Jacob Van Hinte: Sociographer and Historian of Dutch-American Immigration and Settlement

by

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As some of you are aware, a project was begun in 1978 to provide an English-language translation of Jacob Van Hinte's monumental two-volume history, Nederlanders in Amerika, published in the Netherlands in 1928. This 1,100 page work, now long out of print and quite rare, is even more inaccessible because of the language barrier. Yet this is the only comprehensive history of the four million Americans of Dutch birth or ancestry written by a Netherlander, from the perspective of a Netherlander, and intended for a Netherlandic readership. Indeed, to this day Van Hinte is the only Dutch scholar to take a life-long professional interest in the historical sweep of Dutch settlement in North America from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.[1] This lack of interest is understandable. The Netherlands never experienced a truly mass migration, as did Ireland and other nations. Consequently, Dutch textbooks seldom mention overseas migration and Dutch historians prefer to study the "golden age" of colonial expansion, or other topics of greater significance in their history.

To the immigrants themselves and their offspring, therefore, has fallen the primary task of preserving and documenting the history of Dutch resettlement and life in America. Dingeman Versteeg's De Pelgrim Vaders van het Westen (Grand Rapids, 1886) was the first attempt, but Versteeg, an immigrant himself and

untrained in historical writing, gave us a largely impressionistic and anecdotal account of the western Michigan settlement, plus a brief chapter on Pella.[2] Jacob Van Zee's Hollanders of Iowa (Iowa City, 1912) admirably corrected this oversight and is a model of good scholarship, as one would expect of a university-trained scholar.

The English-language work that comes closest to emulating Van Hinte's massive book, but with a distinctly American flavor, is Henry Lucas's The Netherlanders in America (Ann Arbor, 1955). This detailed and thoroughly documented account of 750 pages, unfortunately, is also out of print and increasingly difficult to find. The same is true of Bertus Wabeke's brief and truncated history, Dutch Emigration to North America, 1624-1860 (New York, 1944). Gerald F. DeJong's very readable and comprehensive survey The Dutch in America, 1607-1974 (New York, 1975), thankfully is in print and it fully meets the needs of the general reader. These works and nearly 800 other books and articles in the English language, are all listed with brief comments as to their significance in Linda Pegman Doezema's recent annotated bibliography, Dutch Americans: A Guide to Information Sources (Detroit, 1979).[3]

Having briefly surveyed the major historians of the Dutch in America, we return to Jacob Van Hinte. He was born in 1889 at the village of Muiden and grew up in Alkmaar.[4] History was his first love and major subject in college, where he studied with the famous Professor I. J. Brugmans, but later at the University of Amsterdam he studied social geography with the renowned

scholar S. R. Steinmetz. Van Hinte taught geography and history at the high school level for the next six years in the cities of Leeuwarden (1912-15), Den Helder (1915-17), and Amsterdam (1917-18). In 1919 he joined the geography faculty of the Openbare Handels School (State Trades School) in Amsterdam, which post he held for nearly thirty years until his untimely death in 1948. That his students were fond of him is evidenced by the fact that they referred to him among themselves by his familiar nickname "Jochem." While teaching in Amsterdam, he seized the opportunity to continue graduate studies at the City University, completing the dissertation in 1920 on the subject of Dutch emigration to America. This book became the basis for the first volume of the 1928 publication, *Nederlanders in Amerika.*

In the summer of 1921, Van Hinte began work on the companion volume by taking a research trip to the USA.[5] He visited all the major colonies and settlements in the East and Midwest, spoke at length with first and second generation colonists, read available primary documents and books, and took copious notes. Many of his sources and all of his interviews are now lost. It was a prodigious effort to squeeze into the brief school holiday. All through the 1920s, Van Hinte drew on the capital stock he had accumulated in 1921 and he continued writing. By 1928, on the eve of his fortieth birthday, he defended his dissertation and was promoted *cum laude.* The two-volume book had grown to 31 chapters totaling 1,128 large pages, with 83 illustrations, including photographs, maps, and diagrams.

For most scholars, such a book is a life long task. Van Hinte acknowledged that this type of book "one writes only once in a lifetime." One reviewer called the result a "*kerelswerk*," or "he-man's job," doubtless because of the tremendous amount of materials processed, the balance between a scientific and humanist approach, and the author's amazing ability to capture the spirit of the times and the thinking of the immigrants.

