

The sticky path from interesting subject to quality publication

Projects devoted to the Batavian-French period by the Institute of
Netherlands History, 1905 to the present

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Dit Artikel is verschenen in **TijdING**, een breed samengesteld online tijdschrift over de Nederlandse geschiedenis. **TijdING** bevat artikelen over historiografie, methodiek en allerlei thema's uit de Nederlandse geschiedenis. Veelal gaat het om voordrachten die bij een bepaalde gelegenheid zijn gehouden (nu in geschreven vorm gepubliceerd) en artikelen die elders al eens zijn verschenen. Maar ook bevat **TijdING** bijdragen die voor de eerste maal worden gepubliceerd. Meestal zullen de artikelen in meer of mindere mate verband houden met een of meer van de uitgaven of projecten van het instituut of met het werk van het instituut in het algemeen.

Introduction

For a long time, Dutch historians regarded the Batavian-French period, the years between 1795-1813, as a kind of black hole. The gradual decline and, in 1810, the complete loss of Dutch independence to France was perceived as a shameful interlude. So it would seem that we do not only have a sticky path to follow, but an uninteresting subject to discuss as well.

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the founder of the Bureau der Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis, later to be the Institute of Netherlands History², Herman Colenbrander, who afterwards became a professor at the University of Leiden, undertook a voluminous edition of papers on the Batavian-French period³, accompanying them with textbooks in which he expounded his own, sadly unfavourable, view. In his opinion, the Dutch could never have stood up to the French because they lacked both bright ideas and stamina: it was largely their own fault that they had been taken over by the French⁴.

It was only after the Second World War that a more favourable perception of the Batavian-French period was ventured. In the forefront were legal historians who had investigated the codification of law after the end of the Old Regime⁵. Somewhat later, a band of American, English and Dutch scholars started to re-examine the generally accepted opinions on the struggle between the Patriots and the Orangists. They stressed that modern concepts had arisen here well before the French revolution occurred⁶. Nowadays, much more research is being done, but it is still a small amount

² K. Kooijmans en J.P. de Valk, “‘Eene dienende onderneming’. De Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandse Geschiedenis en haar Bureau 1902-1968” in: K. Kooijmans e.a. (ed.), *Bron en Publikatie. Voordrachten en opstellen over de ontsluiting van geschiedkundige bronnen* (Den Haag, 1985) pp. 203-283.

³ H.T. Colenbrander, *Gedenkstukken der algemeene geschiedenis van Nederland van 1795 tot 1840*, 22 vols., 's-Gravenhage 1905-1922. Vols. 1-6 cover the years 1795-1813.

⁴ H.T. Colenbrander, *De patriottentijd, hoofdzakelijk naar buitenlandsche bescheiden*, 3 vol., 's-Gravenhage, 1897; *De Bataafsche Republiek*. Amsterdam, 1908; *Schimmelpenninck en Koning Lodewijk*. Amsterdam, 1911; *Inlijving en opstand*. Amsterdam 1941.

⁵ *Bronnen van de Nederlandse Codificatie sinds 1798*. Werken der Vereniging tot Uitgave der Bronnen van het Oud-vaderlandse Recht, 9 vols. published 1968 - 2002.

⁶ R.R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution. A political history of Europe and America 1760-1800*. 2 vols. Princeton, 1959-1964; S. Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780-1813*. New York, 1977. In 1787[?], a spate of new Dutch literature on the subject was produced. “A state of the art” in N.C.F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland. Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750-1900*. Amsterdam, 2005. Annie Jourdan.

compared to the efforts that are poured into the history of later part of the nineteenth century.

This very superficial sketch must suffice here. It only serves as a backdrop to a survey of the various initiatives that the Institute of Netherlands History has taken since 1905 to stimulate more intensive research into the Batavian-French period. These initiatives have led to a great variety of editions, culminating in the present spate of largely digital publications.

It is my intention to provide a short introduction to each of these projects and to underline some methodological problems that cropped up during their realization.

The historical records of the Netherlands 1795-1840

In 1905, Herman Colenbrander published the first volume of his *Papers concerning the general history of the Netherlands, 1795-1815*⁷. He aimed at editing what he considered to be the best sources available, with an emphasis on variety. Accordingly, he hoped to elucidate the development of the history of the modern Dutch State and to broaden the views of his fellow historians.

