

## II.13 **Long Live the Library!**

### The Book Collections of the IISH, in Particular the KNAW Library\*

**Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk**

#### **Introduction**

In the early 2000s I worked at the IISH as a PhD student, writing a dissertation on early modern women's work. I felt I was in the right place at this institute: the Research Department focused on family strategies and increasingly on global labour history. The academic atmosphere and debates were lively and colleagues were friendly. The best thing was that the IISH was not simply an institute of researchers. There were also many capable people working on the development and preservation of collections and developing a digital infrastructure. In the past I had worked closely with some of them on a few business history projects, but in a context of inventorying the available archival material of the firm in question, rather than as a frequent user of the core IISH archives.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* The author would like to thank Wiljan van den Akker, Lex Heerma van Voss, Frans van der Kolff, Jan Lucassen and Jenneke Quast for their useful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the preliminary inventory work by Bouwe Hijma in the Philips archives for the history of the Philips Retirement Fund. Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Jan Peet, *Een peertje voor de dorst. Geschiedenis van het Philips Pensioenfonds* (Amsterdam, 2002).

As a PhD researcher working with primary data on early modern local labour markets from many regional archives, I did not consider myself an important consumer of the IISH collections. This self-image changed drastically, however, when in the fall of 2003 the evaluation board visited the Institute. This external committee wanted to talk to several staff members, and I was granted the dubious honor of being selected by the IISH directorate to be one of the interviewees. To prepare for this, Henk Wals gave me a short briefing. “Remember,” he emphatically told me, “if the committee wants to know how your research relates to the IISH collections, do not forget to mention your use of the extensive library!”

This was actually the first time I realized I was indeed a frequent user of the institute’s collections. Over the past year and a half, I had primarily visited local archives all over the Netherlands, but had I visited many *libraries* outside the IISH? Of course, there had been an occasional loan from a university library of some obscure book on women textile workers in pre-historic times.<sup>2</sup> But the majority of my – then still incomplete – bibliography was indeed derived from the IISH library collection. From then on, I felt even more at home than before. No longer did I have to feel ashamed that my research did not exactly overlap with the IISH collections, I was in fact a wholesale user of the Institute’s inventory!

As a tribute to this important part of the IISH collection, I would like to devote the following pages to the peculiar history and contents of what is probably the largest sub-collection of the IISH library: the library of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (KNAW), which was given to the Institute in 2005.

### Background of the Transfer

Since its establishment in 1808, the Royal Institute (later Royal Academy for Arts and Sciences – KNAW) already owned a respectable library. Not only did King Louis Napoleon contribute a number of duplicates from the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, but also many members, associates, and correspondents bestowed (part of) their book collections to the Academy’s library. David Jacob van Lennep, a classicist who worked as the Institute’s librarian from 1817 to 1851, played an important role in further building the collection.<sup>3</sup> When Van Lennep died, the secretary of the Academy took over his job. In 1858, a new catalogue of the library’s collection appeared and some important literary collections, for instance those of Willem Bilderdijk, were collected in the final decades of the century. However, in the course of the twentieth century, the library turned from a “library of books to one of

---

2 E. Wayland Barber, *Women’s work: the first 20,000 years: women, cloth, and society in early times* (New York, 1995).

3 <http://socialhistory.org/nl/collecties/gidsen/akademiebibliotheek-geschiedenis>; last accessed 24 April 2014.



**The Interior of the KNAW Library (Trippenhuis, Amsterdam).  
Collection KNAW. Photograph by Gert Jan van Rooij.**

journals.”<sup>4</sup> This implied that the former interest in the library’s book collection faded. Therefore, large parts of the collection were outsourced to other Dutch institutes. In 1938, for instance, the collection of western manuscripts – containing manuscripts by the seventeenth-century literary scientist Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) and his son Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695) – were given in permanent loan to the Royal Library in The Hague. Other parts of the collection (eastern manuscripts) were lent to the University of Leiden and the collection of coins went to the *Koninklijk Penningkabinet*, now – for as long as it will still exist – the Money Museum in Utrecht.<sup>5</sup>

The Academy Library thus outsourced important parts of its collections, making it perhaps an even more haphazard assemblage than before. Still, in the 1990s, interest in the library was revived. A restoration department was installed, and parts of the collection were used for exhibitions. Also, efforts

---

4 “Lectures on the library of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences”, *On the Waterfront. Newsletter of the Friends of the IISH*, 11 (2005), pp. 9-15.

