
Pro Rege

Volume 14 | Number 2

Article 3

December 1985

Looking Back to See Ourselves

James C. Schaap

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (1985) "Looking Back to See Ourselves," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 14: No. 2, 16 - 21.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol14/iss2/3

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Looking Back to See Ourselves

James C. Schaap
Associate Professor of English



*A 1970 graduate of Dordt College, Professor James C. Schaap has been a member of the English department since 1976. He has a Masters Degree from Arizona State University and plans to complete his doctorate from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is the author of **Thirty-five and Counting**, (Dordt College Press, 1985), **Intermission**, (CRC Publications, 1985) and numerous articles and stories.*

Dutch Calvinism in Modern American: A History of a Conservative Subculture, by James D. Bratt, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984. *Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, vols. 1 and 2, by Jacob Van Hinte, Robert P. Swierenga, General Editor, Adriaan de Wit, Chief Translator, Heritage Hall Archives, Calvin College and Seminary, Sponsor, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1985; a translation of *Nederlanders in Amerika: Een Studie over Landverhuizers en Volkplanters in de 19 and 20 Eeuw in de Vereenigde Staten van America*, published by P. Noordhoff, Groningen, The Netherlands, 1928. *The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change*, Robert P. Swierenga, General Editor, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1985.

In the heat of the 1984 Presidential campaign, Geraldine Ferraro, democratic candidate for Vice President, explained her husband's stubborn refusal to release his tax returns on the basis of his ethnic heritage. Ferraro told reporters that anyone married to an Italian husband should be able to sym-

pathize with her inability to get her husband to budge.

Some Italian-Americans considered the candidate's generalization to be an ethnic slur, even though Ms. Ferraro herself is the daughter of Italian immigrant parents. Whether or not her stereotyping casts

undesireable characteristics on all Italians we'll leave others to decide. What was interesting in her answer to reporters is the degree to which Ms. Ferraro leaned on ethnicity to explain her own political misfortunes. What is more interesting, of course, is that she expected the American public to nod understandingly, if a bit reluctantly. Many did.

In America and Canada ethnicity lives, despite the heat of the cultural melting pot and the efforts of even the most recent immigrants to rid themselves of its vestiges. It leaves its indelible marks even on those who angrily leave the shelter of its communities in search of "mainstream" America or Canada. Ethnicity remains a telling part of human character simply because it is so obvious and yet so undefinable.

Ethnicity shows itself in how we eat our potatoes, where we spend our Sunday afternoons, and how we decorate our homes. One can smell ethnicity in foods, see it in clothes, hear it in a few remnant words, the oddities of mother tongues otherwise long since lost.

But where ethnicity has married into faith, it holds with most intensity. One need only think about North American religions which can be modified by ethnic tags: Norwegian Lutheran, German Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Dutch Calvinist. A friend of mine who teaches at Notre Dame University claims that ethnic differences between Roman Catholics—Polish, German, Italian, Irish—often display themselves clearly.

In fact, those who study ethnicity have their best chance of defining "Dutch-ness" or "Swedish-ness" in those folks who have retained their old-country faith. Americanization and Canadianization occur much more quickly to those immigrants who have arrived in North America without a particular faith.

Dr. James D. Bratt notes that fact at the beginning of his very readable history, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, in explaining why he has used the terms "Dutch-American" and "Dutch Reformed"

interchangeably.

As I realize only too well, many Dutch immigrants did not move into Dutch-American settlements at all, and some who did join the settlements did not join the Reformed denominations. Because this study concerns the enduring community, I have had to let these "outsiders" go.

Quite simply, the mix of faith plus ethnicity creates a compound identity forged into steel. What Bratt's book illustrates vividly is that simply burning the wooden shoes will not purge the sister denominations, Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church of America, of their sometimes embarrassingly identifiable ethnic marks—which appear, incidentally, not only as obvious weaknesses, but as undeniable and integral strengths as well.

Of the three books reviewed here, Bratt's book is the most enjoyable to read. Always sharp and witty, the style, at its best, is worth the price of the book. Occasionally, especially in the later chapters, Bratt can be a bit too scholarly, his word choice too heavily Latinate to follow easily, especially by most of those who would appreciate the content of the book. While the book has the heft of a dissertation, it sometimes reads like popular history. For the most part, the sentences ring with all the charm of Sunday morning church bells. Bratt is a writer.

