

The letterbox of time¹

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At the end of the seventies of the last century, maritime historian S.W. P. C. Braunius searched in a record office in London for some military legal documents related to the wars between England and Holland. Although the relations between England and the Netherlands have been very good for a long time now, the situation was different in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the two countries went to war four times.

A regular item on the war programmes in those days was privateering. Privateering and piracy are often mixed up – for more on that subject see further on in this volume. Here it is important to know that privateering was a government-organized and sanctioned form of private warfare. A privateer was a shipmaster who had been granted the right by his government to capture enemy ships – complying with the rules as laid down in a so-called letter of marque.

In England those letters were issued by the *Admiralty*. It was the *High Court of Admiralty* that afterwards, when a foreign ship had been captured, decided whether everything had gone by the book, whether this was a ‘good and lawfull prize’ – legitimate loot or *a prize* as it was then called. For that decision, the High Court relied on evidence – consisting in statements by the privateers and extensive interrogations of the crew of the captured ship. In addition, evidence was provided by the documents found on board: the ship’s papers, bills of lading, the mail and the personal papers of the crew members.

The number of documents that were found differed from ship to ship. A simple fishing boat had only few papers on board – a journal, a registry certificate, a few bills and a couple of notebooks – but on board of a ship to the East or West or on a warship there were large quantities of ships’ papers, maps, bills of lading and letters.*

In any case, the papers found by the privateers were handed over to the High Court. There they were archived, also for legal reasons: the victims could appeal against a decision.

The exact number of Dutch ships that were captured during the four naval wars with England is not known, but there must have been thousands. In addition, ships of other nationalities were captured, tens of thousands of them in total. The archives of the High Court, which were at first kept in the Tower of London, became thus enormously extended. They contain hundreds of thousands of documents; the collection is hundreds of metres long.

When Braunius was making his inquiries in the High Court archives, he was looking for some legal documents. He did not find them, and in that respect, he wrote later, his investigations ‘could not be called successful’. But he did find something else, something that surpassed his wildest expectations – the captured papers of thousands of Dutch ships.

Boxes and more boxes packed with Dutch documents were discovered. Commissions, letters of recommendation, bills of lading, cargo papers, bills, sea letters, safe-conducts, trading letters interspersed with pieces of news and scandals, but especially: personal letters from and to sailors, the seals of some of which had not even been broken. The contents of the boxes covered all the Dutch-English wars. Braunius was not only moved by this find, he also realized the great importance of it. In 1980, in an article entitled ‘The life of a seventeenth-century sailor: false romanticism or reality?’, he wrote that the picture of the sailor had till then been far too one-sided

The sailor was depicted as a rough seaman with or without a heart of gold, undisciplined and dissipated. On board he could only be kept under control with hidings,

¹ This text is translated by Piet Verhoeff.

keelhauling and by being put on bread and water. The stories about his life on shore are, if possible, even sadder: whoremongers, soul-sellers, women of easy virtue and, of course, drink caused the already destitute sailor to join up again for a following voyage.

Braunius realized that the Dutch letters in London – he did not know yet how many there were – might redress this picture.

Braunius wrote his article, in which he was the first to publish eight of those letters, in 1980. Meanwhile 28 years have passed. About the life of seamen, several scientific and popularizing books have appeared in the meantime. Still, the archival treasure remained known only among few people, for years on end. The situation changed some years ago. The letters are now receiving a good deal of attention – also in the media. They have been given a general name, *Sailing Letters*, a term invented by Els van Eijck van Heslinga.

Since 2005, we have also known how many there are. In that year, journalist and historian Roelof van Gelder spent six months in the building of the National Archives in Kew in West London, where the archives of the High Court have been housed since the nineties of the last century. He examined the contents of over eleven hundred boxes and in a database (now to be consulted on the Internet) he made a first, global inventory. According to van Gelder there are more than 38,000 letters. Sixty per cent of those letters are of a business-related nature; forty per cent are personal letters. Of those forty per cent, about eight thousand letters were written by ‘ordinary’ people, sailors to their wives, wives to their husbands, children to their father at sea, and so on.

Is that remarkable? Yes, that is very remarkable. Holland has, roughly, one hundred and fifty record offices. In those offices, numerous documents have been preserved, but letters or diaries by ‘ordinary’ people are few and far between, and if they exist at all, it is just a handful. In London, on the other hand, there are thousands of letters scattered over a long period – more than two hundred years. Moreover, you sometimes find a whole series of letters by one person.

Why do letters from and by ‘ordinary’ people interest us so much? Is it not much more exciting to read letters written by famous scientists, explorers, political leaders or generals? Yes, they can be fascinating, especially if the author is not too vain, but letters by ‘ordinary’ people move us because we, the readers, are also ordinary people.

Generals will write most extensively about their resounding victories on the battlefield, scientists about their pioneering discoveries – and so on and so forth. That may be very interesting, but most people do not make pioneering discoveries and for many modern western people, most battles are fought at home, in their relationships. A bargeman’s wife writing to her husband ‘teer beminde lief’, ‘lieve tweede ziel’, or calling out in despair ‘aag lieve God, was ik maar nooit geboren’ (the quotations are from the fine book *Kikkertje lief* by Perry Moree, 1912) – such a woman is immediately close to our hearts. The antiquated language may sometimes create a little distance, but once you have surmounted that obstacle, the persons in the letters are quickly close to us, precisely because they are so like us.

Now, you have to be careful with such a statement. Reading some of the letters, you might think that hardly anything has changed over the last few centuries. Birth, love and death remain the highlights in a person’s life, the greatest worries are usually related to health, safety, the family, money and goods. In broad outline, that goes for all times, but that some things were a little different then appears, for example, from a letter by a seaman’s wife, who first fills two pages chattering about all sorts of matters, in order to subsequently – oh yes – inform her husband that they will be having another child.

