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Memoirs and Metafiction: Dutch Immigration to Canada after World War II

Since the discovery of the Americas by Europeans who were looking for an alternative passage to the Orient, an amazing amount of writing about the "New World" has been produced. Some of it, dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century, was to enlighten Europeans about the geography of the discovered territories, their flora and fauna and native inhabitants, to enable future explorers to exploit the resources of these previously uncharted areas, and in other cases to satisfy Europeans' curiosity about the so-called "uncivilized" lands. These aims of informing and entertaining were also those of later writers. At times they wrote to entertain and at other times they gave practical advice for would-be travellers or immigrants to the American continents.

There were certain periods in history when North America held a particular attraction for Europeans. One thinks of the Romantic period, for instance, when the revolt against the ideas of the Enlightenment is best reflected in Rousseau's idealization of the "Noble Savage." In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the German writers Charles Sealsfield (1793-1864), F.P. Grove (1871-1948) and particularly Karl May (1842-1942) who never actually visited North America, wrote for a European audience. Karl May entertained millions of German teenagers with his tales about life among North American natives and his hero Old Shatterhand; some 13 million copies of his books have been published. For the English speaking public, two sisters who emigrated from England to Canada, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, wrote extensively in the mid-19th century about their experiences as English "gentlewomen" who were transplanted to a foreign, pioneer colony. Their books relate their daily experiences, both negative and positive, and the contrasts that they perceived between their native and adopted countries. They talk about the hardships imposed by a harsh climate, living in a relative wilderness as opposed to a cultivated landscape, a social environment that was completely different from the one to which they were accustomed. Another concern was the lack of the amenities of English domestic life which a woman of their social standing enjoyed in her native land but found lacking in the colonies. On the whole, the sisters appear to have coped extremely well. Their accounts are not only entertaining and a pleasure to read, but they also contain much practical advice for anyone contemplating immigration to Canada. Shortly before the publication of their works, in 1838, Anna Brownwell Jameson published an

entertaining and informative chronicle of her eight month sojourn in Canada with the title *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles*.

It is apparent, then, that there is a long tradition of writing in several genres and languages aimed at both a European and a North American audience. The writers that I have mentioned above wrote fiction, metafiction, autobiographies and memoirs. Like their other European counterparts, Dutch authors have also written about life in Canada. Four works that I would recommend appeared in the period immediately after World War II, during the greatest wave of Dutch immigration to Canada. They are:

Beukman, Manja. *The War Bride's Tale, or I Was the Bride of a Canadian*. 1950. Trans. Jan W. Auer. St. Catharines, Canada: Marnie Heus Books, 1999.

Brandis, Maxine. *Land voor onze zonen: Belevenissen van een emigrante in Canada*.Utrecht/ Antwerp: Het Spectrum, 1960.

Horn, Michiel. *Becoming Canadian: Memoirs of an Invisible Immigrant*. Toronto/Buffalo/ London: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

Schryer, Frans J. *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario: Pillars, Class and Dutch Ethnicity*. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998.

I have selected these authors because of their variety. Aside from their time frame the authors of the works in question have little in common and approach their topic from different standpoints. The reasons for my selection are the following: Schryer and Beukman focus on the Dutch who arrived in Ontario, while Brandis and Horn write about the experience of those who landed in British Columbia. The writers were all born in the Netherlands, but had different backgrounds as far as education and their eventual professions are concerned. Schryer, as a social scientist, decided to concentrate on certain groups of the Dutch who settled in Ontario, and his study is the result of extensive research in this field. Horn, who was a budding historian when he arrived as a child, must have kept meticulous diaries and the result is a book that is more a narration of his personal life than the average immigrant's experience in Canada — if there is such a thing as a typical immigrant's experience. Brandis also describes her first years in Canada from a personal point of view, but her book would have been more useful than Horn's to a person considering emigrating to Canada. In all fairness to Horn, Brandis published her book in English in 1950 and in Dutch in 1960, whereas Horn's appeared in 1997, so that the two were meant to reach completely different audiences. In other words, Brandis, who immigrated as an adult, had lived in the United States for a while with her husband, had some experience as a journalist, and wrote in the tradition of Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, both to entertain and enlighten her readership, whereas Horn has written a book that can be classified as the autobiography of a boy who grows up in Canada and becomes a mature man who works and lives in Canada. Beukman's novel is different from the other works mentioned in the sense that it belongs to that sub-genre of the narrative known as metafiction in that her personal encounters with "real" people are recreated and fictionalized. As she pointed out in her letter

of September 27, 1998 to Jan Auer, the translator of her novel, the character Thomas contains much of her own character (see Auer's paper below).

