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Dutch-American Arts and Letters in Historical Perspective

Edited by Robert P. Swierenga, Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Nella Kennedy


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This is, in summary, an analysis of Van Bergeijk's "A history" of Dominie Scholte. The question remains, whether the document merits an English translation and publication. Truus Schalekamp made a fairly complete translation of about half of the text and a summary of each of the later pages. Should the entire work be translated? On the one hand, little has been written in defense of Scholte, who has suffered from a rather negative press by historians, and even in the oral traditions in Pella today. On the other hand, there may not be a lot more "meat" in it than I have reported. There is really no new information about Scholte. Most of the new information, and the most interesting parts, are the gossip and countercharges concerning Scholte's critics. There are many lines of rather tedious theological argument to support the points. Some of those receiving harsh criticism from Van Bergeijk's pen may be icons of Pella history one hundred and fifty years later.

Chapter Eleven
Good Books for Bad Times: Reading Culture and Ethnicity in Dutch-American Reformed Pietism
John Exalto

In the 1840s, the oysterman Bastiaan Broere (1821-1904) of the province of Zeeland had little hope for the future. He had a good business, but in his opinion God was gradually withdrawing His grace from the Netherlands. Broere heard positive stories of Dutch emigrants in America and he decided to join them. He made his final decision with the help of "bibliomanacy." He opened the Bible to an arbitrary place and read Jeremiah 6: "gather yourselves to flee out of the midst of Jerusalem."



Fig. 11.1 Bastiaan Broere

Once in America, however, after spending a few weeks in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Broere wanted to return to the Netherlands. He could not understand the English language, did not like farming, and found few kindred spirits. He went to New York, where he was swindled by an agent of the Dutch shipping industry. Quoting the Old Testament book of Isaiah, Broere complained: "I have tried you in the melting pot of affliction" (Is. 48.10).¹ After making some money in Buffalo, he booked return passage to the Netherlands. But just at the moment of boarding the ship, he heard a divine voice in his heart that stopped him. Broere settled as an oysterman at West Sayville on Long Island and married a Dutch-born woman. He lived for a while in Norfolk, Virginia, but during the Civil War he made a narrow escape and went back to Long Island.

Boere's contribution to "Dutch-American Arts and Letters" is of little importance. Probably, he corresponded with family and friends in the Netherlands, but there are no extant letters. We know

¹ "Melting pot" is the literal terminology of the Dutch Bible; in English Bibles the word is usually translated as "furnace."

more about Broere from his spiritual autobiography, published in Dutch in 1887 in the Netherlands, with a foreword by a Dutch minister. A friend had encouraged him to write his biography. "I cannot do that," Broere replied, "for I have unsatisfactory command of language rules." Yet, Broere took pen in hand and handed over to his friend notes about his life. The friend transformed these notes into a well-ordered story, and sent it to the Netherlands for publication.²

The autobiography of Broere contained few expressions of his reading culture. In the Netherlands, he taught himself to read with the help of his mother's Bible. This marked the beginning of his conversion. Said Broere: "I applied myself diligently to study the Bible as well as some old writers, for which I feel particular affection." He did not cite the names of these old writers, but on Long Island, Broere continued to read these books. Maybe he did so at the Sunday house churches, for Broere did not go to an established church. He was disappointed by the preaching of the Dutch-American ministers in his neighbourhood.

Broere did not migrate to America to discover another culture or to tap new spiritual sources. He only looked for a place where he could live in religious and economical freedom, according to God's commandments. He did not have many opportunities to get acquainted with his new country, since he had to work hard to earn his money. Broere continued to speak the Dutch language, and that would have hindered the communication with his neighbours. He never became an American. In Dutch-American circles, Broere was an exception, but was he also an exception as a Dutch-American pietist?