Like his contemporaries, Colenbrander was sure that, with the best documents at hand, anybody could reach the appropriate historical conclusions. In this context of positivism, the role of an editor was merely to select the right papers and to explain the “inner relations” between these sources. The criteria for selection were therefore directly related to the “quality” of the sources.

To achieve variety, Colenbrander included all manner of papers, produced by diplomats, politicians and civil servants, not only from public depositories but also from private archives of politicians, both Dutch and foreign. He did not hesitate to select only those documents, or even parts of documents, he thought worthwhile. It did not occur to him that his own choice might be questioned or challenged by others. From our point of view, for instance, Colenbrander appears to be too strongly biased towards political and diplomatic correspondence, neglecting both social and economic history, and disregarding much of the history of political thought too. This was only to

⁷ See footnote 2. An excellent evaluation of the series as a source edition: J.P. de Valk, “‘Eene geschiedenis door bescheiden’. De *gedenkstukken* van H.T. Colenbrander nader beschouwd” in: *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, XVII no. 4 (1990), Bronnen van de Nieuwe Tijd, pp. 411-431.

be expected at a time when it was self-evident to publish an edition on the Hanseatic League without referring to trade documents⁸.

To us, Colenbrander's edition now stands as a warning that criteria for the selection of documents that are directly linked to their perceived importance can make for a very dated result, only to be used with the utmost care by later historians. This caution is valid even now, in times when documents from large archives and collections are still being selected on the basis of criteria related to their content, albeit with far greater subtlety and variety than in the past. A selection that appeals to our sense of importance and is therefore quite obvious to us may be completely incomprehensible fifty years on!

The diaries of Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp

Given the chronic lack of financial resources experienced by the Bureau der Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis in the interwar period and a scholarly environment that was not at all conducive to further efforts concerning the Batavian-French period, it was later than 1948 before any new initiatives came to the fore. In 1952, the Bureau published reports on documentary editing in which it announced a diversification by offering the prospect of not only text editions, but also of repertories, surveys and so on⁹. Our topic, however, did not receive any attention at all.

It was quite some time before any new editions concerning the Batavian-French revolution were included in the programme again. Moreover, it is not by chance that the two editions concerned were realized by people from outside what had now become the Institute of Netherlands History: one was a senior university lecturer, the other was a retired mayor.

The first of these editions was published posthumously in 1981¹⁰. Jan Haak presented the full texts of two diaries of Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, which together covered the years 1806-1813. At that time, Van Hogendorp was yet to

⁸ K. Koppmann, *Die Recesse und andere Akten der Hansetage von 1256-1430*, vol. I (Leipzig, 1870), p. XIII, referred to in J. Roelevink, "Van bouwstoffen tot aanknopingspunt. De opzet van grote bronnenuitgaven in de laatste anderhalve eeuw" in: *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, XVII nr. 4 (1990), Bronnen van de Nieuwe Tijd, p. 399.

⁹ P. Geyl, P.J. van Winter a.o., *Drie rapporten over de uitgave van bronnen voor de Nederlandse geschiedenis. Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandse Geschiedenis*. The Hague, 1952.

¹⁰ J. Haak ed., G.K. van Hogendorp, *Journal d' Adrichem (1806-1809) en Journal de La Haye (1810-1813)*. The Hague, 1981.

become a key figure in the foundation of the kingdom of the Netherlands in 1813 and in drawing up its new constitution. But after 1795, as a fervent Orangist of long standing, he had avoided taking office and lived off private means, first at his country seat at Adrichem near Beverwijk, then in The Hague, which, between 1810-1813, was not the seat of the government. Consequently, he was writing his diaries as a private citizen who was not in the thick of things.

Van Hogendorp, a highly cultured man who, as a student, travelled to the United States in 1783 and 1784, did not write diaries in the strictest sense of the word. Rather, they were a chronological series of essays, impressions and remarks. The diaries touched upon all sorts of subjects, from the pregnancies of his wife to poems on human life to essays on the care for the poor. But it was mainly a running commentary on political events written by a well-informed outsider. Haak valued the diaries as an “egodocument”, a term coined by his famous teacher Jacques Presser¹¹.

