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Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr, Secretary to Stadholder-King William of Orange

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2013 has been proclaimed the Huygens year in the Netherlands. With a major exposition in the Great Church in The Hague, and a flurry of Huygens-related activities throughout the country (ranging from Huygens city walks to performances of Huygens compositions and lectures on early modern astronomy), the family that played such an eminent role in Dutch 17th-century politics, art and science is once more firmly on the cultural agenda.

As is to be expected, most attention during this year has been devoted to Constantijn Huygens, Sr. (1596?1687) and his most famous son, the brilliant scientist Christiaan (1629?95). Building on the foundations laid by his father, Constantijn self-consciously engineered the family?s rise to prominence. Secretary ? and gatekeeper ? to two Princes of Orange, Frederick Henry and William II, and in the possession of an extensive and powerful pan-European correspondence network, Constantijn occupied a crucial political position throughout the second quarter of the 17th century. But Constantijn was also an accomplished poet, musician and art connoisseur, every inch the Renaissance *uomo universale* he conspicuously desired to be. No wonder his life and work continues to attract scholars with a wide range of interests. Christiaan?s legacy, by contrast, is firmly anchored in the history of science. His fundamental work

in mathematics, optics, and astronomy made him into one of the best natural philosophers of his generation, second only to Isaac Newton. While pursuing his theoretical research, Christiaan, like Robert Hooke, was also a tireless designer of instruments: he perfected the telescope, invented the pendulum clock, and independently from Hooke developed a balance spring watch.

With two such luminaries in one family, it should not be surprising that the other scions of the Huygens family have met with considerably less attention during this current year of commemoration. Of Constantijn Sr.?s four other children, only the eldest son, Constantijn Jr., received more than fleeting notice, and that mainly because he lived out his professional life in the vicinity of the man who was crowned King of England on 11 April 1689, William III.

It must not always have been easy for Constantijn Huygens, Jr. (1628?97) to live up to the expectations of his successful, demanding, and long-lived father, or to match the brilliance of his younger brother, in the inbred knowledge that posterity would judge him. His own son, Constantijn III, or Tien, later collapsed under the pressure. Constantijn did as well as he conceivably could, but his career had an unfortunate start. His thoroughly planned education ? which he dutifully underwent ? had prepared him to follow in the footsteps of his father, yet through no fault of himself, his most productive years coincided with the Stadtholderless period, when the Huygenses were side-tracked in Dutch politics along with their patrons. Constantijn spent his leisure time studying, fathering a bastard son, marrying, and assisting his brother with lens-grinding and telescope-building. Only in 1672, when John de Witt was murdered in The Hague and William III was restored to the office of his forefathers, could Huygens, now 44 years old, finally obtain the public position he had been groomed for: secretary to the stadholder. He would remain in office for more than 20 years. When he retired from court, in 1696, only one year before his death, he had witnessed his patron?s rise to power in the Dutch Republic, had accompanied him to the battlefield in his continuous struggle against France, and had embarked with him on arguably the most risky enterprise of the age, the Glorious Revolution.

Throughout this tumultuous period in office, Huygens kept a diary, in which he meticulously recorded every occurrence in both his professional and his personal life which he considered worth remembering. His notes from 1673?83 and 1688?97, all in all more than 1,500 pages in seven volumes, have survived, and are nowadays preserved in the Royal Library in The Hague. They are a treasure trove for early modernists of all inclinations. Like his near-contemporary Samuel Pepys, Huygens candidly recorded all kinds of personal observations. Besides chronicling the political and scientific developments of his age, he recorded court gossip, his daily life, his dealings in art, and much, much more. What Pepys is for the Restoration, Huygens could be for Williamite England. Yet whereas Pepys? diary is widely known and easily accessible, Huygens? text, in sad reflection of its writer?s eclipsed reputation, remains hidden in 19th-century editions, its existence unknown even to some historians of the period.

In *Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr*, Rudolf Dekker has set himself the task to introduce Huygens? diary and the memories and observations it contains an Anglophone audience. Dekker, a prize-winning scholar who has devoted his life to early modern life writing, is well-equipped for the job and accomplishes it with style. In short, vignette-like chapters, he captures the world and perceptions of a son who never managed to acquire the fame of his dominant father and brilliant brother, yet who stood closer to the centre of 17th-century European power politics than both of them ever did. The subjects he deals with are diverse, and Dekker obviously is more at home on some terrains (for instance, sexual gossip, on which he has published before, and which receives a lengthy chapter) than on others (the chapter on relationships between Englishmen and Dutchmen is much shorter and sketchier). But one can hardly expect him to cover all the themes in a diary by such a versatile man as Constantijn Huygens in equal depth and with equal expertise. Dekker is an ambassador for his main source, and he does not fail to show its richness and attractions.