Dutch-American Reformed Pietism

According to Jacob van Hinte, Broere was a "Calvinist fanatic."³ I would rather characterize him as a Reformed Pietist. The Dutch Reformed

² *Korte beschrijving van het leven van de wonderbare leidingen Gods met Bastiaan Broere, in Nederland en Amerika. Met een theilving van J. J. A. Ploos van Amstel, pred. te Reijthum* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, [1887]). According to a handwritten notice of the publisher in the copy of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek Den Haag (3200 E 46), the booklet was published on 1 November 1887. The introduction of H. de Vries from Sayville, Long Island, is dated 25 January 1887, the foreword of Rev. Ploos van Amstel is dated 12 July 1887. Johannes Jacobus Ploos van Amstel (1835-95) was a minister in the *Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk* and joined the *Doleantie* of Abraham Kuyper in 1886. He wrote the foreword at the publisher's request and was not acquainted with Broere. Broere's year of birth is mentioned in the *Korte beschrijving* and in the 1880 United States Census, <www.familysearch.org>. The year of death can be found in the Kahler genealogy, <www.kahlerweb.com/mefamilytree>, accessed May 2007. See for the Dutch community in West Sayville in Broere's time: Lawrence J. Taylor, *Dutchmen on the Bay: The Ethnohistory of a Contractual Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

³ Jacob van Hinte, *Nederlanders in Amerika: Een studie over landverhuizers en volkplanters in de 19e en 20ste eeuw in de Vereenigde Staten van Amerika*, 2 vols. (Groningen: P. Noordhoff, 1928; in English translation as *Nederlanders in America: A Study of Immigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga, trans. Adrian de Wit [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985]), 1:457.

Pietists acknowledged Broere as a kindred spirit, as is clear from the reissue of his autobiography by a Dutch Pietist publisher around 1930.⁴ Thereafter, a new generation of Dutch Pietists could learn devotional lessons from the life story of a kindred spirit in far away America.

Reformed Pietism was a religious movement within an orthodox framework that argued for a holy and godly life. Dutch Reformed Pietism was strongly allied to English Puritanism. For the early modern period, this movement is known as the Further Reformation (*Vadere Reformatie*). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this pietism had a great influence in the eastern United States. Until the introduction of Neo-Calvinism in the 1890s, pietism played an important role also in Dutch Reformed churches, mainly in the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC). Among historians, these Pietist influences have not been studied adequately.⁵

Pietists were also found outside Dutch-American churches. Some founded independent congregations, other held religious services in homes, as Bastiaan Broere did. The most important Pietist denomination of today is the Netherlands Reformed Congregations (NRC), the so-called "no TV-church," which originated in the late 1870s. Some CRC congregations and pastors, who feared the loss of the Dutch Pietist identity, helped to establish the NRC. The NRC in the United States is centered in Grand Rapids, the so-called Dutch-American "Jerusalem." The Canadian NRC originated after the Second World War in and around Chilliwack, Canada, the "holy city" of British Columbia.⁶

⁴ *Korte beschrijving van het leven van en de wonderbare leidingen Gods met Bastiaan Broere in Nederland en Amerika* (Utrecht: W. M. den Hertog, [ca. 1930]). This reissue lacked the contributions of De Vries and Ploos van Amstel.

⁵ Characteristic for historiography is the designation by Henry Beets, *De Chr. Gevef. Kerk in N.A.: Zestig jaren van strijd en zegen* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Printing Company, 1918) of the first period of the CRC (1857-80) as the "period of wresale" (*worstelperiode*). According to Beets, Pietism was in essence a growing pain, overcome by the reaching of maturity of the CRC. However, see the interesting recent essay of Earl Wm. Kennedy on the important role of the puritan old writer Richard Baxter in the origin of the CRC: Earl Wm. Kennedy, "Richard Baxter: An English Fox in a Dutch Chickens Coop?" in *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Reverend Dr. Elton J. Bruns at Eighty*, ed. Jacob E. Nyemhul, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 56 (Grand Rapids: Berdmans, 2007), 121-61.

⁶ On 31 December 2005, the NRC counted 9,852 members (professional and baptized), ten pastors, fifteen congregations in the United States, and eleven in Canada. See *Jaarboek Gereformeerde Gemeenten 2006*. For the history of the NRC, see L. Vogelbaer, *En gedachtensteeno oegterich: Facetten uit de geschiedenis van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Noord-Amerika* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1998); Vogelbaer, "The Struggle of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations," in *Morsets in the Melting Pot: The Persistence of Dutch Immigrant Communities in North America*, eds. George Hartink and Hans Karbbendam, European Contributions to American Studies, vol. 64 (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2006), 69-78. For the kindred Free Reformed Churches, see Aric Baars, "Between 'Old' and 'Free': The Free Reformed Churches of North America," in *Morsets in the Melting Pot*, 93-108. Betsy Boer prepared a study on the Reformed Pietists in Canada since 1950; I am grateful to her for allowing me to read the first draft. In Dutch historiography, the Reformed Pietists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries usually are named as *bevindelijke gereformeerden* (experiential Reformed).