The editor, Jan Haak, was particularly interested in the history of the press in the broadest sense of the word - very much a hot item at the time. By editing and evaluating the diaries, Haak hoped to establish how quickly an intellectual like Van Hogendorp was able to take in fresh information provided by the newspapers and by the press; in other words, how long it might have taken the thinking public to absorb new facts and developments. In order to achieve this, it was necessary, not only to analyse the diaries themselves, but also to closely examine the contemporary press. To meet this ambitious end, Haak involved a host of assistants and students in his work. The detailed knowledge they gained was to be poured out into the annotation of the edition.

The project was set up in 1967 and Haak’s untimely death in 1970 understandably caused a crisis. The supervisor, Professor Schöffers from Leiden University, decided to take action. He sought, in his own words, to bring uniformity to, and straighten out, the information¹². These were no doubt euphemisms to cut the annotation down to size, as its sole purpose should be to support and explain the text. This strategy complied with the Dutch tendency to follow the English, rather than the German tradition of keeping scholarly footnotes down to a minimum.

¹¹ N. van der Zee, *Jacques Presser: Het gelijk van de twijfel, een biografie*. Amsterdam, 2002, revised edition.

¹² I. Schöffers, Preface to the edition (see footnote 9), p. VIII sqq.

As regards the method, the edition of the Hogendorp diaries shows that it is definitely dangerous to combine a straightforward edition with primary, or even secondary, objectives regarding specific research of its contents. The efforts would probably have been a waste anyhow. Even if Haak's dream had come true, it is not at all certain that we would have learnt anything substantial about the general circulation of news in Holland.

The constitutions

In 1975, the first volume of an impressive series concerning the Dutch Constitutions of the Batavian period edited by the retired mayor of the town of Haarlem, Leonard de Gou¹³, was published. During the best part of the twentieth century, the attention of scholars and politicians had almost exclusively centred on the Constitutions of the Kingdom of the Netherlands from 1813 onwards. But De Gou concentrated on the two draft Constitutions of 1796 and 1797, and the Constitutions of 1798, 1801, 1805 and 1806; this last one was the first Constitution for a Dutch monarchy, i.e. that of Louis Napoleon.

At first, life seemed comparatively easy for De Gou, because the papers of the first two Draft Commissions of 1796 and 1797 were fully available. But the archives of the third Commission had not survived. Moreover, from 1798 onwards, a plethora of actors, both Dutch and French, became involved in the process of legislation. And so it came about that the later volumes of the edition had to have sections in which selected papers from several actors were ordered chronologically.

De Gou, as a member of the legal world, set out emphatically from the formal side of the Constitutions, the text of the law and the changes made in the drafts. But unlike so many legal historians, he did not stop there. As an experienced administrator and politician, De Gou could not help being interested in the general context and in

¹³ L. De Gou, *Het plan van constitutie van 1796. Chronologische bewerking van het archief van de eerste constitutiecommissie ingesteld bij decreet van de Nationale Vergadering van 15 maart 1796*. The Hague, 1975; *Het Ontwerp van Constitutie van 1797. De behandeling van het Plan van Constitutie in de Nationale Vergadering*, 3 vols., The Hague, 1983-1985; *De Staatsregeling van 1798. Bronnen voor de totstandkoming. Bronnen voor de totstandkoming*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1988-1990; *De staatsregeling van 1801. Bronnen voor de totstandkoming*. The Hague, 1995; *De Staatsregeling van 1805 en de Constitutie van 1806. Bronnen voor de totstandkoming*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1997. De Gou assessed his own *magnum opus* in: L. de Gou, "De geschiedenis van een bronnenpublicatie. Aanleiding tot en kort begrip van een onderzoek naar onze grondwetgeving in de periode 1795-1806" in: *Grondwetgeving 1795-1806. Voordrachten gehouden bij de presentatie van De Staatsregeling van 1805 en de Constitutie van 1806. Bronnen voor de totstandkoming op 27 maart 1997 te Haarlem*. (S.l., 1997) pp. 13-49.

the external influences on the legislation. But unfortunately, there was simply not enough space to include everything he wanted to. He tried to compensate this by writing rather long introductions, which the Institute, as the publisher, again, had not intended. Fortunately, both parties were willing to accommodate and a viable compromise was reached.

