



Roelof van Gelder, *Naar het aards paradijs. Het rusteloze leven van Jacob Roggeveen, ontdekker van Paaseiland (1659-1729)* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2012, 335 pp., ISBN 978 94 600 3573 9).

Jacob Roggeveen was an unusual explorer. Trained as a jurist and best-known in his day as a promoter of libertine religious beliefs, this former inhabitant of Middelburg at age sixty-two convinced the West-Indische Compagnie (WIC) to entrust him with the command over a fleet of three ships destined to discover the imaginary *Terra Australis Incognita*. Despite stumbling upon the most remote part of the inhabited world – the previously unknown Easter Island (Rapa Nui) – the expedition of 1721-1723 fell miserably short of expectations. Consequently, Roggeveen failed to establish himself as a famous South Seas navigator along the likes of Magellan, Drake, Quirós, Schouten and Le Maire. That his long life and ill-fated mission are nonetheless well worth recounting is amply shown by Roelof van Gelder's *Naar het aards paradijs*. While Roggeveen's voyage takes centre stage in the latter half of the book (chapters 10-20), the first one hundred and fifty pages (chapters 1-9) situate his career against the background of social and religious life in the Dutch Republic around the turn of the eighteenth century. This 'life and times' approach has resulted in a rich and stimulating account that will be warmly welcomed by the general reader. At the same time, specialists will find much of use in this meticulously researched and well-written book.

In chapters 1 to 9, Van Gelder successively discusses the early history of exploration in the South Pacific; the career of Roggeveen's father Arent; Jacob Roggeveen's youth in Middelburg and first short stint in Batavia; the major political and religious disputes that shook late seventeenth-century Zeeland; Roggeveen's troubled career as a member of Batavia's Council of Justice; and finally his involvement in religious controversy after his return in Middelburg, on account of which he was expelled in 1719. The book's most original contribution is its reconstruction of Roggeveen's interaction with a diverse network of freethinkers and the ensuing quarrels with orthodox ministers of the Reformed church. The author relates how, after an early flirt with Spinozism, Roggeveen was to become a life-long adherent of the dissident theologian Pontiaen van Hattem. For circa half a century (1690-1740), this charismatic figure and his followers remained prime targets for censure by church councils, the various Zeeland classes, and civil authorities in Zeeland and beyond. Roggeveen would assume a leading role in the

dissemination of Van Hattem's ideas with his publication in four volumes of the latter's scattered writings, entitled *Den Val van 's werelts afgod* (1718-1727). Based on the venomous pamphlet war he waged with the Middelburg minister Carolus Tuinman as well as his inflexible comportment in VOC service, Roggeveen is presented to the reader as a stubborn, quarrelsome, and at times intractable personality.

Fans of the travel genre are well served by the second half of *Naar het aards paradijs*. Closely following the manuscript journals and printed accounts pertaining to Roggeveen's expedition, Van Gelder's narration of events reads like a classic adventure story. Albeit comparatively understudied, the voyage of the *Arend*, *Tienhoven*, and *Afrikaanse Galei* has certainly been written about before. The sizeable collection of relevant documents published by the *Linschoten Vereeniging* in 1911 remains indispensable to researchers, while Anglophone scholars can turn to Andrew Sharp's translation of Roggeveen's journal. In recounting the circumstances that led to the European discovery of Easter Island on 7 April 1722, the principal value of the present book lies therefore not in uncovering virgin territory, but in introducing largely known facts to a wider readership in a lively narrative form. Highlights include the pieces of anecdotal evidence that intersperse the account. They relate the experiences of individuals such as the sailor Martinus van Gelder, who was abandoned at São Sebastião for violence committed on board, and helmsman Steven de Wit, who was nearly stung to death when intoxicated by Brazilian sugarcane brandy (presumably *cachaça*). Finally, Van Gelder also vividly brings to life the ever more desperate conditions which the dwindling crews suffered when crossing the Pacific.

Writing an accessible book for a broad audience, Van Gelder has had to make several concessions. His bibliography and endnotes are slim, and historiographical discussion is largely omitted. The absence of an introduction and conclusion (the book has a prologue and epilogue instead) perhaps illustrates best that *Naar het aards paradijs* above all has a story to tell, not an argument to make. While the choices are understandable, it does mean that opportunities for furthering historical debate are missed. For instance, in discussing Roggeveen's intellectual environment the author makes ample mention of thinkers such as Spinoza or Balthasar Bekker, thus suggesting links between his subject of study and the so-called Radical Enlightenment. Yet only very summarily is the role of the hattemists in this wider movement addressed (301), and indeed any engagement with the work of Jonathan Israel or his critics is lacking. Likewise, more could have been made of the Dutch encounter with the indigenous inhabitants of Easter Island. For example, Van Gelder's speculation that the Rapa Nui perceived the Europeans as divine creatures (218) would have gained more depth when situated against the contesting anthropological views on this issue (Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate). Overall, the author chooses to downplay the problematic nature of first contacts and their representation in European sources, stressing admiration rather than contempt as characteristic of Dutch responses (221, 256). Such a reading sits uneasily with Roggeveen's hacking into one of the sacred Easter Island statues, or the violence

perpetrated upon landing. Elsewhere, Van Gelder uncritically accepts the corporal Karl Friedrich Behrens' claims about Pacific Islanders' sexual promiscuity (222, 241), despite not only an abundance of critical scholarship about the European projection of sexual desire onto 'native' women, but also his own admission that Behrens' published journal was adorned with invented sensational details (202). Ultimately, these points of criticism do not diminish the fact that Van Gelder has succeeded in writing a masterful account about a fascinating figure.

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