Dutch Pietism can be described by six characteristics: *first*, an emphasis on a personal experience of grace and individual path of conversion; *second*, the old-fashioned Biblical language as verbalization of spiritual experiences; *third*, the canon of old writers as normative readings; *fourth*, meeting in conventicles for conversation or listening to lay preachers; *fifth*, a negative view of society and of the Christian church as a mix of unfaithful people and hypocritical believers; and *finally*, a supernatural world in which divine providence is manifest in daily deliverances and punishments.⁷ Dutch Pietism is different from the more familiar Methodist Pietism. The passive spirituality of this Dutch Pietism is akin to Quietism. Conservative folk in the CRC were opposed to the general Arminian religious culture of Methodism. Dutch Pietism was, therefore, doubly isolated. It stood against the Arminian culture and also the cultural optimism and Neocalvinist doctrine of the CRC.

Reformed Pietists in the Netherlands of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were characterized by an intensive reading culture of the Bible and the so-called "Old Writers," devotionals of Pietist (mainly Dutch) writers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and also various Dutch translations of English Puritan works from the early modern period. These old writers were frequently reprinted in modern times, and are favorite subjects in Pietist circles. These "good books" of the old writers are considered as spiritual authorities. The Dutch Pietist reading culture functioned in the context of the pietist practice of meditation. In this practice, reading had a significant but not a monopolistic position. The practice of meditation was also used in spiritual conversation and in writing the spiritual letter.⁸

In this chapter, I will examine whether and to what extent Dutch Reformed Pietist immigrants continued a pietist reading culture in North America. The answer to these questions will also suggest something about the ethnocultural identity of the emigrants. First, I will give a sketch of the reading culture of two women living in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and second, I will place their reading culture in the broader context. In conclusion, I will ask what we can learn from this reading culture as it relates to the ethnocultural identity of Dutch-American Reformed Pietism.

Geertje Petersen

Geertje Petersen (1832-91) left a spiritual autobiography, much like that of Bastiaan Broere. But her life story contains more details of reading culture. That is not surprising, for Petersen was married to a minister, who needed books for his employment. Like her husband, Ede Luurs Meinders (1827-1904), Geertje Petersen

⁷ According to the overview of Fred van Lieburg, "Pietism beyond Patina: A Dutch Religious Heritage in North America," in *Morrels in the Melting Pot*, 43-54, there 45.

⁸ See John Exalto, *Mandelende bijbels: Pietistische leescultuur in Nederland 1830-1960* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 2006).

grew up in Ost-Friesland, Germany, on the northern borderland of the Netherlands. Both she and her husband were raised in a pietist climate, where conventicles and lay preachers played an important role. After migration, Dominie Meinders became a farm laborer in Riddor, Illinois, and an evangelist in the Reformed Church of America (RCA). Later, he served as a pastor of CRC congregations in Steamboat Rock, Iowa, and South Holland, Illinois. At the end of his life, he joined the NRC for a short while, but died as an independent minister.⁹

According to her autobiography, Petersen read the Bible regularly, as well as other books, particularly the old writers of the Dutch Pietist canon. She mentioned seven authors (all available to her in Dutch): one Reformer (Martin Luther), one English Puritan (William Guthrie), and five Dutch Pietist pastors of the early modern period (Robertus Albertoma, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Johannes Groenewegen, Jodocus van Lodenstein, and Siccó Tjaden).¹⁰ Undoubtedly, she read many other books of the same genre. After Ede's death, his library was donated to the CRC Theological School in Grand Rapids.¹¹

Petersen's reading practices were an integral part of her spiritual life and meditation. The path of conversion was the framework of her autobiography, so Petersen focused on moments along her path of conversion, as guided by the Bible and the old writers. Hers was a difficult path, with much spiritual dryness and little divine comfort. Petersen often told her spiritual journey to others, and sometimes she wrote about it in letters. When she was asked to write her autobiography, she first hesitated: "I need my time for the exercise in godliness by reading godly writers, so I want to come to more growth in faith."¹² But later on, a divine voice called her to write her life story.