5 <http://socialhistory.org/nl/collecties/gidsen/akademiebibliotheek-geschiedenis>; last accessed 24 April 2014.

were made to reorganize the catalogue of the library's collection and to perform research on specific subsets.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this revival of interest, the collection became too large for the Academy to house within its walls in the late twentieth century. The Royal Academy decided to find accommodation for its library in the newly established Netherlands Institute for Information Services (NIWI). This was a merger of six different institutes that were supposed to focus on the provision of (especially digital) infrastructure for the arts and sciences in the Netherlands. In practice, however, it was not a very coherent umbrella for its many different activities, some more successful than others. In 2005 Wiljan van den Akker, then the director of the KNAW-institutes, decided to dissolve the NIWI, and to continue some of its activities in a different form. But of course, there was still the valuable large collection of books, journals, pamphlets, and other curiosities. Selling parts of the collection would have been difficult, especially what to do with the rest of the material.

In one of his conversations with Jaap Kloosterman, the director of the International Institute of Social History at the time, Wiljan van den Akker mentioned his dilemma with the Academy library. Fortunately, Jaap Kloosterman – as always – had a pragmatic attitude and offered to house the entire collection at the IISH. While the collection appeared to be somewhat scattered, Kloosterman saw its value quite clearly. In Van den Akker's words, he was not “one of those posh directors who says: ‘Well, I'm sorry, this doesn't fit my collection’, but instead he was pragmatic and helpful.” Perhaps, Van den Akker speculates, this was also owing to both men's coinciding interests.<sup>7</sup> Kloosterman probably saw this acquisition indeed as complementary to the IISH collection. It was a typical scholarly library with different – cultural and scientific – specializations than the social and economic collections the IISH and Economic Historical Library housed until then. It constituted an extension of the larger Enlightenment project, just as was the case with the emancipation of the labouring classes.<sup>8</sup> Or, in the words of Jan Lucassen, “the French Encyclopedists, Smith, Darwin, Stuart Mill *e tutti quanti* cannot be considered separate from Marx, Engels, Bakunin and pals”.<sup>9</sup>

This is how the IISH acquired the largest library collection at once in its history thus far. The Academy library added a sub-collection of about 200,000 volumes, which in large part covers the physical and biological sciences. The book collection comprises around 60,000 documents, and there

---

6 “Lectures on the library”, p. 10.

7 Interview with Wiljan van den Akker, 13 July 2013. Van den Akker is a professor in modern Dutch literature at Utrecht University.

8 As was for instance the idea behind the Exhibition Catalogue published on the occasion of the 75 year existence of the IISH. Jaap Kloosterman and Jan Lucassen, *Rebels with a cause. Five centuries of social history collected by the International Institute of Social History (IISH)* (Amsterdam, 2010).

9 Personal e-mail from Jan Lucassen, Monday 21 October 2013.

are about 2,000 drawings, plates, and maps. Furthermore the Academy library contains almost 3,000 journal series of various scientific societies and about 5,000 pamphlets.<sup>10</sup> While perhaps not at the core of the Institute's collection profile, the directorate still believed this was a valuable collection to acquire. First, because the Academy library represented a unique historical collection, which was in fact endangered.<sup>11</sup> Some of the books in the library are the only copy available in the Netherlands, and sometimes even very rare in the world. Also, the library's contents were, "surprisingly close to the areas of interest of IISH and NEHA".<sup>12</sup> Not only indirectly, since many of the works represent a collection of contemporary works of 'propositional knowledge' à la Joel Mokyr.<sup>13</sup>

