



Robert A. Naborn, ***Eilardus Westerlo (1738-1790): From Colonial Dominee to American Pastor*** (Ph.D. Thesis, Free University Amsterdam 2011; [Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit], 2011, 288 + 361 pp. (appendices)).

Few drivers motoring along Route 32 in upstate New York will take notice of the small town of Westerlo (pop. 3,361 in 2010). Even fewer will know that the town is named after the eighteenth-century minister Eilardus Westerlo who spent his entire working life serving the Dutch Reformed Church in Albany. Through his dissertation, Robert Naborn has rescued this little-known minister from oblivion.

Westerlo was born in 1738 in Kanten in the province of Groningen and read theology at the university in the homonymous provincial capital. In 1760, the young man was recommended by his professors Gerdes and Bertling for a vacant pulpit on the other side of the Atlantic. For thirty years, until his death in 1790, Eilardus Westerlo faithfully served his congregation in Albany. Much changed in thirty years: the Dutch Reformed churches gained their independence from the classis of Amsterdam, the thirteen American colonies cast off the British yoke, and Albany was flooded with immigrants from New England, losing much of its Dutch character in the process. During a large part of these exciting times, Westerlo kept a diary. It is a rare and rich source, which Naborn has included in full in the appendices to his dissertation.

Naborn calls his dissertation a 'spiritual biography' (11) and focuses on Westerlo's personal development in piety and faith. After two introductory chapters, the spiritual rebirth or regeneration of Westerlo on 20 April 1768 takes center stage. The author convincingly traces Westerlo's pietism to its Dutch and German intellectual origins. The chapter on Westerlo's translation of Robertus Alberthoma's *Uittreksel van de Leere der Waarheid (Extract of the Doctrine of Truth)* into English illuminates Westerlo's personal religious convictions.

Naborn's investigation of the role Westerlo played in the creation of the Church Order of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which was based on the Church Order of Dort, is slightly less convincing, as there is little evidence to go on. The author devotes an entire chapter to the question whether John Henry Livingston can justifiably be called the 'father' of the Reformed Church in America. More interesting is Naborn's analysis of Westerlo's sermon of 27 June 1782, when George

Washington visited Albany. The author suggests an intriguing link between Westerlo's exegesis of Romans 13: 1 and Washington's famous *Circular Letter* of 1783.

Any reviewer will have to respect Naborn's choice to write an inward-looking 'spiritual biography', but it results in several other aspects of Westerlo's life receiving short shrift. His social status is a prime example. In 1775 Westerlo married Catharine Livingston, the widow of Stephen Van Rensselaer, the prominent patroon of Rensselaerswijck. Through his marriage the minister aligned himself with the elite of Albany, as is evidenced in 1780 when he conducted the marriage between Alexander Hamilton and Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of general Philip Schuyler. Westerlo's role as husband, (step-)father, and family member is not touched upon. The turbulence that the American Revolution caused in the Hudson Valley is hardly even mentioned. Naborn does not even pose the question whether such major developments affected Westerlo's spiritual life or that of his congregation.

Insufficient contextualization is also a problem in Naborn's use of his main source. Naborn calls these *Memoirs* but the use of that term masks a hybrid character. The first sixteen folio pages are Westerlo's own *Levensbeschrijvinge* [biography], containing a retrospective view of his early years, written in January 1770. This includes a relation of his rebirth experience in 1768. Westerlo picked up his pen again in late 1774 to add eight pages on his work as a minister. Yet the major part consists of a diary: over five hundred quarto pages covering the years from 1781 to 1790, i.e. from the last years of the Revolutionary War to a year after the election of Washington as President of the United States. Although Westerlo reported on his daily activities and contacts as well, his main aim was to reflect upon all of the goodness God had showered him with. Through his writings he wished to impart this to his offspring. Like other first person writings, autobiographical conversion descriptions are shaped by the conventions of its genre. Naborn's analysis of Westerlo's writings would have benefitted from a greater awareness of the typologies and theories of ego documents.

Naborn has included Westerlo's reflections, as well as some other documents, in the appendices to his dissertation. As he writes in his introduction (11), he has modernized the spelling and punctuation and made changes in grammar and sentence structure while transcribing the manuscripts. This is in accordance with the *Richtlijnen voor het uitgeven van historische bescheiden* [Directives for the Publication of Historical Documents] of the Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap [Royal Netherlands Historical Society] and is standard practice among Dutch scholars of the early modern age. Yet in this case it is a dubious decision, as the major part of Westerlo's writings is not in Dutch, but in English. More importantly, the Dutch convention is quite different from the standard in transcribing early American manuscripts, for instance the correspondence of John and Abigail Adams. American scholars shun away from modernization, on the basis of the argument that it 'can compromise the historical value of a document' (Michael E. Stevens and Steven B.

Burg, *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA 1997) 93). As this dissertation, written in English but defended at a Dutch university, on a Dutch minister in early America aims to reach an American scholarly audience, adhering to American scholarly practices would have been better. Despite these drawbacks Naborn has done good work, both in the spiritual biography as in making available Westerlo's diary. Scholars of early modern America will be grateful to him for that.

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