The public and the private

The figure of William III towers over Huygens? diary. Like all other courtiers, Huygens anxiously observed

William whenever he could, attentive to every wink of the new monarch. Dekker naturally devotes much attention to Huygens? relationship with the king, which, to Huygens? despair, fluctuated between familiarity and distance. In one of the most interesting chapters, ?The many faces of William III?, Dekker recounts several lively anecdotes that shed light on William?s enigmatic character, in a different way to Wout Troost in his political biography. The diary especially brings out William?s dry sense of humour. It also shows that the king enjoyed mocking people; at one occasion he even ridiculed Huygens in public. But while this was cruel, Dekker also portrays William as a compassionate man, who inquired frequently after Huygens? family. And when his brother Christiaan died, in 1695, William consoled Huygens and made a kind gesture which showed him he cared.

Constantijn did not only record his public life however. Like Pepys, Huygens recorded both the public and the private, both courtly and domestic life, and both with an immediacy that would have thrilled Samuel Richardson: Huygens is writing to the moment, and Dekker manages to get very close to his personal experience. He especially brings out Constantijn?s more tragic side. In revealing scenes scattered throughout the book, Dekker draws attention to the fact that Constantijn, despite his priviliged position and his relative closeness to the prince, was from the outset an outsider, with little control or influence. He foregrounds, for instance, the fact that Constantijn learned of William?s intentions only days before the embarkation of the Dutch fleet to England from a printed proclamation, which was ironically signed with his own name. After the Glorious Revolution, his position deteriorated, especially when his friend and protector Bentinck, the earl of Portland, lost influence at court. But if Constantijn continuously worried about his growing distance from the king, he did little to prevent it. An incident on the road during a campaign in the Nine Years War symbolizes the civilized, yet resigned aspect of his nature: ?Blathwaite?s coach pushed ahead of mine, so I let him ride on ahead? (p. 47). William Blathwaite was one of William?s English secretaries, and Huygens? main competitor. Dekker portrays Huygens as a melancholy man, lacking the character traits required for real courtly success. In England, he felt increasingly side-tracked, receiving more and more second-rate commissions. His office was chaotic, and Huygens frequently made mistakes for which he could not blame his servants. He felt out of place, and suffered from bouts of home-sickness. He contemplated resigning more than once, yet his sense of duty prevailed, and he remained to serve William until a year before his death.

In the personal sphere, too, Huygens was frustrated by his own lack of control. He was away most of the time, and yearned for letters from home. His wife Susanna wrote to him often, and their relationship seems to have survived his long absences remarkably well. With his son Tien he had a troubled relationship, however. Tien rarely wrote when his father was away, which pained Huygens and made him ?melancholy?. Tien grew up to be a difficult adolescent, and when he entered university he was soon reputed to be ?the most debauched student in Leyden? (p. 151). Huygens tried to correct his son, but ultimately lacked authority; he could make Tien cry, but not mend his ways. At night he heard the urgently whispered conversations between Susanna and Tien with rising anger ? even at home, he was not allowed to hear all. Luckily Dekker does not succumb to the urge to psychologize, and he is to be commended for the straightforward but suggestive way in which he tells the story of Huygens? family troubles. In a related chapter, in which Dekker reconstructs Huygens? relationship with his servants, his resistance to such interpretation is less successful. When we learn, for example, that Huygens ? rather cruelly, by modern standards, and quite unlike his own master ? rejected his boy Daniel?s request to take time off after his father had died, more texture would have been welcome.

Modernity and contextualization

Dekker writes with verve; he has highlighted interesting themes, and has a fine selecting eye for evocative passages and anecdotes. He is an emphatic biographer, at his best when describing Constantijn?s experiences and direct environment. He is less convincing in critical analysis and contextualization. This is partly due to the conciseness of his text, which does not permit him to expound his views, but also to his inclination to act as the diary?s ambassador rather than its critical interrogator. Dekker is particularly keen on qualifying it as a modern text. The privacy and the immediacy of the diary are certainly new for the 17th century, but in his understandable eagerness to emphasize the importance of his source, Dekker overplays his strong hand.