What is more, apart from the majority of books on physics and biology, there were also many examples of historical accounts of the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries that may be very suitable for social and economic historical analysis. For instance, the collection contains many manuscripts and documents of the Directorate of the Mediterranean trade, established in 1625 to maintain relationships with the Ottomans, Venetians, and other notable powers in the Mediterranean. Another example is a fairly unique copy of the work of an English shipbuilder, William Sutherland: *Prices of Labour in Ship-Building*, a two-volume manuscript which records elaborate calculations of costs of labour in this particular industry.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, from the more recent books in the Academy Library, the IISH made a selection of secondary literature, including many unpublished PhD theses, which were able to nicely complement the more recent collection of the library.<sup>15</sup>

So, there is also a more direct link to the use made of the library by other historians as well as to the research performed at the institute. One particular suggestion for current research, especially in the context of global labour history, are the many travel descriptions of scientists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They discovered a new world, just as traditional labour historians have now come to uncover new regions of the world by increasingly studying their labour histories, including the very first colonial encounters. In the context of the regional desks that have been extended by the Institute over the past few years, ranging from Southeast Asia to Latin America, it is all the more valuable to reflect this in its collections. Let us now turn to one of the volumes in the book collection, the *Historie Naturael*,

---

10 Source: <http://socialhistory.org/nl/collecties/gidsen/akademiebibliotheek-geschiedenis>; last accessed 24 April 2014.

11 As the reader may know, this was one of the founding principles of the International Institute of Social History in 1935.

12 "Lectures on the library", p. 10.

13 Joel Mokyr, "The Industrial Revolution and the Economic History of Technology: Lessons from the British Experience, 1760-1850", *Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance*, 41 (2001), pp. 295-311.

14 "Lectures on the library", pp. 11-15, some other notable examples are mentioned.

15 Personal e-mail from Jan Lucassen, Monday 21 October 2013.

or a translation from *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (Salamanca 1588). The fact that this work was almost immediately translated from Spanish to Dutch in itself shows the growing interest of ordinary people in the then rapidly globalizing world at an early stage.

### The *Historie Naturael* by José de Acosta

One of the very old books in the collection of the Royal Academy is (a translation of) the Natural History of the West-Indies by the Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta.<sup>16</sup> Its author, José de Acosta, was born in 1540, as one of nine children of a rich entrepreneur from the prosperous Castilian merchant town of Medina del Campo. According to his own testimony, José ran away from home a few months before his twelfth birthday in 1552, and entered the newly established Jesuit Society in Salamanca. The reason for joining the congregation was probably from a genuine religious vocation, as he “saw the great charity, kindness, humility, and fervor that existed in it.”<sup>17</sup> José also expressed the wish to travel to “the Indies”, although spreading the word of God among Africans was also on his wish list.

Indeed, his wish would be fulfilled, although he had to wait 20 years, in which he travelled a great deal throughout Europe. In 1572 d’Acosta finally sailed to Latin America, where he would remain for 15 years. He visited regions that today include Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico. On his journeys he noted his observations of natural phenomena, many of them related to the geophysical sciences. Not only did he comment on the skies, climate, winds, volcanic activity, earthquakes, and a variety of new minerals, plants, and animals, but he also wrote extensively on the social structure and habits of the inhabitants of the region. When he returned to Spain in 1587, Acosta started writing the *Historia*, which is about his observations of America. He wrote another, controversial book in which he strongly criticized the way the Spaniards treated the indigenous population.<sup>18</sup>