One theme that all four works have in common is the sense of freedom, both on a personal level and on a social one, that a newcomer from the Netherlands experiences in Canada. The adjustment to Canadian society is hard to deal with, but on the whole it seems to be liberating. In Schryer's study, for example, the very title indicates that whereas in the Netherlands one's "class", as determined by family background, education, social connections and income is important, that importance has to be explained to native Canadians. Among the Dutch expatriate community this sense of "class" still plays an important role in some circles — albeit less now than it did in the late forties and the fifties. In Canada some of the newcomers were pleasantly surprised that their social standing in the Netherlands meant nothing in Canada, whereas others felt that it should mean something.

Beukman refers to this difference between the meaning of social status in the Netherlands and Canada throughout her novel. When Elisabeth announces to her father and mother that she is going to marry Lloyd Collins, her parents are dismayed initially that she is going to marry an enlisted soldier rather than an officer. Making the situation even worse, as far as they are concerned, is the fact that Lloyd is a railway worker who is on a waiting list to become a train conductor. Since the parents will have to explain the engagement to their relatives and the acquaintances within their social circle, they decide to invent the myth that Lloyd is a fur dealer. As Elisabeth's mother says: "We would say that he is a fur dealer. That sounds very Canadian and not at all bad." (Beukman, p. 18). She then adds, as an obvious criticism of her husband, who has not had to work for a living, but has managed to support his family in genteel poverty thanks to what is left of a pitiful inheritance, that it would be nice to have a man who actually leaves the house for a job that provides some income. Not only that, but Elisabeth, who works as a secretary and hates her job but has to work to support the family, is actually the first one in the family to be gainfully employed. At the end of the novel, Elisabeth decides that, in spite of the fact that she despises office work, she is tired of working as a maid. She responds to an ad in the *Montreal Star* that announces a job opportunity with a Dutch company in Canada. The description of the interview with Elisabeth's prospective employers reminds one of a caricature by Hogarth or Dickens. The interviewers are more interested in Elisabeth's social standing in the Netherlands than in her secretarial skills. (Beukman, pp. 169f.)

Horn's autobiography shows that his parents also discovered that their social standing in the Netherlands meant nothing to Canadians when they arrived in British Columbia in 1952 with their sons. Whereas Beukman's Elisabeth sees this as something positive, Horn's mother, as she is portrayed, is dismayed to find out that she has descended the social ladder. In Baarn she enjoyed being the wife of a prominent architect, living in the best residential area of the town, as Horn tells us – in fact Horn tells us what the house was worth when he last visited it (Horn, p. 8) – and he contrasts it with the humble quarters that the family was forced to rent upon its arrival in Victoria (Horn, p. 56). Horn's mother appears to have had many problems in adjusting to life

in Canada. She found it demeaning that among Canadians she was an ordinary woman like everyone else, with no special privileges because of her "class" in the Netherlands, and that her husband had to find a less prestigious occupation than the one that he had had there. Her interaction with the Dutch community in Victoria also seems to have been problematic in that she thought that it was unsuitable for her family to associate with certain Dutch immigrants. As Horn says:

> Although Father was fairly flexible, Mother felt fully at ease only with people of her own social milieu. Those from a lower class in Holland were kept at a distance, their status in Canada being largely irrelevant. "Goede mensen, maar wel wat ordinair," Mother would say: Good people, but a bit common. (Horn, p. 66).

It becomes quite obvious that in spite of the subtitle of his book, Horn appears to share some of his mother's prejudices. He may have become Canadian, but he is certainly not an invisible immigrant, for he tells the reader in minute detail about his personal life in Canada and his year at the University of Freiburg. It is is true that he is not a member of a visible minority and is integrated into Canadian society, but on the other hand we are given many details - too many and not very interesting to the average reader- about his personal life, such as the friends he made, the sexual experiences he had, the books he read,the records he liked, the lectures and concerts that he attended, and more. One of the characteristics that is often described as typically Canadian is reticence, and that element is lacking in this book.

Maxine Brandis had an advantage over Mrs. Horn when she arrived in Canada in that she had had a post-secondary education and had lived in the United States. These experiences helped her and her husband to adjust to life in North America, but they were of little use as far as their chosen occupation in British Columbia was concerned. They settled in a fairly remote area of the province and initially eked out an existence as farmers. Brandis describes the family's struggles to integrate into Canadian society. There are numerous tales of the problems that were encountered in their new homeland, but they are told with a sense of humour, and Brandis' optimism pervades her memoirs. At the same time she, like her predecessors Traill and Moodie, gives useful hints to prospective immigrants; she points out the difficulties that the Dutch would encounter, tells them that Canada is not the land of milk and honey that they might have expected, but that it is a beautiful country with many opportunities that were lacking in the Netherlands at the time for those who were willing to set aside their preconceptions, work hard and become integrated into Canadian society.

The four books that I have mentioned are all valuable reading for anyone who wishes to know something about post World War II immigration to Canada from the Netherlands. For me they have a special significance, since as a young boy I immigrated to Canada with my parents in the early fifties, and can therefore relate to many of the characters and events described. Two of them, by Marja Beukman and Maxine Brandis, were presented at greater length in a panel discussion held during the

CAANS annual conference at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec in 1999. Those presentations follow here.