The spirituality of Petersen is akin to Quietism. She waited for divine revelations in her heart, which she considered far more important than reading the old writers. The books were little more than a means for growing in godliness and devotion.¹³ Petersen reflected on her inner life day and night. But at a certain moment, she discovered that she herself could not make any progress. Only when God was pleased to reveal Himself did she flourish. This kind of spirituality cannot be learned from a book, but only from God Himself. However, what a pietist can do is exercise godliness by reading godly writers and compare her inner life to the ones described in the books. Besides reading, talking and writing were also useful

⁹ L. Vogelhaar, *Pelgrims komen thuis: Uit het leven van ds. E. L. Meinders en zijn echtgenote* (Barnveld: Uitgeverij Boekhandel Gebr. Kosten, 2003). The life story of Geertje Petersen, originally published as *De gedachtenis des rechtharadigen: Kortje beschrijving van het leven en zedig afsterven van me-juffrouw Geertje F. Meinders, geboren Petersen* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1892), is reissued in Vogelhaar, *Pelgrims komen thuis*, 55-157.

¹⁰ Vogelhaar, *Pelgrims komen thuis*, 60, 62, 85, 97, 107, 109, 131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 164. Unfortunately, there is no inventory of Meinders's library, according to Paul Fields, librarian at Calvin College.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69, 70, 73, 79, 86, 99, 132.

for spiritual exercises. Petersen applied these three media, not only for her own spiritual welfare, but also for the comfort of other children of God. That comfort was a major objective for writing her autobiography. And maybe, Petersen said, poor sinners could discover their awful state.¹⁴

Vrouw Sieben

Petersen's practice of godliness was close to the meditative rhythm of life of Catharina Juliana Maria Sieben (1842-93). Both women must have known each other, but we do not have concrete evidence of contact. "Vrouw Sieben," as her Dutch friends called her, was married to the carpenter Cornelis Hasselman (1843-after 1893). The married couple emigrated to Roseland, Illinois, in 1867. From 1880 onwards (maybe earlier) they lived in Harvey, Illinois. She could not find spiritual food in the sermons of the Dutch-American ministers and so she held house services, where a man read a sermon of the old writers. In the late 1880s, Dominic Meinders joined the NRC and from that time, Sieben went to the church services led by her husband.¹⁵

Sieben's autobiography and various letters were published after her death in the Netherlands. The letters were mostly written to Pietist pastor Elias Franssen (1827-98),¹⁶ whose letters were also published. In 1880, Sieben read a volume of Franssen's sermons, and this prompted her to write the author. The pair corresponded two or three times a year until Sieben's death in Harvey, after which her husband sent Franssen four volumes of letters, collected in *schriftboeken*.¹⁷ Franssen published twenty of the letters.¹⁸ Shortly after Franssen's death, thirty of his letters to Sieben were also published.¹⁹

Sieben wrote her autobiography as an admonition to her children to persist in the old ways. She urged them to read and reread the Bible, the infallible

¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵ Elias Franssen, *Enige brieven van een kruitgezant*, ed. A. Ros (Barnveld: Uitgeverij/boekhandel Gehr. Koster, 1993), 11-17.

¹⁶ The first edition is not extant, and the second was published in 1929 at Gorinchem by Romijn & Van der Hoff. I used C. J. M. Sieben, *Aanspraak en raad van een moeder aan hare kinderen en pleegkinderen en den weg van hare bekering tot God*, 6th ed. (Gorinchem: Fa. Romijn & Van der Hoff, n.d.).

¹⁷ Elias Franssen, *Brieven aan Yekwse vrienden*, ed. A. Ros (Barnveld: Uitgeverij/boekhandel Gehr. Koster, 1993), 230.

¹⁸ *Verzameling van eenige brieven van Catharina Juliana Maria Sieben, overleden te Harvey, Amerika den 3en april 1893, in den ouderdom van ruim 50 jaren: Geschreven aan E. Franssen, tegenwoordig leerarr bij de Gereformeerde Gemeente te Barnveld* (Barnveld: Boonstra, 1897); I used the reprint, *Edce: De Westfriesche Boekhandel*, 1980.

¹⁹ *Enige brieven van den welervwaarden heer Elias Franssen, in leven gereformeerde leerarr achter-eenvolgens te Kampen, Lisse en Barneveld, geschreven aan Catharina Juliana Maria Sieben te Harvey (Amerika)*, ed. A. Janse (Kampen: B. Leene & Co., [1899]), reprinted in Franssen, *Enige brieven van een kruitgezant*, 19-116.