Here, I would like to highlight just one aspect of the selection made by De Gou. Many papers connected with the Constitutions of 1796 and 1797 were of a financial nature. At the time, some Dutch provinces had accumulated very high debts whereas others had managed to keep theirs within bounds. Amalgamation would inevitably cause the good to suffer with the bad. The bearing of this state of affairs on the political debates concerning centralization or federation is evident. De Gou was very much aware of this. Therefore, though hesitant, he was personally inclined to select some financial papers as well, but this caused a friendly discussion with his supervisor, Professor J. Th. de Smidt of the Law Faculty at the University of Leiden, who, among other things, had the task of keeping the edition within bounds. De Gou and De Smidt agreed to call in a third party, the retired Keeper of the Dutch Archives, Professor J.L. van der Gouw, who, in due course, came out firmly in favour of inclusion of crucial financial papers. And so it happened. Nowadays, historians would consider a discussion of this kind as totally surrealistic, because very few of them, including the supervisor at the time, would now have any doubts about the overriding importance of State finances, especially in the Batavian-French period¹⁴. It illustrates how personal inclinations and historiographical factors may sneak into the selection process.

Early statistics

So far we have discussed books. From the middle of the nineteen eighties onwards, the digital revolution started to transform, if not to say revolutionize, documentary editing. The incredible potential of databases very quickly dawned on us all. One of the first databases that was from the outset designed for publication by the Institute of Netherlands History was initiated by Professor Paul Klep from Nijmegen University

¹⁴ Authorized report of my interview with Professor J.Th. de Smidt about the editions by both J.L. De Gou and J. Haak, Leiden 29 July 2008.

and Dr. Charles Jeurgens from the Institute, in 1991. It proved to be the beginning of a lengthy learning process.

The ambition was to make all the statistical material gathered by Dutch authorities in the Batavian-French period available. These statistics cover all aspects of government activity and are often linked to the initiation of new policies. They range from military phenomena to agricultural and industrial matters to cultural and social issues. It was stipulated that both the archives of the central government and those of the provinces and the municipalities should be searched. This was considered to be necessary because the editors wanted to reconstruct the document flow underlying the information-gathering process. In order to achieve this, a very complicated database was designed, which would assign each individual document to a stage, a “step”, in the information-gathering process. Images of the data were to be made available to the public and all institutions involved would have to be fully described¹⁵.

After the publication of a provisional list on the basis of inventories, Charles Jeurgens and his successor Astrid Verheusen started with the selection of documents in the series of correspondence of the departments of State. This was a daunting task and progress was accordingly slow. By 1997, it was clear that the project had to be reconsidered. I was called in and my new proposal, including a different search strategy and narrower criteria for selection, was eventually adopted for the entire project and in the end I processed the years 1801 to 1813. Dr. Ronald Sluijter was later appointed to complete and revise the years 1795 to 1801¹⁶.

It was a challenge to speed up the work process and to cut the project down to a viable size. An important decision was to turn the guide to institutions and archives into a separate project¹⁷. Secondly, it was necessary to find a different and more economical way of treating the government archives. The concept of document flow, till then superimposed on these archives, is largely foreign to them. The Dutch administration at the time linked each document by date and day number to a decision taken by an authority. The order in which both the series of decisions and the

¹⁵ Ch. Jeurgens and P.M.M. Klep, *Informatieprocessen van de Bataafs-Franse overheid 1795-1813*. The Hague, 1995.

¹⁶ Web publication (www.inghist.nl): Beschrijvend bronnenmateriaal van de Bataafs-Franse centrale overheid, 1795-1798 (edited by R.H.G. Sluijter and K.J.P.F.M. Jeurgens), 1798-1801 (edited by R.H.G. Sluijter and A. Verheusen) and 1801-1813 (edited by J. Roelevink).

