membership lists of the late 1950s. How many individuals are listed who have not been included in the Bosveld narrative?

This approach will bring its own problems because individuals relocated. Bosveld himself, with at least some of his children, relocated to Launceston in 1957 [Kleyn p.304].

Individuals who began their migratory experience in Launceston or other Australian cities and subsequently relocated to the Armadale group are technically internal migrants, within Australia,

and they no longer belong to the category 'migrants to Australia' and have not been included in this database or study.

Incomplete information

Because it was not the purpose of Bosveld's book to make a complete record of Free Reformed Church members, the sample of individuals in his book suffers from incomplete information. This especially concerns wives and children. Wives are often referred to by their initial, but sometimes not at all, and their existence is inferred. We can know they exist because Mr A Nnnn is noted as arriving with wife and children. Mrs Butler has three children, all of them named [p.32], but their parents names are not recorded. Mr van der Steen has a wife and five children - we know his name begins with the letter P, and we know the names of all five children, but Mrs van der Steen lacks even an initial. For some families, only the surname and initial of the father, are recorded.

Again, this situation can be remedied with a study of church membership records, correlated with Immigration Department records.

Lack of supporting documentation

Bosveld names individuals, dates of arrival, numbers of children in various families. Dates of birth are sometimes noted, and often inferred. Relationships are sometimes noted, especially in the case of children, but family links are usually not.

The information in the book is based on diaries, photos, church newsletters and interviews. Interviews bring memories to the fore, but are invariably incomplete or tinted. Names, dates and events need documentation, if possible, to enhance their veracity. Church member lists such as baptism records, attestation records, marriage registers, youth group or other society member lists would all enhance this study. External records, especially those held by the Immigration Department, would create a more comprehensive picture.

Church records

A study of the actual number of Free Reformed Church migrants to Western Australia/Armadale would need to be refined from access to the Attestation Book of the church. This book should record the movement of all members, especially their origin or their departure. Sadly, this book was never created - attestations were recorded in the Consistory minute book, a book littered with confidential information, and not accessible for research.

The Consistory, as a body of church elders, did nominate those names they remembered, during their discussion of my research request. This exercise yielded 11 names not found from other sources.

Other Church member lists are not available either, due to confidentiality reasons, and some level of disarray in the archive cupboard. For the purpose of this study, this is not a handicap.

BERKELAAR

However, there is another document. It was compiled by Jacob Berkelaar. It is a record of some 5000 names, titled Free Reformed Church of Australia, sub-titled Family Ties, and dated 9/14/2025. It is not an official church document, and contains a lot of sensitive information. Accordingly, it has not been published, but was available on request.

It has been suggested by Ian Boersma that Berkelaar's methodology was to reconstruct family ties from the current generation to the founding fathers. The information is tabulated in Word format on 219 pages. Every individual from the pioneer generation, parents and children, has been assigned an alphabetical letter, the next generation has been assigned numbers, the numbering system allowing traceability through the tree of family ties.

The Family Ties document is organised by year, by family, nominating the paternal name, the maiden name of the mother of the children, and listing all the children. No dates are assigned. Distinction is made regarding origin or destination of individuals. Only individuals who migrated directly to Western Australia have been included in the survey at hand. People from other

countries, internal migration in Australia, people who migrated directly from the Netherlands to an eastern Australian State, have been eliminated for this analysis. Only those individuals who arrived in the 1950s have been considered for this study.

It has been noted that some individuals were not recorded on Berkelaar's list, but the number is very small. Input from church members nominated a total of 8 people.

Correlation

All of the collected names were cross referenced with Department of Immigration records, as held by the National Archives of Australia. It needs to be said - the record is scant. Not many files have been digitised, but there is usually a note in the file name and content description to indicate that a person has arrived in Australia.

Of the files that have been digitised, and some run to 180 pages of sundry documents, approximately half contained the medical report certifying good health, and many of these reports were poorly completed, typically with respect to date of birth, so often given as age in years.