Word of God, and the touchstone of religious experiences.²⁰ Besides the Bible, she urged her children to read the old writers, which are beloved, profitable, and sweet books that outline the path of conversion. From these "worthy writers," Sieben told her children, "you could learn the way of true conversion; make good use of these books, for they are a greater treasure as [*sic*; than] earthly wealth." Sieben mentioned several old writers, such as Jodocus van Lodenstein, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Alexander Commie, and Ralph Erskine. Her favorite was the Scottish Puritan Ralph Erskine: "Hold dear especially Erskine," she wrote.²¹ She often read and reread Erskine's translated works with tears.

Sieben regularly reread her books, and that is another characteristic of the pietist reading culture. It is a meditative style, based not on the increase of knowledge, but on the growth and strengthening of godly spirituality. In her letters to Franssen, Sieben stressed the same practice as in her autobiography.²² She thanked Franssen for guiding her to the pith and marrow of godliness that was missing in the Dutch-American ministers, except for Dominic Meinders.²³

Sieben was devoted to the old writers. "I am mostly alone in home and I have few friends," she wrote to Franssen.²⁴ She spent a lot of time reading the work of her beloved mentor. Like Petersen, the spirituality of Vrouw Sieben was one of a Quietist character.²⁵ Moreover, Sieben had a very negative view of contemporary Christianity. Thus, her love for the old books is understandable. Also Sieben made a great contrast between the beloved godly writers and herself. I cannot stand in their shadow, she said. She characterized herself by paraphrasing Romans 7: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells."²⁶

The reading culture of Vrouw Sieben was part of her practice of piety and meditation and of her exercise in godliness. Reading and writing letters functioned in the same context, as is clear from the correspondence between Sieben and Franssen. The Dutch dominie often read the letters from America with tears. Franssen was convinced that God navigated the pen of Sieben to comfort his soul.²⁷ Both used their letters to share spiritual experiences, dissatisfaction with contemporary Christianity, and sorrows about their sinful souls. Paradoxically, these elements are also characteristics of experiential, Pietist truth. The struggle of God's people with the devil and with unbelief, Franssen wrote, is a mark of the experiential truth.²⁸ A few times, Sieben's letters did not arrive in the Netherlands. But her mail always

²⁰ Sieben, *Aanspraak en raad*, 6, 36, 62.

²¹ Ibid., 6, 28, 53, 62-63, 96, 15, 16, 19, 60, 62, 87.

²² *Verzameling van eenige brieven*, 17, 32, 57, 62, 64, 72.

²³ Ibid., 5; see also 26, 30, 32.

²⁴ Ibid., 43.

²⁵ Ibid., 15, 19.

²⁶ Sieben, *Aanspraak en raad*, 85.

²⁷ *Verzameling van eenige brieven*, iv.

²⁸ Franssen, *Enige brieven van een kruitgezant*, 73.

arrived at the right place, though sometimes it took up to twenty-four days and was damaged by seawater.²⁹

On both sides of the Atlantic, pious people read the letters of Franssen and Sieben. Some people copied the letters and shared them with their friends. According to Franssen, Sieben's letters were beloved and in much demand. Many souls drew comfort from them, for they showed that God in the dark age also worked in a soul in far away America.³⁰ After Sieben's death, Franssen was plunged into mourning for many days. For years, her letters from America offered him much comfort.³¹

For Franssen, it was a grateful duty to publish the autobiography and letters of Vrouw Sieben, though Sieben had not intended that her writings be published. Both booklets were reprinted more than once. The autobiography was very popular in Dutch Pietist circles, and in 2002 the twelfth edition was published.³² Pietists read and wrote as an exercise in godliness. Thus, it is not surprising that a pious Dutch man for his own use copied Sieben's printed autobiography in the early twentieth century.³³

The Old Writers in Modern America

Broere, Petersen, and Sieben loved the old writers. But they could not take all their books with them when they emigrated. Yet in America, these old writers were available in three ways. First, they were imported from the Netherlands, privately or by booksellers.³⁴ Second, beginning in the seventeenth century, substantial numbers of Dutch books, mainly religious tomes, circulated in eastern America.³⁵ Third, until the 1950s a Dutch language press was active, which chiefly published periodicals and theological literature.³⁶ When Reformed Dutch-Americans did not possess Pietist books, they could regularly read excerpts

²⁹ *Verzameling van eenige brieven*, 59.