¹⁷ Web publication (www.inghist.nl) : Onderzoeksgids bestuur en administratie in de Bataafs-Franse tijd, edited by J. Roelevink.

corresponding papers were placed in the archives is therefore chronological. To make it easier to search for papers on specific subjects, “indexes” were compiled which summarized decisions and arranged them according to subject. The bulk of the archives can therefore be visualized as a pyramid, with the individual documents at the bottom, the decisions in the middle, and the indexes with their summaries at the top.

Obviously, working with the indexes as opposed to processing the individual documents is a good short cut, the more so because, together with the decisions themselves, they are the most complete series. Individual papers, annexes to the decisions, had been thrown away in the course of time or were removed to be used later on, leaving that series with quite a few gaps. Accordingly, the indexes at the top of the pyramid became the scope for the search for statistical information. It was decided to summarize the decisions on statistics, to transcribe the corresponding questions and to mark the position of the answers in the archives. It took some time to sink in that working with the indexes and using decisions as a basis also entailed a rather drastic adaptation of the database application.

The scope of the selection of documents also needed to be reduced. To start with, I proposed to leave the provincial and municipal archives alone. This was justifiable because the central authorities were the ones who not only asked the questions but also amassed the answers. In addition, the local authorities usually sent back the completed tables without keeping copies of their own so that you would only find the minutes of the covering letters in their archives. Secondly, my suggestion to include only requests for information to external authorities, and to leave out internal registrations and lists from the central government was endorsed. Even so, the database contains no less than 500 requests, the full text of the questions asked, and the location of the answers that have been provided.

One or two lessons taught us that it remains dangerous, even in a time of data warehouses and more flexible data structures, to pursue multiple objectives within a single edition or to superimpose new conceptual layers, however intriguing, on archives which are foreign to their order and purpose. Also, both the presentation on the Internet and the search for data on a screen, dictate that the structure of a site and its contents be pellucid and that the number of hits remains manageable. In fact, digitalisation does not make the old rules of documentary editing invalid, but rather, more stringent. Simplicity remains the key concept.

Compendium of office holders and civil servants 1428-1861

In the meantime, new attention had been drawn to people in political and administrative history. In 1997, my colleague Dr. Jos Gabriels had proposed to create a prosopography of Dutch regents during the Republic. The purpose was to give a survey of their careers and to provide personal information. After a pilot, it became clear that realizing a project such as this would consume much more manpower than was available. In addition, there was not much hope to attain a reasonable uniformity and completeness in the data of the first half of the seventeenth century and earlier, especially where personal information was concerned.

A few years later, another colleague, Gerard Hooykaas, made a similar proposition for the nineteenth century, but this time it was based on institutions and their functionaries. It was decided to join the two proposals into one project which would be flexible enough to allow working in independent phases and adding data later on.

The answer was to choose a number of institutions for the first phase, and to define which of their administrators and which ranks of civil servants were to be included. As a consequence, the main sources such as commission books and indexes were serial, and therefore suitable for efficient processing. The first phase has now been completed by Dr. Ronald Sluijter, Marc Kooijmans and myself. The data range from 1588 to 1860, and are limited, at the moment, to three provinces for the period of the Republic. The new ING programme has now provided for a first extension into the Middle Ages¹⁸.

So far, we have been very happy with the project and its presentation on the Web. The only point that warrants discussion is whether it would be better to indicate the exact reference with the volume and page of the source for every appointment or change. At the moment, only a general indication of the source used is available.

Guide for the institutions and archives of the Batavian-French period

In 2000, it was decided to produce a guide to the manifold institutions and archives of the Batavian-French period. Each of the six changes of regime entailed a general

¹⁸ Web publication (www.inghist.nl) : Repertorium van ambtsdragers en ambtenaren 1428-1861, 1428-1588 (ed. M. Kooijmans and B.J. Ibelings), 1588-1795 (ed. R.G.H. Sluijter), 1795-1813 (ed. J. Roelevink), 1813-1861 (ed. M. Kooijmans).

reconstruction of the central government, and often of the provincial government and the legal institutions as well. All in all, the guide comprises a description of 325 Dutch and French institutions over a period of fifteen years.