But there is more to admire than style alone. What Bratt has done is swim through an ocean of sources to put together a study that, even if written poorly, would be worth reading. His immersion in original sources—old denominational periodicals by the hundreds—is on its own right worthy of a synodical medal of honor. It is unlikely that anyone on the face of the earth has poured over more *De Wachters*, *Banners*, and *Church Heralds*, than has Dr. Bratt, and it is awe-inspiring (even shocking) to think of the burden of reading through such a

heavy stack of primary sources, in both Dutch and English, many of them heavily polemic and contentious about issues which often seem remote, even silly, to the modern consciousness.

Bratt's history is a cultural study which uses literature, in its broadest sense, as its base. His study includes an informed look at the church periodicals; but one of the most interesting chapters, to those familiar with the novels, is an investigation of four "lapsed" Dutch Calvinist authors—Manfred, De Vries, De Jong, and Mulder. Bratt uses the novelists in two ways: first, to show what they had to say about their subculture; and second, to illustrate (convincingly, I think) that the deeply-ingrained ethnic ethos is a marked characteristic of their work, despite each of the novelist's self-proclaimed liberation from the tradition.

What is most unsettling about the whole study, however, is the finished portrait. For better or for worse, what Bratt shows us is a nearly unending family fight, undertaken on theological or philosophical battlefields, but otherwise almost undistinguishable from the old-time feuds between warring hillbilly families. If the picture is unsettling (it is) and sad (that too), it is, nonetheless, accurate. At least Bratt convinces us that it is. The book makes those of us who are part of the tradition smart with embarrassment, in the same way we can be made uncomfortable when we hear our own voice on a recorder or see an image we consider unflattering in a candid photograph. But such chilling self-portraiture is itself a mark of the book's accuracy.

If there is any consolation here, it might be noted that Bratt's sources are always the warring generals—seminary professors, magazine editors, preachers who become the denominational stars. Bratt's sharp exposition of the foibles of the Dutch Calvinists starts and ends with the famous; the little people he leaves for other historians.

The distinction is important. If one assumes, for instance, that the attitudes and arguments of any of a series of *Banner*

editors are typical of the man (or woman) in the pew, one must buy the thesis that the views of Lester De Koster and Andrew Kuyvenhoven, recent *Banner* editors, always represent those of CRC brick-layers in Lansing, Illinois, or real estate salesmen in St. Catharines, Ontario. Such is not the case, of course. There is, then, some comfort in knowing (or hoping) that perhaps not all of those Calvinists with Dutch surnames are so eager to battle with fellow members of the tribe.

Another weakness (it may be comforting actually) of Bratt's course in taking hold only of the newsmakers is that we miss the personalities involved in the bickering. Anyone who has watched the wars in the Christian Reformed Church, for instance, knows that behind every sticky theological or philosophical argument lie real, live human beings, men (usually) as fully debilitated by depravity as Calvinism's adherents have been known to advance in their preaching.

But Bratt does not concern himself with the gossip or the back room politics; he stays with the issues. The result is a history fraught with feuding, of course; but by staying away from personalities, the wars, as plentiful as they seem, can take on an ivory-tower righteousness they may not deserve.

The study does not penetrate into the seventies with the sharpness it shows in earlier chapters, but then the dust really hasn't cleared sufficiently to get a close look at recent arguments and personalities. Despite the fact that one need not look as deep to write the history of a decade ago, making sense of the recent past can be even more difficult, because all of us who have lived through those events can tend to be slightly near-sighted.

One interesting phenomenon which Bratt's study shows clearly is the immense power that Abraham Kuyper has wielded over the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is there in every fight, in every synod. His language, appropriated by adherents of sometimes different camps, still

defines and limits the nature of the discourse between us. His piety, scorned by those who look almost exclusively at society's ills for the target of a Christian world-view, is an obvious remnant of the *Afscheiding*; while his sternly driven program for bringing principled Christianity into every sphere of life even today makes the pious cringe and complain about "social gospel." In the Christian Reformed Church, Bratt's study shows that no single individual has set as firm an agenda as Abraham Kuiper.