During the 1930s Van Hinte broadened his inquiry to include Dutch emigrant settlements in the East Indies, South Africa, and Scandanavia. In 1933, in fact, he embarked on an extensive research trip to Asia and Africa and in 1938 he returned to the East Indies once more. He published the fruits of this work and other research in more than forty articles in professional and popular journals.[6] He also served on numerous government geographical commissions and was a long-time director, beginning in 1933, of the Royal Netherlands Geographical Society (Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrykskundiz Genvotschap), and later served the Netherlands-South African Geographical Association as well. Only the rise of the Nazis and the Second World War interrupted his professional career. A Dutch nationalist to the core of his being, Van Hinte was persona non grata among government officials who collaborated with the Nazis. Several years before the War, he was nominated to be the first holder of the Steinmetz Chair in Geography at the University of Amsterdam, but the city fathers put a National Socialist Party member in the Chair. In September of 1941 Van Hinte even resigned from the Royal Geographical Society because he believed it had come under Nazi influence and control. There was some criticism of his action from colleagues within the leadership of the Society, but in 1946, upon the death of the president of the editorial board of the Society's journal, Tydscrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap (K.N.A.G.), Van Hinte was named to this prestigious post, a position he held until his death two years later.

In these depressed post-war years, Van Hinte's long time scholarly interest in Dutch overseas emigration was stirred anew by the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of his compatriots. Specifically, he believed the time had come to translate into English his 1928 work and perhaps to add a third volume covering the 1930s and 1940s, provided an American publisher would underwrite the project.

Van Hinte in late 1946 expressed his desires to his friend Dr. Wybo Jan Goslinga, then head of the government department of education of Curacao, who occasionally visited the United States. Goslinga in February of 1947 met with the publisher William B. Eerdmans in Grand Rapids.[7] The timing was perfect. Eerdmans had only days earlier purchased the Van Raalte estate including the original homestead and the dominie's library and personal papers, with the intent of establishing a Van Raalte Memorial Library. Eerdmans, who had known of Van Hinte's work since 1928 when he received a complimentary copy from the author, was delighted to learn of his aspirations, especially since Van Raalte was the major hero of Van Hinte's book. Eerdman wrote immediately to encourage Van Hinte in his plans and also to solicit from the Dutch scholar manuscript material and books on immigration for the Van Raalte Library.

With Goslinga acting as the go-between, Van Hinte replied by directly asking Eerdmans to provide funds to enable him "to come to America to complete his third book and to render them in the English language."[8] The wiley Eerdmans sidestepped this

request by seeking to obtain a part-time position for Van Hinte either at Hope College or at newly-proposed Dutch Chair at the University of Michigan, for which the Netherlands government was willing to pay half the salary. To make the offer irresistably tempting, Eerdmans promised to provide Van Hinte with office space in the Van Raalte homestead if he would serve as Curator of the library. "It seems to me," Eerdmans wrote, "you would be the logical man to develop the history and the historical significance and everything that goes with it of the early Dutch settements in Michigan and other States."[9]

Eerdmans may have had ulterior motives as well. For he added: "Personally I am very anxious to have you come to America and if you do come you should take your library along and place it in the old homestead--part in the fireproof chamber and part in the library--and become Curator of the Historical Foundation. However, all these things in the final analysis resort to that nasty little word 'money.'"[10] And Eerdmans apparently was unwilling to part with any of his. But he did use his personal contacts to convince the University of Michigan to name Van Hinte as the first holder of the Dutch Chair. By July of 1947, Van Hinte agreed to come. "One cannot ask for more," he wrote Eerdmans.[11] But this was not to be. Van Hinte died after a brief illness on March 1, 1948, only a few months before he was to take up residency in Ann Arbor.

In July of 1948 Eerdmans made one last attempt to purchase the immigration part of Van Hinte's library, but he was too late. Already in May, Jacob's brother and executor had disposed of the

bulk of the 700-book collection through a public auction house. Unsold books and all manuscript material were donated to the Royal Library (Koninklyk Bibliotheek) in The Hague. Eerdmans also indicated in this final letter that "We have not made definite plans in regard to the translation of his two volumes on Nederlanders in Amerika. This would be a huge work and it would be very difficult to procure a translator."[12] Eerdmans practical business sense, unfortunately, overrode his interest in scholarship; he never did underwrite the venture.