The guide was devised in a time when most archive inventories were only available in print, but it was anticipated that this could change rapidly, which actually happened. The guide now serves two purposes: in the first place, it provides a superstructure for the inventories by describing the institutions, their organisation and their tasks, with a short note on the general contents of the archives. The second purpose is to facilitate the search in the archives themselves by describing the contents and the use of the agenda or indexes. In one instance, the index on the archives of the General State Secretary, images of the source are supplied so as to allow the user to start work at home. It is hoped that the guide will hit the Internet towards the end of 2009. There will be a direct link to the *Compendium of office holders and civil servants 1428-1861*.

Correspondence Canneman-Gogel

The latest offshoot of our editions concerning the Batavian-French period are the letters exchanged by Isaac Gogel, Secretary of State for Finances, and his highest civil servant, Elias Canneman¹⁹. The editor, Mieke van Leeuwen-Canneman, is a historian and archivist and a direct descendant of Elias Canneman. The letters contain fascinating details concerning the secret dealings of the State on the financial market. The two authors were also close enough to swap inside information about individual politicians, their aims and their weaknesses. The annexes include a survey of all tax measures and general taxations of the period.

The edition is the only instance of the Board of the Institute allowing a fuller annotation, which is due to the specialised financial background.

Conclusions

The time has now come to draw some general conclusions. The Institute of Netherlands History has been able, over the last thirty years or so, to enhance the infrastructure for research into the Batavian-French period. The first results are now becoming available as learned publications, especially theses and articles.

¹⁹ M. van Leeuwen-Canneman, *Een vriendschap in het teken van 's lands financiën. Briefwisseling tussen Elias Canneman en Isaac Jan Alexander Gogel, 1799-1813*. The Hague, 2009.

As to documentary editing, I would like to contend in the first place that we do not so much need a set of rules on how to edit as much as a set of conditions for the choices which have to be made by any editor when he or she plans a project. Rules call for exceptions, based on the material itself, on personal views and on scholarly traditions. Choices, on the other hand, leave the freedom to adapt decisions to circumstances and to adjust the project to the features and characteristics of the material. But they cannot do without stipulations²⁰.

I will only mention some of these. Utmost simplicity should be the main aim. The simpler the course of the research, the quicker it will be completed and the more transparency will be gained in presenting it to the user. Secondly, every choice made by the editor should be made transparent, be fully explained and be open to checking by the user.

In general, the best thing is to stick as closely as possible to the structure and the properties of the archives and sources themselves. This means that editors ought to suppress any desire to superimpose their own constructions and interpretations on the source material. These invariably prove to be the weakest link as time wears on.

It is generally counterproductive to assign too many functions to each element of an edition. The annotation, for instance, is there to help understand the text, not to display erudition or to serve any secondary aims of the editor as well. Conversely, each function should be assigned to one element of the edition, e.g. the identification of persons either to the annotation or to the index and the explanation of backgrounds either to the introduction or to the annotation.

Thirdly, criteria for selection, both the external ones that describe the circumference of material searched or documents added, and the internal ones that mark what is left out, should be of a formal nature in as far as it is possible. By that, I mean that they should be based on the functions of an institution or person, as mirrored by their archives, or on formal characteristics of documents. Criteria related to content prolong the time needed by the editor to make choices, leave too much room for personal preferences and are not easily verifiable for third parties.

²⁰ J. Roelevink, "Tussen natte vinger en keurslijf. Korte handleiding voor het samenstellen van eenvoudige en ingewikkelde bronnenuitgaven voor professionals en belangstellenden" in: E. Dijkhof and M. van Gent (red.), *Uit diverse bronnen gelicht. Opstellen aangeboden aan Hans Smit ter gelegenheid van zijn vijftenzestigste verjaardag* (The Hague 2007) pp. 177-291. An extended version in English will be published on the website of the Institute of Netherlands History.

Lastly, I would contend that the choices to be made can also be described in terms of concentric circles, starting from the absolute minimum necessary to establish an edition and going on to more layers which add new information. Each layer should be consistent and comprehensive in its execution. It is often simply a matter of choice how many layers should be included, depending on the time and the means available. The final test is that results should be verifiable and conducive to further research. Only then will the sticky path of the editor have reached solid ground.