

**TON BROOS, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**  
**Batavian slavery, or Eighteenth-century Dutch adventurers of  
the colonial West**

The experiences of early Dutch *gelukzoekers*, fortune hunters, have seldom been the subject of printed reports, and of such accounts as have survived, many are buried in official histories of the Trading Companies, which have more to say about the East Indies. Moreover, my interest is not so much in the official archives and statistics as in the representation of these experiences in the imagination of contemporaries, in the lesser known early novels and literary texts. Literary examples before 1800 are certainly not in abundance, and of those also, most are about the Eastern hemisphere. This article must therefore be sketchy in character, as I have limited myself to a few finds of different shape, form and color, representing the kaleidoscopic character of the material. What is surprising is that I have been able to draw such a picture with the help of Dutch novels and periodicals to be found in the library of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, not a place one would have expected to have holdings in such a specialized topic (see bibliography).

Ironically, the only text I found there which mentions Canada, specifically Quebec, would be classified under the heading of tales about the East Indies. It is entitled *De Gelukzoeker*

*over Zee, of de Afrikaansche en Aziaansche Wegwyzer* (The fortune hunter across the seas, or the African and Asianguidebook), and is the second part of a bawdy novel of adventure called *Het koddig en vermakelijk leven van Louwtje van Zevenhuizen of de schermschool der huislieden* (The comical and amusing life of Louis of Zevenhuizen, or the fencing school for rednecks) by Gerrit van Spaan, published in 1752. In a section leading up to the main story, we read about a wine merchant who is down on his luck. He is thinking about moving to New Netherland, because he has often heard that it is a good healthy fertile country, and that the Dutch people who move over there do well. Some friends, however, advise against this enterprise because, they argue, it is always cold in winter and there are continuous battles with "the West-Indian nation." They claim that the French of Canada and Quebec fight continuously with the English of Pennsylvania, Long Island and New York, "als er maar een strootje in hun baard vliegt" (any time a piece of straw gets in their beards, in other words, at the drop of a hat). The merchant decides to move to the East Indies instead.

The western hemisphere is represented in these stories by the West Indies. And that

raises the question of slavery, which was an institution of those islands, and because of which the modern reader may well find these works racist. At the time critics thought them immoral. Looking for eighteenth-century reviews of this popular, some would say lightweight, Dutch literature, I came across one in which the critic is more than upset. He uses phrases like "disgusting to read ... vices are described as funny rather than horrible." Another work gets a real tongue-lashing: "This novel is of the ordinary Dutch kind, as they occur these days, and at that, one of the worst: without imagination, without wit, consisting of many kinds of unchaste behaviour, portrayed in the most stupid way; the protagonist, despite this disgraceful sort of behaviour, becoming happy in the world; it is incomprehensible to us how an honest man can condone the printing of such intolerable texts." What was so intolerable for this reviewer for the *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* of 1761? The title page might show some of his problems:

The Middelburg adventurer. Or Life of a burgher. Consisting of his unusual education; childhood love affairs; lessons; disastrous business, caused by multiple amorous deals; life in the countryside, total ruin; prison; unusual rescue, and journey to Surinam, where he is so blessed by fortune that after a short stay over there he returns to his Fatherland a rich man, and is united in a desired marriage. Mixed with many unusual Histories, miraculous love affairs, and surprising encounters.  
Written by himself.

The many love affairs must have been too much for the reviewer. Surprisingly, he does not mention the journey to Surinam. Also,

when talking about the disgraceful behaviour of the protagonist, he does not refer to the practice of slavery as it is described by the anonymous author. In the novel, our hero, called Lodewijk (Louis), accepts an interesting gift from a friend: half a plantation in Surinam. They both travel there to inspect their property. A thousand slaves welcome them with a lot of noise, and they treat them to meat, brandy and tobacco. The narrator/protagonist writes: "They also got their portion of brandy, but this made their heads go crazy so much that they howled and shouted like madmen." This has a bad effect on a certain young slave, who, heated by drink, seizes his chance and hits a black overseer on the head so hard that his brains are splattered out. A great commotion ensues. All the Blacks approach the owners, but instead of killing them, they fall on their knees and make a great deal of noise. One of them comes forward and starts to speak:

It has been long enough, Gentlemen, that we have been silent under tyrannical slavery. It has been long enough for us that we have been treated as mindless animals, without having the courage to express our complaints, to avoid a cruel death. Fate has made us into slaves, alas; although our souls stay free even in the deepest slavery.