There is something else you have to bear in mind when reading these letters. We are talking about letters from the 17th and 18th centuries. In comparison with the rest of Europe, the degree of literacy in the Netherlands in that period was high, but even so most lower-class people could not read or write. The letters that we now find from them were written by third

parties. The sailor was sometimes helped by a navigating officer or a captain. The women usually employed a professional writer, a *public writer* as they were then called. We find letters from different women that are not only written in the same handwriting, but which open and end in the same way. Those public writers in their turn used model letters in stylebooks – see Judith Brouwer’s chapter on the subject in this book (or even better: see her excellent master’s thesis from 2007 with the title *Al zeyt ghy uyt den ooge, ghy bent uyt myn herte niet. Amsterdamse brieven uit het Rampjaar 1672*).

So in these letters, written by third parties, we do encounter ‘ordinary’ people, but through a coarse filter. For that matter, you may wonder how it must have been for a sailor, after months or sometimes years, to receive a letter from his wife that was couched in a formal language that he did not know from her at all; in which he found phrases like ‘vrijendelijke groetenijssse’, and where we constantly find references to God (‘looft Godt bovenal’, ‘verhopende door Godts genade’, ‘so Godt met ons is so sal het wel gaan’, and so on).

Incidentally, such professional writers still exist in various countries. In 1980, when Braunius published the existence of the *Sailing Letters* abroad, I travelled through Latin America for a year. There I encountered those professional writers everywhere. Just like their Dutch colleagues long ago, they sat in much frequented places, in marketplaces or near churches. They sat at a small table with a simple typewriter on it, and they were always men.

Braunius was moved by the letters that he found in London. That emotion is felt by nearly everybody who gets to see this remarkable collection. The letters are produced in boxes – the size of small removal boxes – by the staff of The National Archives. Of some boxes, the contents are neatly arranged: neat rows of letters one after the other, sometimes bound together with a piece of string. In other boxes, there is chaos, letters and other documents are lying in a heap, loose wax seals among them, bits of string and paper, rusty paperclips, documents torn, rolled up or roughly sewn together with pieces of string so that you can hardly consult them without damaging them.

Most loose objects – keys, wallets, books, textile swatches, postbags – have in the course of years been removed from the boxes, but sometimes you will still find things. A dried plant for example, or seeds.

It is well-known that naturalists from far and wide sent seeds, plants, insects, fishes, birds and other animals to their colleagues in Europe, for instance because they thought they had discovered a new species. Now you have a look in the letterbox of time and you can see how that was done.

Reading or sometimes even opening such a letter (about ten per cent is still unopened) is a first-class historical sensation. You must be made of stone not to be moved by it. Here you are reading a letter that was not meant for your eyes. A letter that was stolen long ago; one that has been covered in dust for years and years (Braunius wrote about this in 1980, ‘Even wine lovers can only dream of the anthracite-like layer of dust that some of the papers are covered in’). You are holding a letter here that most probably will have meant a lot to the person addressed, but which never reached him or her. You will find openings such as ‘Eerwaarde En Seer Geachte Lieve vrouw’, ‘waerde beminde lief’, ‘Teeder Geliefde, van mijn hart beminde en getrouwste vriendin’, ‘Mijn hart, mijn ziel’. When you start reading, you have the feeling that you are doing something you shouldn’t. We have been brought up with the notion that you should not read other people’s mail. And at the same time you realize that that letter has arrived, after all those years – for you, the reader; for you, the reader of this book.

What remains is the question, where do we stand now, with our investigation of the *Sailing Letters*? At the beginning. A first inventory has been made, the first studies have been completed – historical, linguistic – the letters now receive the attention they deserve. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek has posted the first few letters on the Internet, the largest letterbox in the world.

But still we are only at the beginning. Of the 38,000 letters, only a fraction has been typed out. Of only a few dozen letters the historical details have been investigated, enabling us to learn more about the senders, the receivers, the circumstances in which the ships were captured.

As for the latter details, new research possibilities have, fortunately, opened up. Although the crews of the Dutch ships had been ordered to defend themselves against privateers, the capture itself usually went in relatively good order. The privateers themselves usually held back: the prisoners were not to be treated roughly and – according to a regulation from 1780 – there was to be no ‘violence to prisoners, or indecency to female prisoners’.

The fact that sometimes, however, the capture did happen rather roughly appears from reports in *The Times*. As mentioned before, a captured ship was called a *prize*, and a captured Dutch ship was a *Dutch prize*. When you now look up ‘Dutch prize’ in the files of *The Times*, which has been digitalized from 1785 till 1985, you will find dozens of interesting articles that tell us more about the context and the course of the captures.

Thus, we read in *The Times* of October 19th, 1797, ‘Another seven of Admiral Duncan’s fleet, among which the *Director*, have arrived here; two others, and also a Dutch prize, are within sight. [...] The Dutch admiral De Winter conducted himself very bravely: he fought until he had on one side only six canons left that could fire; his captain, who had both his thighs shot off, died on Sunday morning.’

And this is only one new source; in the next few years, hundreds of English newspapers will become accessible via the Internet, from the 17th century, too.

This little book, with contributions by twenty experts, is the first of a series. I wish for the makers and its readers that many more volumes may follow – there is plenty of material.

Notes

1. This paragraph and the last are based on the report *Sailing letters. Verslag van een inventariserend onderzoek naar Nederlandse brieven in het archief van het High Court of Admiralty in The National Archives in Kew, Groot-Brittannie* (2005) by Roelof van Gelder.
2. S.W.P.C. Braunius in *Mededelingen van de Nederlandse Vereniging voor Zeegeschiedenis* (1980) 40/41 (october), p. 11.