³⁰ Franssen, *Enige brieven van een keruisgezant*, 120. See for reading and copying by third persons, *Verzameling van eenige brieven*, iv, 20; Franssen, *Enige brieven van een keruisgezant*, 20, 21, 29, 38, 120; J. van Dam, *Kom, luister toe: Uit het leven van het oude volk*, vol. 5 (St. Philipsland: Uitgeverij De Palmboom, 1992), 156-60.

³¹ Franssen, *Brieven aan Veluwe vrienden*, 226.

³² C. J. M. Sieben, *Aansprake en raad van een moeder aan haar kinderen en pleegkinderen en de weg van haar beleving tot God*, 12th ed. (Houten: Den Hertog, 2002).

³³ Exalto, *Wandelende bijbels*, 119.

³⁴ Cf. Hans Krabbendam, *Vrijheid in het verschiep: Nederlandse emigratie naar Amerika 1840-1940* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2006), 242-43.

³⁵ Marika Kehlbesk, "New York, Amsterdam, Leiden: Trading Books in the Old and New Worlds," in *Amsterdam — New York: Transatlantic Relations and Urban Identities since 1653*, eds. George Hanck and Hans Krabbendam, European Contributions to American Studies, vol. 59 (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2003), 117-24.

³⁶ Hendrik Sdeijman, *The Dutch Language Press in America: Two Centuries of Printing, Publishing and Bookselling* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1986).

from the old writers printed in church periodicals such as *De Wachter*, the official weekly of the CRC.³⁷

Supposedly, the introduction of Neocalvinism in Dutch-American Reformed churches in the 1890s gradually lessened the influence of the old writers. However, one hundred years after the founding of the NRC, the old writers are still honored. They are read as sermons in congregations without ministers. The honoring of the old writers is also clear from the NRC periodical, *The Banner of Truth*. Each issue contained a section with citations from the old writers. In modern times, however, the old writers are chiefly of English origin. I will come back to this point a bit later. In the early 1980s, NRC minister Arie Willem Verhoef (1917-96) recommended in *The Banner of Truth* the reading of the Dutch and English old writers. These books are, according to Joshua 5, the old grain, or, as Rev. Verhoef said, the "old corn," preserved for later and worse times:

The old writers are old corn. In the centuries past when the church was flourishing more than at the present, the Lord gave gifted men who wrote edifying sermons and meditations as well as warm-hearted doctrinal instructions. They spoke after the heart of Jerusalem. That corn grew in years past. But now that the harvest is so scanty, now that so little grain is growing on the field of the church—now we are still privileged to have this *old corn* to us. . . . God gave to many of His servants talents of spiritual knowledge about which you hardly hear nowadays. . . . They proclaimed in their sermons the pith and marrow of the Gospel of free grace. The old writers could distinguish, they could separate the precious from the vile, real Christianity from name-Christianity, the true work of God from the near-coming work of man.³⁸

Verhoef and his NRC colleagues continued the pietist spirituality of the nineteenth century. The most important difference, however, is language, which shifted to English after the Second World War. In contrast, Sieben was an ardent supporter of the Dutch language. She demanded that her children learn Dutch, for it was an honour to be a descendant of the Dutch nation. Further, God gave in the past his particular blessings to the Dutch forerunners. Curiously, Sieben did not use the Dutch language argument for reading the old writers, but it was an obvious case to her.³⁹ Lady Sieben, Broere, and Petersen used the Dutch language exclusively for spiritual conversation and reading.

³⁷ Beets, *Chr. Genef. Kerke*, 259.

³⁸ A. W. Verhoef, "Old Writers and Long Sermons," *The Banner of Truth: Official Publication of the Netherlands Reformed Churches of the United States and Canada* 48 (1982): 11-12.

³⁹ Sieben, *Aansprake en raad*, 97.