Bratt himself is largely sympathetic to his subjects throughout. His sharp and bright style sometimes carries the bite one might expect from a scholar/writer who spent the Vietnam era at college—Calvin, no less. While he seems finally to love the strange, always warring people he has worked to understand, he is not afraid of being sharply (and often creatively) critical. In discussing the issue of pacifism after World War I, for example, Bratt first outlines the argument, then passes his judgement; "The antipacifists countered with jingoism, a malicious tone, and an intellectual rigor as undistinguished as that of their opponents," he says. Such judgements never stand unsupported, however.

In *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*,

America, on the other hand, suffers from a terminal case of undisguised cultural chauvinism. He is an apologist for his own people, probably without parallel. Furthermore, his selection of historical data seems specially undertaken to reinforce his own always obvious prejudices. Even within the tribe, he has his favorites. Writing as he did in the early part of the twentieth century, he has little patience with the Christian Reformed Church, then still a fledgling institution. He seems convinced that the CRC locked itself in a garrison, when, like the Reformed Church immigrants, it should have set its course toward Americanization. Nonetheless, quite frankly, Van Hinte thinks of the Dutch themselves as the master race.

But readers will forgive all those sins and more if they take the time to read through the giant volumes of Van Hinte's classic study. For Sunday afternoon reading that will last several years, one could do no better than Baker's reprint and translation of the Van Hinte classic. Van Hinte is to Dutch Calvinist history what James Fennimore Cooper is to 19th century American literature—slightly embarrassing, but immovable. All the sins are there in spades, but the work is central. No one knows anything at all about Dutch American

If Van Hinte were alive today, his Chevy would be graced with a bumper sticker—"If you're not Dutch, you're not much." And he'd mean it.

Bratt builds convincing arguments out of impressive scholarship and colors it with a sharp style not quite nasty enough to be *sputten*. In the process he creates a wonderfully readable, sometimes painfully accurate portrait of an eccentric subculture whose own members often find as impossible to love as it is to leave.

Jacob Van Hinte's *Netherlanders in*

history before the Depression without reading Van Hinte. Even at forty dollars, it's a steal.

As anyone who has looked seriously at Dutch immigration history knows, Van Hinte's book has been the standard for many years. Long out of print, however, and written in Dutch (sometimes elaborate, academic Dutch, I am told), much of the commentary

has not been accessible to modern readers. Baker Book House is to be commended for their willingness to bring back Van Hinte—as is Professor Robert Swierenga, of Kent State, who acted as general editor; Mr. Jacob Van Namen, of Chicago, a sponsor; and the Heritage Hall Archives at Calvin College. Their combined effort has done more to preserve Dutch-American history than a century of tulip festivals.

Despite its sometimes silly parochialism, Van Hinte's book is priceless because, like Bratt's, it has the mark of history that has covered well all available sources. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Van Hinte, a Dutch historian who spent his entire career in the study of Dutch immigration, travelled throughout the United States, from New Jersey to Northwest Iowa, in search of original immigrants who would tell their stories. In the process he discovered and used original sources which are simply not available to contemporary scholars. The result is a spacious study of people and places, of colonies made and colonies lost, of religious bigotry and warm piety, of the stubborn desire to succeed by turning uncut prairie land and swampy lake regions into homelands where American strangers could find warmth and love.

Where Bratt follows the foibles of the ecclesiastical stars, Van Hinte goes directly to the little people in an effort to discover their animus, that driving force that led so many European immigrants to leave all for a land and a way of life they knew only through letters, travel brochures, and sometimes questionable promotional come-ons. Although the hero of the entire epic is Michigan's Dominie Van Raalte, *Netherlanders in America* is essentially the story of the immigrants themselves trying to build their communities with their own hands. At best, Van Hinte's work is broad and expansive narrative history, the story of an immigrant people—a thousand stories, really—combined to create the epic that it is.

If Van Hinte were alive today, his Chevy would be graced with a bumper sticker—"If

you're not Dutch, you're not much." And he'd mean it. If the work is jaundiced by his chauvinism, it is at least honest prejudice; and, embarrassing as it sometimes is, it lends the entire work a character which enhances its readability. It may not fit the standards of contemporary historical methods, but its fervor, at times almost evangelical in spirit, is its own distinctive strength.

Jacob Van Hinte's study, translated and redone by Baker Book House, is to the study of Dutch-American immigration what St. Joseph, Missouri, was to the pioneer in prairie schooners—the place to begin. If you own only one book on the Dutch in America, you should own Van Hinte.