This is a pity, because Van Hinte's work is an interesting period piece that remains a landmark in Dutch immigration history that can never be surperceded by subsequent writings. It is narrative history at its best--imaginative, interpretive, and always stimulating and thought-provoking. The first of the six major parts describes the colonial Dutch, whom Van Hinte calls the "older branch," next comes a detailed account of the transplanting of the "young branch" in the mid-nineteenth century. The third section traces the problems of adjustment in American social, economic, religious, and political life. In part four, Van Hinte describes the successful sprouts from the young branch, i.e., the planting of new colonies throughout the midwest, such as Orange City and New Holland, South Dakota, which he calls a "daughter" and "granddaughter" of Pella. Part five takes the reader back to the agricultural crisis in the Old Country in the 1880s and the out-migration it spawned to newer Dutch settlements in California, the Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountain

region, and the South. Most of these later settlements, says Van Hinte, were plants "not firmly rooted."[13] Many failed at the hands of swindlers, misguided promoters, and land companies, and other suffered from simple ignorance of farming in low rainfall areas or southern humid zones. The sixth and final part covers the first two decades of the twentieth century when the second and third generation Dutch-Americans moved speedily along the path of assimilation, due in large part to the hyper-Americanism of the First World War and its aftermath.

Americanization, indeed, is the central theme of Van Hinte's history of the Dutch settlers. It was, for the most part, a "slow and steady process" that was desirable as it was inevitable, according to the author. It would be "tragic," Van Hinte declared, for the Netherlanders to become American citizens and yet desire to remain Dutch.[14] They could not contribute to American life, if such attitudes prevailed.

Van Hinte's belief that the Dutch should jump into the American melting pot is surprising, given his strong Dutch nationalism. It can only be attributed to his political liberalism which tolerated the loss of Dutch identity in the interests of a higher good--the success of the American democratic experiment of creating one nation out of many peoples.

For Van Hinte was nothing if not a proud Netherlander. That he jeopardized his professional career to resist Nazism in the years 1935-1945 is quite consistent with the extreme nationalistic tone of his writings in the 1920s. From beginning to end,

Nederlanders in Amerika is one long paean of praise to his Netherlandic readers, as they basked in the accomplishments of their departed kinfolk. Van Hinte repeatedly refers to "the Dutch-Americans with personal pronouns--"us," "our Hollanders," "our clan," "our Groningers," "our Frisians," or simply "our brethren in America."

Everything is written in terms of what "our Netherlanders" accomplished. This is understandable since the Dutch are "one of the best races of mankind."[15] Although few in number, "their quality has been outstanding." "By sheer will power they [that is Van Raalte and his followers] confronted and conquered all their problems and difficulties." They succeeded because of their "character," "their enterprising adventurous Dutch spirit," whereas other groups failed, even fellow Calvinists like the Hungarian colony in Iowa.[16] The Dutch proved to be "real Americans," throughout the frontier years, abounding in restless energy and straining to get ahead like the "Transvaal trekkers." The Dutch frontiersmen in Kentucky were "veritable Daniel Boones." Patriotic Dutch young men readily volunteered in the Civil War and during the hey-day of slavery, Dutch colonists in Pella and Chicago operated way stations on the Underground Railroad.[17] Even Dutch Catholic immigrants are "echte Hollanders," although they displayed less of the Calvinist work ethic than the Protestants.

Van Hinte chides American historians for downplaying the Dutch presence in Colonial America, especially in Pennsylvania, and he claims as his own every notable person of Dutch ancestry--the two

Roosevelts, the pioneer labor leader Samuel Gompers.

In contrast to the Dutch in America, other nationalities pale by comparison. The English, Irish, and to a lesser extent, the Germans, fare poorly in Van Hinte's work. The "English cloud" hung as a pale over New Netherlands in the seventeenth century and the English throughout American history displayed a "haughty, opinionated," and "arrogant" spirit.[18]

In modern scholarship, ethnic historians who excessively tout the accomplishments of their own nationality are called "filiopietists." Most scholars of Van Hinte's generation suffered from a similar myopia, and he is no exception. If readers can accept this as a cultural artifact of the time, they will be able to appreciate the bit of quaint humor it adds to the story.

Besides being a proud Dutchman, Van Hinte was a proud Reformed Dutchman although of liberal leanings. "Faith is the tie that binds" in his account, and also the tie that breaks. In one emotional passage Van Hinte declared his American cousins to be a "believing, theological, psalmsinging, quarreling, controversial, slandering group of pilgrims."[19] While not belonging to the Seceder tradition, Van Hinte, not always successfully, as the above quote suggests, tried to understand that movement as an expression of Calvinism. Especially he revered Albertus Christian Van Raalte and devoted himself to perpetuating the memory of his career. By the same token, the independent-minded Hendrik Pieter Scholte, who refused to affiliate with the Reformed Church in America and who was ambiguous on the

slavery issue, is given an extremely biased treatment. Van Hinte calls Scholte a "sphinx" and a "chameleon."[20] Similarly, the 1857 Seceders and their successors, the Christian Reformed Church, are condemned for their self-righteousness and pettiness. Making a pun of their original denominational name, the True Dutch Reformed Church, Van Hinte always referred to them as the "true brethren." Once he called them "twice Seceders," which subsequent research has shown to be erroneous.[21]