Steben's preference for Dutch was not unique. Until the 1930s, most conservative Reformed migrants were devoted to their mother tongue.⁴⁰ Sometimes, it was considered as almost a sacred language. The idea was that the transfer of religious and cultural values could be best accomplished only with the Dutch language.⁴¹ But this idea died with the Second World War. Only the NRC congregations in Canada, founded after the war, used the Dutch language for two decades or so. The older generation insisted on reading theological works in the Dutch language, because the pure truth is best conserved in these works. However, Dutch is not a living language anymore in Canada or in the United States.⁴²

So the assumption of outsiders that the NRC holds on to the Dutch language is not true. That idea arose because the NRC is strongly isolated.⁴³ That is an important reason why the NRC did not fear the loss of identity when shifting to English, a reason directly connected to the reading culture. Already in the seventeenth century, there arose in the Netherlands a translation tradition of English Puritan works. Through the centuries, an enormous volume of English old writers was translated into Dutch.⁴⁴ These godly men attained the same status as the Dutch fathers. Maybe Dutch Pietist readers did not always know that they were reading an original English work.

Therefore, the shift to the English language was no problem. And the NRC did shift, as is clear from the "Inheritance Publishing Committee for the Dissemination of the Truth as Expounded by the Old Writers," the nonprofit publishing fund of the NRC, founded in 1929. The Committee published in the first decades English translations of the Dutch founding fathers of the NRC mother church.⁴⁵ But in later decades, the fund published chiefly English Puritan works. Over the years, the Committee spread thousands of sermons of the old writers across the globe.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Robert P. Swierenga, "Walls or Bridges? Acculturation Processes in the Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches in North America," in *Morrels in the Melting Pot*, 33-42, esp. 37-38.

⁴¹ Krahbendam, *Vrijheid in het verschieft*, 218.

⁴² See, on the language issue in Canada, chapter 8 in Betsy Boer's forthcoming book on the Dutch Reformed Pietists in Canada.

⁴³ Jaap van Marle, "Preservation of the Language and Perseverance of the Saints: Critical Comments on Religious Orthodoxy and the Loss of the Native Tongue," in *Morrels in the Melting Pot*, 125-30.

⁴⁴ W. J. op 't Hof, "De internationale invloed van het puritanisme," in *Het puritanisme: Geschiedenis, theologie en invloed*, R. Bisschop, W. J. op 't Hof, and W. van 't Spijker (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2001), 273-84. See for the reading of translated Puritan works in the Netherlands, Exalto, *Mandelerde bijbels*; van Lieburg, "Pietism beyond Parat"; Fred van Lieburg, *Living for God: Eighteenth Century Dutch Pietist Autobiography*, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies, no. 18 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

⁴⁵ See the list in *The Banner of Truth* 46 (1980). Cf. J. W. Lamain, H. Beijeman, and H. Natziij, *Leven en werk van ds. W. C. Lamain* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1999), 369-71.

⁴⁶ In 1993, the Committee's president, Rev. Joel R. Beeke, left the NRC and founded the Heritage Reformed Churches. The name of the Committee was changed to Reformation Heritage Books and remained under Beeke's administration, <http://www.heritagebooks2.org>, accessed 31 July 2007. The

Reading Culture as a Benchmark of Ethnocultural Identity

Clearly, the NRC shift of language meant no shift of position. The NRC is an isolated community with a strong orientation to the Netherlands. The reading culture of its members can be seen as a benchmark of ethnocultural identity. The NRC stayed with the old corn; it is the pith and marrow of godliness. The Pietist idea of the old corn also carried through to modern America. In contrast with other Dutch-Americans, pietists did not consider America as the promised land. The religious situation in America, Sieben complained, is much sadder than the one in the Netherlands.⁴⁷ Often she wished to go back to the Netherlands, where the truth was purely preserved. In America Sieben only knew Dominic Meinders.⁴⁸ Franssen did not encourage Sieben to come back, for the spiritual situation was also mournful in the Netherlands. But he confirmed that in the Netherlands the experiential truth was more purely conserved than anywhere else in the world.⁴⁹

Bastian Broere was attracted to the religious freedom in America. But later on, he was also disappointed by the religious situation and wanted to return to the Netherlands. Neither Geertrij Petersen nor Lady Sieben explained their motivation for emigration. In the writings of these three pietists, mention of the new fatherland is strikingly absent. There is no connection between their inner life and America. Sieben complained only of the religious state of her new country, and Petersen referred only one time to America. She mentioned a church service on the occasion of the centennial of the American Republic, by order of the president. But what she wrote about her husband's sermon that day shows no relation at all with the American Republic.⁵⁰

Rev. Willem Cornelis Lamain (1904-84), pastor in Grand Rapids and the leading man of the NRC from the 1940s until his death, also seldom referred to his new fatherland. Lamain educated students who wanted to be NRC pastors, and the first thing he taught them was reading the old fathers. That was the best way, he thought, to teach Reformed dogmatics and exegesis.⁵¹ In his writings, Lamain referred regularly to the old writers. Dutch as well as English fathers. He took many such books with him when he emigrated to America.⁵² During his sojourn in America, Lamain wrote various Dutch-language books that mainly brought to mind the gloried past in the Netherlands.

