



Judith Brouwer, *Levenstekens. Gekaapte brieven uit het Rampjaar 1672* (Dissertatie Rijksuniversiteit Groningen 2013; Hilversum: Verloren, 2014, 352 pp., ISBN 978 90 8704 405 3).

For research on Dutch correspondence in the seventeenth century scholars have long depended on letters preserved in family archives of the Dutch Republic's elite. In contrast, Judith Brouwer's book *Levenstekens* focuses on letters written by people from the lower classes. She investigated material first discovered by the Dutch historian S.W.P.C. Braunius, who found intercepted mail and papers from the early modern Netherlands in the National Archives of the United Kingdom in the 1980s. These letters are part of the 'Prize Papers' collection, as they had been transported on board ships that were captured by English privateers during wartime. The letters never reached their destination, because privateers had to bring captured ships with all their contents to England. Correspondence on its way to or from the Dutch colonies thus ended up in the English archive.

Some researchers followed Braunius to England, but only after Roelof van Gelder investigated the extent of the collection in 2006 did the letters become known to a wider public. Van Gelder estimated that the archive contained over 38.000 early modern Dutch letters. His report led to many more publications on this unique material, from the edited volume of letters written by people on Michiel de Ruyter's fleet to investigations into the development of Dutch language among the lower classes. The *Sailing Letters Journal* series, moreover, offered a large number of short articles by scholars of various disciplines on individual letters. Judith Brouwer has added an important study to this body of scholarship with her book on captured letters from the Dutch Disaster Year 1672.

With this book, based on her PhD dissertation defended at the University of Groningen in 2013, Brouwer has written a comprehensive study of the 195 preserved letters sent from the Dutch Republic to the colonies in 1672. She investigated the lives and feelings of the individual authors in the context of the 1672 war. While previous studies have uncovered many aspects of the Dutch Disaster Year, it has never been possible to examine this closely the personal experience of the ordinary inhabitants of the Dutch Republic. Brouwer has explored the letters from various perspectives. The book investigates the epistolary culture of the seventeenth century and the social background of the authors and recipients. Its second part analyses the way authors reported about the war that broke out in 1672 and continues by describing the personal lives and emotions of the correspondents.

*Levenstekens* commences with the practices of letter writing in the Dutch Republic, covering the educational system, the letter books with theoretical ideas about corresponding, and the extent to which the correspondents of the 1672 letters brought these ideas into practice. Through these topics, we already get a closer look into the lives of the correspondents: some were unable to write themselves, so professional writers put down their thoughts on paper. Others asked neighbors or family members to write their letters for them. The fact that some senders could not write was closely related to the environment they came from, Brouwer subsequently demonstrates. Literacy was high in the Dutch Republic, but those women who had husbands overseas often came from the lower classes. Some could read, fewer of them could write. Not all correspondents came from the lowest classes, however. Brouwer's meticulous archival investigation of the origins of the Amsterdam authors establishes that the correspondents came from all social strata. Almost half of these people had a husband overseas. This investigation also shows the limits of this type of research: because archives offer more details about the wealthy families, Brouwer emphasizes that the chapter on the social background of the correspondents can say most about these people (160). At the same time, this makes the number of people from the lower classes that she has been able to trace impressive.

The second part of the book forms the core of the research, focusing on the content of the letters. The third chapter analyses the ways the authors wrote about the developments of the 1672 war, the last chapter shows how the people in the Dutch Republic informed their correspondents about their daily lives. These chapters allow the reader to approach the correspondents more closely. Brouwer discusses the way the correspondents wrote about various themes, such as the longing for the people overseas and the misery of illness, death, and poverty. She shows that people without a good education were also highly interested in obtaining news via various channels. By discussing a broad variety of themes, in these chapters Brouwer reveals the most important thing the authors have in common: a feeling of insecurity about their own lives and the lives of their loved ones overseas. The war only intensified these feelings. In this part of the book, these emotions truly seem to come alive.

Brouwer brings the reader in close contact with her source material with an abundance of quotations. Her aim to investigate the letters from many perspectives combined with her eye for detail sometimes results in repetitions. In addition, the many details she provides about a large number of individual correspondents can make it more difficult to follow the general point of her analysis, especially in the chapter on social origins that contains many brief life descriptions. Another point of attention is that her analysis does not cover all the Dutch correspondence captured in 1672. Brouwer does not discuss the hundreds of letters written in Suriname at various moments during that year. She remarks in her conclusion that the correspondents living in Suriname

only possessed knowledge of the outbreak of war, which would make a comparison with the more elaborate war correspondence written in the Dutch Republic almost impossible (289). However, the letters from Suriname written in August and September 1672 show that the war also had a major impact on the colonists' lives: they feared an English invasion, their sugar production stagnated, the trade with the Dutch Republic was severely disturbed and life was arguably even more insecure than it was in the Dutch Republic itself. Some attention to these letters could have placed Brouwer's material from the Dutch Republic in a broader comparative framework.

With her focus on correspondence from the Dutch Republic, Brouwer has written a book that will be of great interest to scholars of the Dutch Golden Age who want to know more about the epistolary culture of the lower classes and daily life in times of war. Yet *Levenstekens* will certainly appeal to a broader public as well. Brouwer's writing is clear, without unnecessary jargon, and she provides much contextual information useful for those unfamiliar with the history of the Dutch Republic. With this book, Brouwer ensures that numerous carefully written 'signs of life' from 1672 can finally be read and enjoyed.

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