Missing from most files is the "Registration as an Alien" form which almost every migrant file in the Department of Immigration in Tasmania has. This was the first document completed by migrants on entering Australia, recording some forty facts, but never religion. (There are a small number of non-standard forms which do ask for 'religion', but their number is insufficient to build a study on).

Also missing from most digitised files are the naturalisation documents. Naturalisation was a multi-step process, requiring a form for each step. One of the forms was completed by ASIO agents, whose identity needs to remain secret - there is no reason why the other documents are not in the files.

Also missing from the West Australian files are requests for re-entry visas - I saw one, whereas I have seen hundreds in Tasmania. Form or no form, there are many instances of migrants arriving twice, several years apart, without ever leaving, according to the records. There are also boomerang migrants, who endure the migration process several times, but they are a statistical minority.

Returns

This brings us to the question of returns. It has been estimated that the return rate is 25%, noting that this is an estimate. Estimates are based on assumptions and the possible assumptions for making an estimate are as follows.

Almost all migrants to Australia registered as aliens, which allowed the Immigration Department and or ASIO to keep track of them. The migrants were required to advise the department of changes of address, of employment, of marital status. Those reports were rarely made. Initially, teenagers achieving the age of sixteen, or adults who had been in Australia the required number of years, were requested, in a personal letter, to apply for citizenship.

Migrants who desired to visit their place of birth, for whatever reason, and had not yet naturalised, requested a re-entry visa. Non-migrants did not, although they completed the same alien registration document, and were classed as migrants. It seems as though the Department had failed to imagine that people would come to Australia and then leave again.

What happened, as best I can see, is that 'Oma en Opa' came to visit their children and grandchildren. This process began in the latter 1950s, it preceded the jumbo jet (which accelerated the process, but the Department had new documents to cope). Increasing welfare in the Netherlands allowed grandparents and maiden aunts the possibility of seeing their offspring and the world. Travel was by ship, so the stay in Australia was at least six months and often a year, to make it worthwhile. Travel was by ship, which was relatively cheap, especially at back-fill rates on otherwise empty passenger ships.

A study of shipping records will show all these grandparents and maiden aunts leaving the Commonwealth. All will have arrived in Australia on migration papers - tourism was not yet a thing, so nobody was counting them. To complicate the issue, the Dutch have a naming proclivity. Jan Smit tends to be the son of Jan Smit who is probably the son of Jan Smit. Ditto with the girls. Thus, to find the name Jan Smit on a shipping register and in a migrant file is very easy, but they are probably two different people.

This study has examined the record of approximately 800 individuals, i.e. all the migrants/ members of the Free Reformed Church. Of these, 29 returned, and we know all their names, and the reasons for return. The list of names has been lodged with the History Hub of the Free Reformed Church in Armadale, Western. Australia, for privacy reasons.

Summary

Bosveld's book contains a great deal of useful information, as incidental to his story of the growth of the church, and incidental to the work of genealogists. It is a very specific sub-set of Dutch migrants to (Western) Australia, a group that should have quite detailed records to confirm the discussion in this paper.

For the student of migration, correlating the Bosveld list with Berkelaar and other sources of data could reveal significant patterns concerning chain migration, naturalisation (assimilation), family sizes, and other questions re migration.

There are plausible explanations for the estimated return rate which need to be examined. A correlation of shipping lists with original 'Registration as an Alien' forms would be necessary.

Most importantly, I have shown that the Free Reformed Church of Western Australia sample of Dutch migrants have a distinctly lower return rate in comparison to the currently accepted wisdom.

References

Bosveld, G.J., *Free Reformed Pioneers*. A history of migrants from the Netherlands to Australia and the early days of the Free Reformed Churches in Western Australia in the 1950s. Pro Ecclesis Publishers, Armadale, Western Australia 2009

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