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Dutch Chicago: A History of the Hollanders in the Windy City (Book Review)

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Dutch Chicago: A History of the Hollanders in the Windy City by Robert P. Swierenga. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. xx + 908 pages. ISBN: 0-8028-1311-9. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication, Dordt College.

This book is a masterpiece of historical writing. It marks the apogee of the author's long career of tracing the history of the Dutch in the United States. Here Swierenga goes back to his roots in Chicago. In massive detail attained from careful combing of immigration records, church council minutes, and other archival sources, he traces the emigration of the Dutch to Chicago and follows their history to the present.

As in much of his other works, Swierenga traces the influence of the faith of the immigrants and their offspring, in this case, primarily the Dutch Reformed because clearly they had the largest numbers, but he also gives space to the Dutch Catholics and Jews. More than just numbers, the faith of the Dutch Reformed influenced the places they lived, the schools they founded, the churches they built, and the type of work most of them found. The Reformed in Chicago were close knit and worked together, whether in building churches and schools or starting business ventures.

Many of the Dutch immigrants came from the province of Groningen in the Netherlands and settled on the west and south parts of Chicago. Most were products of the 1834 Secession of the Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk from the national Hervormde church. A significant characteristic of this group was that they tended to band together against those they thought opposed them. They actively sought to preserve their faith, families, churches, and schools from outside challenges. Their neighborhoods demonstrated this togetherness as they often lived close together in a small area of the city, and when they moved because of the declining value of the neighborhood, they tended to move to a new neighborhood where they could once again live with their Dutch relatives and friends in a covenanted community. Most chose to stay together rather than live in integrated neighborhoods. The Kuyperian vision of reclaiming and making a Christian presence in all areas of creation, notes Swierenga, "found very few advocates among the Dutch Reformed in Chicago"(51).

By banding together in colonies, the Dutch believed that they would not be scattered and their faith lost. Compared to other immigrants, these communities were very slow to Americanize. For instance, struggles to maintain the Dutch language in churches caused many disagreements. Nevertheless, the churches remained strong and continued to grow. The author tells affectionately the story of immigrants building beautiful churches. Clearly, the church was at the center of life in these communities, and his description of struggles with church issues should be

instructive history for us all as we try to determine how the instituted church stands in the midst of culture.

More than the building of churches, the establishment and maintenance of Christian schools in Chicago presented a larger challenge. The Reformed Dutch disagreed on how important Christian schools were, so much so that the issue caused division between Christian Reformed and Reformed churches. A significant reason for Christian schools for Chicagoans was the need to protect children against the threat of secularization (357). Furthermore, the schools would be feeders for the church. The author explains the struggle Reformed church leaders faced when the Chicago Board of Public Education "declared the Bible an 'unsuitable' and even 'dangerous' book for children" (360).

The author relives the painful story of the struggle of Timothy Christian School as it faced the challenge of violence over the "gut-wrenching racial issue in admissions policy" (427-443). The question of admitting African-American children is told with great sensitivity. As is often true in this book, Swierenga lets real characters speak of their experience when they were deeply involved. As a member of Timothy at that time, I can testify that the author provides a balanced view, even though there may be some little quibbles about details here or there. He very clearly shows that this "tragic episode is filled with 'might have beens'"(427) that, in hindsight, might have changed the entire situation. Again, history should be our instructor here.

The fascinating story of the Dutch moving from agriculture to trucking shows how their work ethic led them to areas that others did not prefer, primarily picking up garbage. Appendix 1 lists all the Dutch garbage companies in Chicago, and there are 30 pages of names! They came close to a monopoly on the garbage business. In the 1920s they formed an association (called the "Dutch Mafia" by critics) whose "members agreed not to compete with each other and traded accounts to concentrate their routes for greater efficiency" (601). Apparently, organizing was acceptable for company owners but not for drivers. The Dutch business held out against the Teamsters Union as long as they could, but eventually their drivers had to join. They did little, however, to make their voice heard in the union hall. Cartage was second in popularity with eight pages of names in Appendix 2 of Dutch trucking companies. The story of the Dutch in business indicates that they were skilled, energetic, and courageous as they struggled against the mafia, the Teamsters, and competition. Eventually, most of the small Dutch

garbage companies yielded to the large conglomerates who took control of garbage. Of course, the Dutch were not limited to these two types of businesses; they also had many stores and, true to their nature, encouraged "buying Dutch."

Politics did not receive anywhere near the attention that the Dutch in Chicago gave to churches, schools, and business. Many served their country faithfully in wartime. Beyond the call to the military, there were only a few who entered government. There was no Kuyperian movement toward joining forces to bring the light of the gospel to politics. The Chicago Dutch had their roots in the Afschieding of 1834 in the Netherlands rather than in the Doleantie movement of Kuyper in the late 1800s. Though they did much to take care of their own, the history of Chicago also indicates that many important institutions to care for the needy and to bring the gospel were established by the Dutch, and many of those institutions remain strong today.

Similarly in journalism, the Dutch wrote for the Dutch. For a long time, papers were in the native language. Instead of bringing their insights to the larger city, they tended to focus on their own local needs--schools, churches, language issues, etc. Yet, these papers were an important influence in binding the Dutch together--in effect, preserving their community.

Swierenga's story is replete with names and footnotes. Besides the appendices already mentioned, he provides three more: Churches, Schools, and Missions; Societies and Clubs, and Church Membership, 1853-1978. Thus, he provides a valuable service not only to other historians but

also to those many people who still live in Chicago. As a member of that community for several years, I found the names and notes fascinating; many of the people I knew. It is very gratifying for me to see my high school teacher do a masterful job with this huge topic.

The final chapter is an analysis of the Dutch Reformed as a covenanted community: "From the beginning, the Dutch Reformed looked after one another, bore each other's burdens, and shared not only things religious but also a common social and cultural life" (745). They lived together at worship, school, work, and play. When they moved, they moved together. Always they faced the challenge of when to assimilate American culture and when to remain separate. Traditions had a strong hold on the adherents.

Of course, Chicago is Swierenga's own story. Throughout the book, one can sense the admiration of the author for the many fine things demonstrated by his ancestors and contemporaries. Yet, that admiration is balanced with judicial and analytical criticism of the way certain issues were handled and of the tendency of the Dutch to protect themselves at the expense of a wider vision. I would call it criticism with a hug.

This book should be on the shelf of anyone with roots in or ties to Chicago. It is the story of Christians who struggled to live obediently in their journey to the face of God. As such, it should be read by many Christians, Reformed or otherwise. These local histories need to be written and read—far beyond Chicago. As the author penciled in my copy, "Surely we have a goodly heritage. Ps. 16:6."