In chapter two, he observes that Constantijn?s diary-writing was part of a wider concern with time-management that was also manifested in his scientific interests. Constantijn supposedly even coined the term time-management in Dutch. This is an interesting point of departure for a cultural historical analysis. Both Constantijn and Christiaan had in their youths imbibed their famous father?s anxiety over wasting time, as well as his lifelong efforts to manage and record it optimally. Yet instead of seeking the roots of Constantijn?s preoccupation in his upbringing, and of analysing it from a filial, cultural or class perspective, Dekker chooses to interpret it only as a sign of Constantijn?s modernity, asserting that the diary ?reflected a new concept of time?. Dekker here echoes Stuart Sherman, who argued that Samuel Pepys? (earlier) diary was ?especially responsive to Huygensian temporality?.(1) But Dekker asserts rather than argues. He does not engage with Nigel Thrift and Paul Glennie, who have criticized Sherman and concluded convincingly that ?Pepys? everyday precisions in timekeeping look far from distinctive? when compared to earlier authors. (2)

Whereas time had always been seen as cyclical, Dekker writes, Constantijn?s ?modern diurnal temporality? (p. 15) broke with this tradition. Oddly, the reference supporting this statement is a chapter in a book on another diary: *Child of the Enlightenment*, which Dekker wrote together with Ariane Baggerman.(3) Here they applied the same claim, with rather more justification, to the diary of Otto van Eck, the 18th-century boy who recorded his own upbringing. Although it is conceivable that Dekker is right in both cases, the long century dividing both his diarists and the lack of argument makes it difficult to believe that linear time was new twice. Indeed, the entire notion of a novel concept of time, interesting though it is, remains unsubstantiated. The cyclical conception underlying medieval and early modern intellectual fields such as cosmography and biblical exegesis was largely philosophical in nature, and never stood in the way of linear timekeeping in genres such as the chronicle or the Renaissance diary. There is no reason to suppose, finally, that linear timekeeping was incompatible with a circular conception of natural processes and history. The calendar itself, combining its recurring monthly and seasonal cycles and progressive, linear counting of years, exemplifies this.

Dekker?s tendency to see parallels between Constantijn?s various spheres of activity, apparent in the example of watchmaking and diary-writing, again leads him astray in chapter 11, where he makes a point of connecting Constantijn?s interest in astronomy, and his observations of ?the microcosm? of the court. This is drawing analogies for the sake of analogy only ? a fine novelistic instrument, but quite out of place here. A similar neglect of scholarly rigour is apparent at several points in the book when Dekker, at some length, draws parallels between Huygens? life and the popular literature of his time, again with no apparent purpose but to add colour to the story.

Conclusion

Rudolf Dekker has written a well-researched and compelling book that will appeal to a wide range of readers. He has some difficulties navigating the thin line between scholarly argument and compelling historical storytelling, but one cannot expect an introductory book meant to disclose and introduce a much-neglected text to do everything. Dekker more than makes up for these deficiencies by offering a captivating picture of Constantijn?s Huygens? life at court, and by vividly showing what could be done with his diary. Others will have to take over now. Nineteenth-century editions are available in open access on the *Digital Library of Dutch Literature* (http://www.dbnl.org/auteurs/auteur.php?id=huyg007 [2]), but since Huygens wrote mostly in French before, and in Dutch after, the Glorious Revolution, an accessible English edition is

much needed. Perhaps Dekker himself would be willing to continue his ambassadorship for another term.

If Dekker ultimately accomplishes his mission with *Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr*, this achievement is partly undermined by his choice of publisher. Considering his aims, it is unfortunate, to say the least, that Brill has put the excessive price of £84.00 on this slender volume, more than six times the amount of the Dutch version (by another publisher) and more suited for the highly specialized monograph than an accessible introduction. This book deserves a wider audience than it may now reasonably expect, and unless an affordable paperback or open access e-book is planned for future publication, it is to be feared that Constantijn Huygens? diary will remain a hidden treasure for an Anglophone audience until the next Huygens year.

Notes

1. Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660?1785* (Chicago, IL, 1997), p. 80.Back to (1)
2. Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift, *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales 1300?1800* (Oxford, 2009), p. 264.Back to (2)
3. Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, *Child of the Enlightenment: Revolutionary Europe Reflected in a Boyhood Diary* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 291?316.Back to (3)

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