He continues to curse the cruel and beastly behavior of his tyrants, and says that for the slaves death is sweeter than their harsh existence. "What will stop us from running away to the forest north of here? Even when hunger would gnaw at us, we would rather hang ourselves than suffer this horrible and slavish existence ... But," he reassures his masters,

We have no rebellion nor disobedience

in mind. We are your slaves, but treat us like gentlemen, not like torturers, and you will not have accidents like this murder, but a general affection. If you treat us like compassionate gentlemen, and control the cruelty of the "senior" Negroes in charge, as well as the overseer, your land will yield double its produce; your female slaves will be more fruitful, and your possession will increase to immense wealth. The gods will give you a healthy and wealthy life and will be safe.

The owner Louis and his friend Wilhelmus do not get angry with the complainant, they follow his advice. They make him an overseer, after having decreed that when overseers misbehave, the slaves have a right to complain. The ones that misbehave and cannot be corrected by mild punishment, are sold and replaced by new ones. Everybody is happy:

No slaves ran away, they were content with their fate, and prayed the gods to let them live out their days under such mild rule. In short, I had not managed this plantation for a year when they assured me it was worth more than six thousand guilders more than when we first came.

Louis is a good example of a benign master, who does not question slavery, and, perhaps surprisingly, does not bother to convert the slaves to Christianity either. His companion Wilhelmus amuses himself with having young slaves run and wrestle for money, but our sanctimonious hero has little to do with such follies. His friend eventually has to pay the price for his behavior: he pines away and

dies, leaving Louis the entire business. One would expect freedom for the slaves, but not in this case. Louis falls in love and decides to sell everything and depart. In fact, when he leaves Surinam again, he does not say what provision he has made for the slaves that have to stay behind. A benign master indeed, but money and his own love life come first. Of course we have to see the description of the plantation in the larger context, as it covers a mere seven pages out of 210. The entire slave episode is clearly a figment of the author's imagination, as becomes clear from the start: there is no record of any plantation in Surinam with a thousand slaves. Although the numbers in the records vary enormously, the largest one had 599 slaves, the average being between 100 and 150. The opinion about slaves in this novel is not different from the one we have come to believe to be the general trend in those days. Not surprisingly, all slaves are described as savages, who can be noble individually, but have to be controlled, certainly when under the influence of alcohol. If you treat them decently, then profit might come your way, but don't bother to convert them.

In a similar vein we can read *De Wispelturige Kleermaker* (The capricious tailor) from around 1760, which could be characterized as a novel of adventure. The subtitle indicates the protagonist's various jobs as "tailor, manservant, undertaker, tobacco salesman, teacher, soldier, sergeant, actor and comforter of the sick." In one part of the story the protagonist is reunited with Rosa, his love of many years, in Curaçao. As it happens, a revolt of slaves is taking place, but this gets only scant attention, in some comments about the punishments. The reader may conclude that this author had never been

there either. Could he have read something about revolts in the newspapers? That is highly unlikely, because the first recorded slave revolt in Curaçao happened much later than our story, in 1795.

Another Dutch story could serve as a sequence to our Middelburger's biography, as he leaves Surinam. I am referring to *Geschiedenis van een Neger ...* (History of a Negro, his voyage with Mr. N... from Surinam to Holland: their landing (caused by a heavy storm) at an unknown island, Description of the Governor of the same, Mr. Le Sage. His [=Le Sage's] arrival at the island, his flight from France because of religion, accurate description of the religion, way of life, of the inhabitants of the island, conversion of the Negro to the reformed religion, his departure to Holland with Mr. N... Meeting of the Negro in Amsterdam, his marriage with the Daughter of Mr. N... etc., written in a moral fashion). This work was published in Utrecht by S. de Waal around 1770.

The Negro, "black in body but white in soul," may be the main character in capital letters on the title page, but more time is spent on the biographies of Le Sage and Mr. N, ... both fine Protestant converts, who have the religious upper hand. Mr. N... is of course one of the good ones who is against the barbaric and cruel ways in which inhuman masters treat their slaves. During their trip they get shipwrecked off an island, covered in mist, where they meet a colony of happy Christians, led by a French Huguenot aptly called Le Sage (the wise man). Our Negro is converted and baptized Thomas. He reluctantly leaves the island, which is on no maps, for the Low Countries.