On the other hand, Van Hinte is exceptionally perceptive in realizing that a salient issue in the RCA-CRC conflict was a difference of opinion about Americanization. The RCA favored and promoted assimilation, whereas the CRC tried to forestall it and preserve their Dutch identity and culture. This was the source of much of the denominational conflict over free masonry, American style revivals, English language worship services, and theological education. Van Hinte also concluded that the urban Dutch in Grand Rapids, Paterson, and Chicago were more theologically and culturally conservative than the rural colonies of Holland and Pella. Additionally, the settlers in the Michigan forests were more conservative than the prairie pioneers, because as Van Hinte theorized, the forests were a harsh, confining environment, compared to the open, rolling prairies with their easily farmed soil.

Van Hinte was more than a proud Reformed Dutchman; he was a proud Reformed Dutch <u>scholar</u> with typical elitist attitudes.

Learned people are portrayed as tolerant, open-minded, liberal, whereas uneducated persons as bigoted, close-minded, and reactionary. As one would expect of a European scholar, Van Hinte was fluent in four languages--Dutch, English, German, and French and the book is sprinkled with quotations and citations in these languages.

Since this work is a greatly expanded version of the author's doctoral dissertation, the writing style is characteristically academic. Van Hinte wrote in a ponderous German style with complex sentence syntax, some sentences stretching to twelve lines with numerous dependent clauses. Rather than composing finely crafted sentences, however, Van Hinte used a free form, similar to the modern stream of consciousness writing, in which he expressed his thoughts in a string of incomplete sentences puncutated with numerous exclamation marks to convey emotion. He also employed negative and double negatives to convey very strong positive thoughts. This personalized style makes for fascinating reading. At times, Van Hinte is also disarmingly simplistic, as when he condemned the use of alcohol and asserted that the colonists succeeded because of their faith in God.[22]

As an academic, Van Hinte shared in the intellectual currents of his age. Causative forces in his history include class consciousness (Marx), Teutonic superiority and racism derived from the infant eugenics movement, environmental determinism from the German political geographer Frederick Ratzel and the American frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner, melting pot ideals

from Turner and the American geographer Ellen Churchill Semple, and personality theories from the sociologist Edward A. Ross.[23] But above all, Van Hinte was influenced by his mentor, S. R. Steinmetz, one of the most eminent geographers in Europe and the founding theorist of sociography. Unlike the environmental determinists, who believed that land makes a people, Steinmetz and his pupil insisted that "people and geography influence each other."[24] In fact, since the environment is constantly changing, the character of a people is more important in successful colonization than are physical surroundings. The Dutch were a people forged in the perennial fight against the sea and the dominant power of Catholic France. It was this cultural and psychological heritage upon which the Dutch settlers drew in their attempts to alter their American environment by chopping down the forests, draining swamps, digging harbors, and damming and channeling rivers, often with the most primitive hand tools.[25] In short, Van Hinte as a sociographer emphasized social and psychological factors more than physical and economic forces, and he concentrated his attention on particular local communities rather than using a large-scale national approach. "By sheer will power," wrote Van Hinte the romanticist, "they confronted and conquered all their problems and difficulties."[26]

The aspect of Van Hinte's scholarship that is most admirable was his speculative mind. He had a gift for drawing comparisons and posing perceptive and intriging questions. How did the

seventeenth century emigration differ from that of the nineteenth century and was there a direct link between the two, given the fact that Michigan was a "daughter state" of New York Dutch colonists? Were the Dutch Calvinists in America like the New England Puritans? Did the developmental pattern differ in the various midwestern colonies, especially Holland, Pella, Sheboygan, and Sioux County? Why did Pella spawn numerous successful colonies and not Holland? Why did Van Raalte mistakenly choose Virginia for his only colonial venture? In what ways were the Dutch affected who settled in "elevator towns" compared to those in homogeneous "church villages?" How comparable was the clerical and business leadership in the different settlements? Did urban and rural dwellers differ? Did the Dutch farm like their American neighbors or retain Old Country cropping practices and animal husbandry? What impact did the coming of railroads, such as the Pierre Marquette or "PM line," have in western Michigan? How did the emigrants of the 1880s agricultural crises differ from those of the 1840s religious and economic troubles? Did the difference between Calvinist energy and Roman Catholic lassitude affect the survival of a Dutch identity? What impact did the disastrous Holland fire of 1871 have on the psychological and physical makeup of the city for the next generations? Why did the Dutch switch their political allegiance from the Democrats to Republicans in the 1850s and 1860s? Did a generation gap develop between fathers and sons in the second generation? And the list goes on and on.

