



Michael J. Douma, *How Dutch Americans Stayed Dutch: An Historical Perspective on Ethnic Identities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 238 pp., ISBN 978 90 8964 645 3).

Identity and the integration of ethnic groups in the Netherlands have been constantly in the spotlight over the last few years. The political and social debate entered a new phase of hardening stances under the successive Rutte governments.

Although the 2011 policy paper still wields the euphemistic term ‘integration’, what is actually wanted is assimilation, and the multicultural society appears to have been declared definitely bankrupt. Immigrants are mainly expected to make efforts to adapt as well as possible to the values of ‘the’ Dutch society. In public debate, remarkably little attention is paid to the fact that in the past, large groups of Dutch nationals were also immigrants, when they had to find their way in societies that were unfamiliar to them, as part of which they continued to abide by their own (often religion-led) identity. If a book had been published last year with the title ‘How Moroccan people in the Netherlands remained Moroccan’, it would undoubtedly have been grist to the mill of populist politicians and been considered a provocation to the electorate. It is to the credit of Michael Douma, an American historian with Dutch roots, that in the commercial edition of his dissertation, he directs the spotlight precisely on Dutch protagonists in relation to this sensitive topic, hence holding up a mirror that is so badly needed as part of the current integration debate in the Netherlands.

Douma chooses a relatively new angle. Whereas much of the literature published about the Dutch American migration flow tends to focus on the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Douma’s analysis spans over one and a half centuries, covering the period from 1840 until today. He builds on the work of many of his American Dutch predecessors, particularly that of Robert Swierenga, linking up recent studies by Dutch historians such as Hans Krabbendam and Enne Koops. Another innovative aspect is his theoretical approach to the concepts of ethnicity and Dutchness. He considers ethnic identity as a group phenomenon with several meanings, which evolves over time through social discourse and as the result of influences from within and outside the group. According to Douma, the three main influences lie in the developments in American culture and society (such as the Civil War and the pressure to become Americanised), the image that is constantly recast through contacts with newly arrived Dutch immigrants or in correspondence with the Netherlands, and the development of internal

relationships within the group (for example, caused by generational differences). This is what makes Dutchness so dynamic and diverse. Douma uses a detailed schematic presentation of these three influences through time as a model to structure his chapters.

The definition of 'Dutch Americans' that Douma uses for this study is nevertheless far more limited than the title of his book suggests. Although he establishes, based on the census of the year 2000, that five million Americans claim to have Dutch roots, he asserts without giving any further substantiation that for many of them, 'Dutchness' no longer has any personal significance as an ethnic identity, simply because they have been assimilated. He exclusively reserves the term 'Dutch Americans' for the groups of Calvinist protestants. In this respect, he particularly focuses on the Midwest (including Michigan and Wisconsin), where many Dutch orthodox Calvinists from the traditions of Segregation in 1834 and the *Doleantie*, a division in the Church in 1886, were living together in communities and had joined the Reformed Church of America (RCA) or the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), which had torn away from the RCA. These protestants were organisationally dominant, eventually the most institutionalised and they left the richest source material. His assertion that religion, rather than class or race, was the central premise on which Dutch American communities were formed, because it shaped and changed the identity of 'Dutchness', would have been more convincing if he had at least tried to make a more consistent comparison with Dutch immigrants having a Catholic or other faith-based or philosophical background. As it stands, readers are given an impression that the book is mostly about their own 'pillar'.

This does not alter the fact that Douma has written a richly documented, fascinating and clearly legible account. In each chronologically sequenced chapter, he develops a special theme in order to illustrate the development of Dutchness as an overarching concept for the personal identity of Dutch American protestants. Some of these themes are surprisingly poignant. In chapter three, for example, he shows how the Dutch American group positioned itself in a national discourse on race and ethnic identity, based on the story of an Afro-American boy who escaped the South after the Civil War and grew up in a Dutch American family. Chapter 6 is particularly interesting because it provides insight into the influence of the generation gap on the development of the Dutch American identity. The struggle of the second generation, which needed to acquire its own identity somewhere halfway between the strictly religious backgrounds of the first generation and a rapidly modernising America, is demonstrated based on the originally extremely rebellious Dutch American novelist Arnold Mulder, who eventually reconciled himself with his 'hybrid' identity.

From chapter seven onwards, Douma shows how new Dutch American identities were created in the 1930s through the development of the Tulip

Time festival in Holland Michigan, which had a commercial rather than a religious undertone. According to Douma, this development away from church membership and the religion of the forefathers continued after 1945, resulting in a fading sense of ethnic identity. This chapter in particular would have been more powerful if a comparison had been made with other religious groups and if the changed nature of the migration – which was by now being managed by governments – had been a more explicit component of the analysis. One of the points made in the last chapter includes the effect of social media and the ease with which family histories can be exchanged over the Internet, for a revival of a certain level of Dutchness in all its multiple facets and complexity.

Aside from only giving a limited definition of Dutch Americans, the book has another weakness, which is the sloppiness with which Douma justifies himself. The list of notes as well as the references and bibliography are marred by omissions and errors. For example, the annotation of Dutch archive references often lacks access numbers or inventory numbers, which makes them difficult to verify. At least five collections from the National Archives of the Netherlands and one from Leiden University Library are missing from the list of Dutch archives consulted, but they are nevertheless included in the annotation. Collections are wrongly included (Amsterdam Municipal Archives collection 646 concerns the Surinamese plantation archive of Louis Bienfait 1729-1912) and Dutch names are mangled with American names (HDNP VU, collection 492 concerns the archive of the Christian Emigration Centre). Although he mentions that chapters three and six are revisions of previously published articles, they are not included under his name in the bibliography. Chapter two even lacks any indication that parts of a section were published previously in the *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geschiedenis* 7:2 (2010) 32-55, whereas a number of paragraphs are copied in full (from 46, 49, 53-54). This is at the least clumsy, given the contemporary polemic on self-citation in Dutch academic circles. However, it does not detract from the potential relevance of this book for the public debate.

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