He is not very happy in Amsterdam, as we can gather from his opinions about the country and people. Not surprisingly, he thinks that daily life is too tumultuous. "The air is heavy and stuffy, filled with intense stinking odors that rise from the canals." He is astonished by the greed and the desire for profit. "Not that there are no honest people at all, but so far I have not found many," says Thomas. He feels that "people are selfish and that they use all means to enrich themselves, that they have little regard for an honest man if he has no money; [but] the greatest respect [for someone of means] even if he is the unworthiest creature alive."

The most remarkable part of this story comes at the end, when Thomas's blackness is no hindrance to being loved by Mr. N's daughter Agnes. Marriage is the result, but "only a very few good friends from either side were invited to the wedding party. It occurred without any ostentation; but this could not prevent the fact that there were many who had few good words for it. It was strange to the world that a man, who could be counted among one of the most decent men, let his daughter be married to a Negro, who had been his slave before." The end of the story comes with the move of Thomas and Agnes to the country house of Mr. N., where they enjoy "loving freedom, their marriage blessed with a few children."

The introduction to this work states clearly that this might be viewed by many as a novel, meaning that it is all made up or contains lies. "But," the author says, "everyone with an attentive eye will be convinced of the opposite and, persuaded by the possibility of the events, it may be useful to the readers. If this is the case, the author has reached his goal."

Interestingly, the writer does not claim that the story is true, but appeals to the readers' empathy and declares his tale is worth understanding. This principle of amusement and utilitarianism, or *utile dulci*, was popular throughout the 18th century, and especially in the last decades, when moralistic works had to entertain, but above all teach a lesson. A self-deprecating sense of humour of the modern kind is conspicuously absent. But then again, this novel should be seen in its historical context, when messages had to be spelled out to a less sophisticated reading public.

A good example of the growing desire for more humane treatment of slaves can be found in Elisabeth Maria Post's *Reinhart, of Natuur en Godsdiens* (Pure-heart, or nature and religion, 1791-92). It is interesting to observe how the illustrations to this work could apply to the previous two: good master meets slave, slaves wave goodbye to good master. Reinhart is returning to Holland after much soul-searching. His life story began in Holland, followed by a voyage to Guyana, work experience on a plantation, and his decision to become a plantation owner despite his misgivings about slavery. He continues to waver between making money, personal pleasures, and social reality and responsibility. He marries a plantation owner's daughter, they have two children, she dies, the plantation gets neglected, and he decides to return to Holland for the children's education.

A. N. Paasman has analyzed this novel extensively in his dissertation *Nederlandse Literatuur en Slavernij*, and points to several fascinating aspects. He mentions its positive sentimental character, the special interest in

social reality, the influence of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Paul et Virginie*, the description of exotic nature, and the ambivalent attitude towards natural man, who is virtuous but lacks Christian faith. The reader may be sceptical of Reinhart's changed attitude from being against slavery on principle to tolerating it. He appeals to Providence to justify the existence of slavery, and he draws the comparison between a carefree slave existence and the wretched existence of free European labourers and peasants. The novel *Aardenburg* by Petronella Moens, which has been recently reprinted, shows several similarities with Post's work, although it also contains outspoken criticism of the despicable treatment of people of color in the Netherlands.

Another view is discussed in an apologia in verse called *My Negro-boy Cicero* by Paul-François Roos, which appeared in his *First-fruits of Surinamese Poetry*, published in Amsterdam in 1783. In a dialogue between Cicero and a fellow-slave, Quamina, we hear the arguments of a slave's sheltered existence, versus being poor but free. The first lines already set the tone:

Your burden is light, because you have,  
after your daily tasks a few hours left to  
work for yourself: Remember, O Peoples!  
That Batavian [i.e. Dutch] Slavery  
Is preferable to a life that might be free,  
but is poor.