Truly, Van Hinte was a gifted historian whose insights and hypotheses have guided and challenged all future students of Dutch immigration and colonization. It is my hope that all of you who cannot read Netherlanders in Amerika in the original will soon have the opportunity to do so in translation. You will learn much from this Dutch scholar who understood the social and geographical forces in the transplanting and who had the gift of empathy for the emigrants as did few Netherlanders of his or any other generation. None need ask for more.

Notes

1. For documentation of this point, see Robert P. Swierenga, "Dutch Immigrant Historiography," Immigration History Newletter, 11 (November 1979), 1-6. Three exceptions are Pieter R. D. Stokvis, whose book De Nederlandse Trek naar Amerika, 1846-1847 (Leiden, 1977) revised Van Hinte's treatment of the 1840s emigration at key points; Hendrik J. Prakkes' Drenthe in Michigan (Assen, 1948), and Hille de Vries, who illuminated the relation of the 1880 agricultural crisis to American immigration, in Landbouw en Bevolking tydens de agrarisch depressie in Friesland, 1878-1895 (Wageningen, 1971).

2. William K. Reinsma has recently translated into English this pioneer work, under the auspecis of the Heritage Hall Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. A typescript is available at Heritage Hall.

3. Other useful reference works are Etton J. Bruins, "The Dutch in America: A Bibliographical Guide for Students," Holland, Michigan, 1979; Elton J. Bruins and Barbara Lampen, "A Guide of the Netherlands museum, Holland, Michigan," (Holland, Michigan, 1978); Herbert J. Brinks, "Guide to the Dutch-American Historical Collections of Western Michigan" (Grand Rapids and Holland, Michigan, 1967).

4. Biographical information on Van Hinte is in "In Memoriam Dr. J. Van Hinte," Tydschrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch

Aardrijkskundig Genootschap, 65, No. 3 (1948), 19-20; P. J. Risseeuw, "In Memoriam Van Dr. Jacob Van Hinte," Missionary Monthly, May, 1949, p. 155. The former is in Dutch and the latter in English.

5. Van Hinte kept an extensive diary of his 1921 research trip, which is in the possession of his brother and the executor of his estate, J. E. Van Hinte, Oostsingel 22, Delft, Netherlands (hereafter cited as Van Hinte Papers).

6. For a complete bibliography of Van Hinte's publications, see Gretha Landman, "Jacob Van Hinte; bio-en bibliografische gegevens," tryscript, Nederlands Agronomisch-Historisch Instituut, Groningen, ca. 1979.

7. Van Hinte's post-war plans are described in the correspondence of W. J. Goslinga and William B. Eerdmans with Van Hinte in 1946-1948, Van Hinte Papers.

8. Wm. B. Eerdmans to W. J. Goslinga, May 27, 1947, Van Hinte Papers.

9. Wm. B. Eerdmans to J. Van Hinte, June 6, 1947, Van Hinte Papers.

10. Ibid.

11. Wm. B. Eerdmans to J. Van Hinte, June 17, 1947, and August 9, 1947, Van Hinte Papers.

12. Wm. B. Eerdmans to J. E. Van Hinte, July 14, 1948, Van Hinte Papers.

13. Van Hinte, Nederlanders in America, II, 619.

14. I, ch. 12.

15. I, ch. 3.

16. I, ch. 10.

17. I, ch. 3; II, ch. 4.

18. I, ch. 2.

19. I, ch. 12.

20. I, ch. 14.

21. I, ch. 15. For a reinterpretation of the 1857 secession, based on new evidence, see Robert P. Swierenga, "Local-Cosmopolitan Theory and Immigrant Religion: The Social Bases of the Antebellum Dutch Reformed Schism," Journal of Social History, 14 (Fall 1980), 13-136; and Swierenga, "A Denominational Schism from a Behavioral Perspective: The 1857 Dutch Reformed Separation," Reformed Review, 34 (Spring 1981), 172-185.

22. I, ch. 4; I, ch. 8.

23. I, ch. 11.

24. I, ch. 3.

25. I, ch. 4.

26. I, ch. 8.