NRC started a new and small publishing fund named Treasured Meditations. Besides the Inheritance Publishing Committee, the Banner of Truth Tract Mission and the Macedonian Mission Society, spreading tracts for missions and evangelism, were active in the NRC in the twentieth century. See L. Vogelara, *In verijgelegen streken: Schetsen uit het kerkelijk leven van de Nederlandse emigranten in Noord-Amerika* (Barneveld: Uitgeverij Boekhandel Gebr. Koster, 2003), 182-83.

⁴⁷ *Verzameling van eenige brieven*, 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25, 26, 46.

⁴⁹ Franssen, *Enige brieven van een bruisgezant*, 34, 67, 87.

⁵⁰ Vogelara, *Pelgrims komen thuis*, 124.

⁵¹ Lamain, Beijeman, and Natziij, *Leven en werk van ds. W. C. Lamain*, 374.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 247.

When Lamain wrote about his new fatherland, it was often in a general sense, e.g., the unstable weather and the long distances. His judgment on the American spiritual situation was negative. Thinking of the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus, Lamain wrote about America: "It looks here like Athens, but the pure truth is scarce."⁵³ In the 1980s, Lamain wrote a book with the title, *Uit het Overjordanse*.⁵⁴ This title is hard to translate, but it refers to Mark 10, where the other side of the Jordan River is mentioned. That side of the Jordan was not a good place, for on this side is the Temple. According to Reformed pietists, maybe God was living in America, but his temple was in the Netherlands.

So it is clear that pietists preferred the old country to America. But according to Franssen, Netherlanders were also drawing away from God, and Broere agreed. However, by divine providence, the old corn of the blessed Dutch past was saved and could be read for spiritual growth. The reading culture of Dutch-American Pietism is not only a benchmark of ethnocultural identity, but is also a pillar of that identity; for that strong Dutch identity was undergirded by a corpus of texts from the past. It is clear that this was an ethnocultural identity that precluded acculturation in the American melting pot.

Pietism as a Deviation from the Dutch-American Migration Pattern

In conclusion, Dutch-American Reformed Pietism is a deviation of the Dutch-American migration pattern. For such pietists, America was not the promised land and, consequently, their pietism lacked the spirit to build a livelihood with hope for the future. In the past, the Netherlands was a particularly blessed country, and in the bad times of their day, pietists could read the old corn of that period. But the corn had a specific taste; it was old and did not connect to the contemporary situation. Pietists did not hold much hope for the future; they longed for the past. It is surprising, but Dutch-American Reformed Pietism, as evident in their reading culture, showed few influences of the American environment.

If we change the English in Dutch toponyms, the writings of all the pietists discussed here continue to be fully credible. But it is important to realize that these tentative conclusions are based on the experiences of ministers and housewives. These people could preserve their ethnocultural identity most purely, because they did not have professional contacts with the outside world. Possibly, the experiences of working people were different, and this aspect would make an interesting study.

In spite of his isolationist and pietist views, Bastiaan Broere did once step outside of them to do a good deed. A Negro slave knocked on his door and asked him to teach him how to read the Bible. That was strictly forbidden, but Broere

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁴ W. C. Lamain, *Uit het Overjordanse* (Veendam: Uitgeverij Kool, 1983).

agreed. The slave came in the dark and Broere's daughter taught him to read the Bible. For awhile, there were no ethnic borders, but it was short-lived.⁵⁵ Broere soon went back to his oysters and his old writers, and died a stranger in a strange land.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Korte beschrijving van het leven van en de wonderbare leidingen Gods met Bastiaan Broere*, 61.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Randall D. Engle, Robert P. Swierenga, and Jacob E. Nyenhuis for polishing my English text.