He tells about his abduction when he was thirteen, and how, after initially crying, "I walked around, without chains and free on the ship, albeit in slavery." Arriving in Surinam,

Here I looked around the place I saw

slaves there, happy and cheerful. This consoled me in my slavery ... I was sold ... and so settled, my Master gave me food; I got a place to sleep and a garment to cover myself at night; This could give me some consolation. No person did any harm to me; However, I thought of my youthful freedom and the approaching work in slavery.

The work proves to be unusually light: it consists of carrying his master's coat, cleaning shoes, brushing coats, carrying a parasol for him "very graciously, as straight as a candle," learning Dutch, shaving beards, and making up hair. When Quamina asks him about freedom, he answers:

I'll tell you more about freedom: When I was allowed to accompany my Master to the freedom-loving Netherlands I thought, well, now I will learn to appreciate the value of freedom, because slavery is forbidden here. I was mistaken, because the poor free person seemed worse off there than in slavery.

I saw many poor whites who would thank the Creator if they would have a life like we do: I saw them carry, heave, toil, pull, dig, plow. Poverty was at their side. Then I thought: Oh, is this freedom? This freedom is also slavery!

It is true, you will say here sometimes that everyone could lay down their work because each is free in his environment; This is true! but he who doesn't want to work is regarded as a pig, yes, as a plague to Society! So that, my friend, their poor freedom contains the yoke of slavery.

Roos paints a picture of almost bucolic bliss, similar to what can be seen in the idyllic pictures in Herlein's early *Description of Surinam* (1718). The reality of the slaves in the fields, the house slaves, or the craftsman-slaves must have been very different. Roos definitely knew better: he lived in Surinam, and was familiar with the more brutal side of life, as he demonstrates in his jubilee song called *Victory at Aroukoe* celebrating the capture of a village of runaway slaves, or Maroons, in 1790. He certainly shows no sympathy for the famous Boni, who was said to lead a gang that plundered, burned and murdered and "eager for the white man's blood, makes us shiver when we just hear his name."

The most interesting source for this battle against runaway slaves, and the treatment of slaves, with elaborate descriptions of natural history and planter's life in Surinam, is a work called *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Its author, John Stedman, had a Dutch mother, was born in Dendermonde, and was in the service of the Dutch government around 1775 to capture runaway slaves. Stedman gives detailed accounts of his life in the colonies, ventures his opinions freely, and includes a lengthy romance with a slave called Joanna, whom he leaves behind when returning to Europe. From the latest annotated edition of this work we know that many of Stedman's opinions denouncing the harsh treatment of slaves were cut out of the original edition. However, the illustrations depicting slaves to be sold, the "Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave" or "A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows" are worth a thousand words.

An opinion as strong as Stedman's can also be found in a Dutch spectatorial journal called *De Denker* (The thinker) of 1764. In a letter supposedly written by an ex-slave, the author Kakera Otie denounces the traditional justification of the slave trade and the attitude of the colonists. Two quotations may suffice: "Wild animals are more moderate in satisfying their urges, than these degenerate human beings [= whites], who pretend to be more civilized than we are," and "We carry out the hardest labour for them from early morning to late at night, and enable them to gain treasures, which they waste in abundance, while we are very badly fed in the meantime." The author is not known, although the name of dominee Cornelis van Engelen has been suggested. This man's more enlightened social conscience seems to be rare at that time.

More often, however, the rose-coloured view took precedence over the brutal view, if there was a view at all. Of course we have to be aware of generalizations, and there are more stories to tell. Take for instance the remarkable story of Elisabeth Samson, the first free-born black Surinamese woman, who in 1764 wanted to marry a white man. She requested an official marriage, which was first denied on the grounds that it was repugnant and horrible and that "we [white people] are of a better and nobler nature than they are." She appealed to the Company in Holland, which granted her request. Meanwhile, however, three years had passed and her lover had died. But she had the last laugh, because she married someone else shortly thereafter. When she died in 1771 she left her husband more than a million guilders in plantation property and houses.

Other remarkable stories can be found in the trials and tribulations of missionaries. In a study of the Herrnhut brethren in the West Indies, we read that even if the missionaries themselves agreed to become slaves, they could not legally do so, nor perform slave labour. Therefore it didn't take long before the missionaries became slave owners. One could treat one's slaves decently without being against slavery as an institution. Working a plantation was unthinkable without slave labour. At St. Thomas the missionaries owned a plantation with nine slaves. This had several advantages: they had cheap labour, they could convert them without being criticized, and the slaves could be treated humanely.