The study of ethnicity has grown in recent years, and in the area of Dutch-American studies, no name appears so frequently in the literature as that of Professor Robert Swierenga. As general editor of the Van Hinte reprint, he has brought an invaluable work into the hands of many who want to know more about people and places important to the immigrant sage. But in another recently published book, *The Dutch in America*, Swierenga, again acting as an editor, has made an additional, but different kind of contribution.

The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change bears the mark of Swierenga's own specialty as an historian—quantitative studies. Many of the contributions to the volume are statistic-heavy and graph-laden. One thinks of Richard L. Doyle's "Wealth Mobility in Pella, Iowa: 1847-1925" as an example. Doyle constructs an argument which quite conclusively proves a characteristic thought to be a stereotype of the Dutch character: that the Dutch are remarkably inclusive and powerfully industrious. Doyle's methods, however, are interesting and typical of the volume's. In order to prove his assertion, he builds graph upon graph, files statistic upon statistic in exacting fashion. The result is very slow reading, but a stubbornly convincing argument. Doyle's study is not, by any stretch of the imagination, popular

history; but it is, certainly, the work that should be done. What it lacks in verve, it compensates for in integrity and persistence. Like other studies in the volume (and much of the work of Professor Swierenga) Doyle's useful essay is stiffly scientific history.

Not all of the volume is so heavily statistical, however. It seems obvious that Rutgers University Press, hoping for readers not already acquainted with the history of the Dutch in America, wanted a short, general introduction to the field. Swierenga himself complied, and his short essay introduction to the book is a helpful and concise history of the background of those Netherlanders who came to North America.

Noteworthy also in the volume are two studies of Dutch Catholic immigration by Henry A.V.M. van Stekelenburg and Yda Saueressic-Schreuder. Those of us with Dutch Calvinist roots often tend to overlook the story of Dutch Catholics, who in some situations on the American continent, established their own colonies, the most famous of which is located in Wisconsin's Fox River Valley, in and around Appleton and Green Bay, a community whose history begins concurrent with the Calvinist settlements in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pella, Iowa.

Dutch Calvinists will find plenty of their own history here in the volume as well, however. Conrad Bult's study of Dutch-American newspapers includes a thorough discussion of many ecclesiastical publications often born out of the in-fighting both between and within the various branches of the Dutch Reformed family of denominations.

Herman Ganzevoort, one of the leading Canadian historians of Dutch immigration, in an essay on the Dutch in Canada, offers a somewhat dispelling thesis concerning the imprint which Netherlanders have made in that country. "With the exception of the Christian Reformed activists, who have sought to make Calvinism relevant to Canadian society, a few dance groups, choirs, and theater groups, Dutch culture

seems to have had no serious impact on the Canadian scene," he claims. His analysis, sounded almost like a jeremiad, strikes the reader as true.

However, Dutch Canadians may not differ much from their Dutch neighbors south of the border, since Dutch Americans may well have made their most significant impact on cultural affairs in those same areas—in American protestantism (one thinks of the Grand Rapids publishers), and in American evangelicalism especially. Ganzevoort's thesis underscores an assumption of Bratt's book, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, that ethnicity is most obvious, at least in the case of the Dutch immigrants, when it resides in and grows out of a system of belief—in this case, Calvinism especially.

Another study Christian Reformed Church readers will find interesting is Herbert Brink's look at the theological backgrounds of early ministers of the denomination. Brink divides those preachers on the basis of the theological tutors in the Netherlands. Then he shows how those immigrant dominies carried the theological battles of the old country along to the new.

There is much to commend *The Dutch in America*, especially to those readers who are willing to wade through some sophisticated scholarship. While the book does not read with the flair of Bratt's, nor does it contain the folksy memories and quaint parochialism of Van Hinte's, this volume of historical papers is the kind of work that is the bedrock of other, more popular, historians.

1982 marked the bicentennial of Dutch-American relations. To some degree, all three volumes considered here are part of the flow of discussion and study created by that anniversary. All three are helpful, each in its own distinctive way, in contributing toward a more complete understanding of what are popularly, but not incorrectly, called "roots," in this case, the religious, intellectual, social backgrounds and features of Dutch immigrants to the North American continent.