Of course there are other sources besides Dutch ones. Stories, fairy tales, sayings and songs have been living an active life among the non-whites, and much has survived in oral tradition for many generations. Hoogbergen talks about the two main themes in the oral stories: the injustice done to the Negroes, and secondly the enormous wealth of the plantation owners. In the novels we have discussed here, we see the same characteristics. Although Louis, Thomas, Reinhart and Cicero have their own distinctive (fictitious) stories to tell, money seems to be first and foremost on the mind of every Dutchman. European patronizing superiority was the predominant attitude, and for most people slavery did not clash with their Dutch reformed religion. When I refer to this "Batavian slavery," I do not mean P. F. Roos's hardly believable carefree labour relationship, but an attitude guided by the principle that "slaves are as good as money, but money is better." In Stedman's book we find an allegorical picture entitled *Europe supported by*

*Africa and America*. The support was financial, and all too often Dutch works of the time exhibit denial of the moral price paid for it. To be sure, in many respects we are still taking stock of our literary and documentary sources on both sides of the ocean, and future finds may modify this picture.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- De Denker*, Amsterdam, 1763-1774 (vol.1) reprinted in : Keijser, Paula. *Suikerriet en suikerverdriet. Slavernij in enkele 18e-eeuwse teksten*. Culemborg, 1984. "Kakera Otie"s plea is on p. 20-35.
- Geschiedenis van een Neger, zyn reize met de heer N.... van Surinamen naar Holland [...]*Utrecht, S. de Waal, [1770]. (University of Michigan Library Collection, Hubbard Imaginary Voyages, PT 5600 A1 G39)
- Herlein, J.D. *Beschryvinge van de Volks-Plantinge Suriname*. Leeuwarden: Injema, 1718.
- Hoogbergen, Wim. *Het kamp van broos en kaliko. De geschiedenis van een Afro-Surinaamse familie*. Amsterdam, 1996.
- Lenders, Maria. *Strijders voor het Lam. Leven en werk van de Herrnhutter Broeders en -Zusters in Suriname 1735-1900*. Leiden, 1996.
- De Middelburgsche Avanturier, of het Leven van een Burger Persoon*. Amsterdam, Steven van Esveldt, 1760. (University of Michigan Library Collection, UBA 554 G 29). Modern reprint: Merlijn s.d.
- McLeod, Cynthia. *Elisabeth Samson. Een vrije zwarte vrouw in het achttiende-eeuwse Suriname*. Schoorl, 1993.
- Moens, Petronella. *Aardenburg of de onbekende volksplanting in Zuid-Amerika*. Inleiding en bewerking door Ans Veltman-van den Bos en Jan de Vet. Amsterdam, 2001.
- Paasman, A.N. *Reinhart: Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting*. Putten, 1984.
- Post, Elisabeth Maria. *Reinhart of Natuur en Godsdienst*. Amsterdam, Johannes Allart, 1791/2.
- Roos, P.F. *Eerstelingen van Surinaamsche Mengelpoëzy*. Amsterdam 1783/9 (title page and first part reprinted in Keijser, p. 10-17 )
- Spaan, Gerrit van. *De Gelukzoeker over Zee, of de Afrikaansche en Aziaansche Weg-wyzer*. Part of: *Het koddig en vermakelijk leven van Louwtje van Zevenhuizen, of het Schermschool der huislieden*. Rotterdam: P. de Vries, 1752. (U of Michigan Library Collection, Hubbard Imaginary Voyages, PT 5681 S73 S3 1752).
- Stedman, John. *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Edited by Richard and Sally Price, Baltimore, 1988.
- Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, Amsterdam [used here : eerste deel, 1761, eerste stuk, p. 380]. (University of Michigan Library Collection, UBA Z 432)

*De wispelturige Kleermaker, Heerenknegt,  
Aanspreker, Tabaksverkoper, Schoolmeester,  
Soldaat, Sergeant, Commediant en  
Krankbezoeker ... of zeldzame Levensloop van  
een Berugte Amsterdammer [...] Nijmegen etc.,  
Wolfsen etc., [1765?] (University of Michigan  
Library Collection, UBA 2379 E 15)*