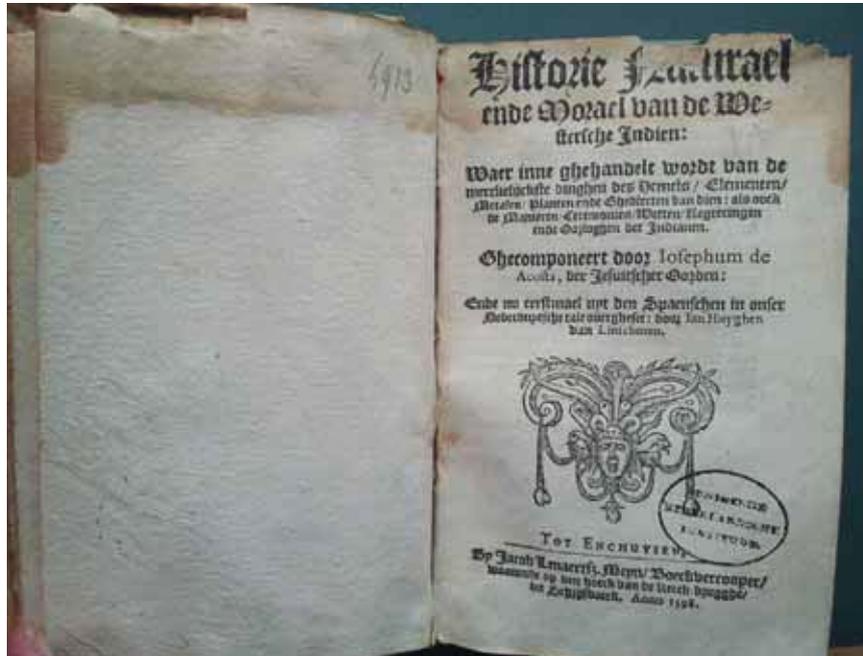
The *Historie Naturael* was a pioneering study in the sense that it constituted the first detailed European description of the geography and culture of Latin America. In the first half of his book, Acosta described the natural world of the Americas, including many of its physiological and biological characteristics. He argued that the Americas formed an integral part of the universe, and that they were formed of the same four physical elements (earth, wa-

---

16 José de Acosta, *Historie Naturael ende Morael van de Westersche Indien: Waer inne ghehandelt wordt van de merchelijckste dinghen des hemels, elementen, metalen, planten ende ghedierten van dien: als oock de manieren, ceremonien, wetten, regeeringen ende oorloghen der Indianen*, Translated from Spanish by Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (Enkhuizen, 1598). Call no.: KNAW AB E 4913 s.

17 As quoted by his biographer, Claudio M. Burgaleta, in *José de Acosta, S.J. (1540-1600): His Life and Thought* (Chicago, 1999), p. 9.

18 Augustin Udias and W. Stauder, “Jesuit geophysical observatories”, *EOS Trans. Am. Geophys. Union*, 72 (1991) pp. 185-187.



Title page of the *Historie Natural* in the IISH collection, KNAW AB E 4913. Photograph by the author.

ter, air, fire) and the same natural orders (mineral, vegetal, animal) as the other continents – a belief that apparently not many of his contemporaries shared. In the second half of the book, he described the human inhabitants of the New World. Although he certainly did not describe the indigenous peoples as equal to Europeans, he did acknowledge that they were intelligent, spiritual, physical, feeling, and rational creatures. Also, he stressed the accomplishments of the inhabitants of the New World, their culture, and the fact that they had their own history, which was generally orally transmitted. In fact, as Butzer has argued, “Acosta was the first European to explicitly recognize that New World phenomena existed in their own right”.<sup>19</sup> He also fervently countered the common opinion “that the Indians descended from Jewish lineage [...], because they were fearful, pusillanimous, of plentiful ceremony, sensible, and mendacious”.<sup>20</sup> As explanation, he stated

19 Karl W. Butzer, “From Columbus to Acosta: Science, Geography, and the New World”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82:3 (1992), pp. 543-565, 557.

20 “Dat d’Indianen van’t Joodsche geslachte afcomen, houdt de gemeyne Man voor een seker teycken, omdat de selve vreesachtich, cleyndoedich, van veel ceremonien, sinnich ende leugenachtich zijn.” Acosta, *Historie Natural*, Cap. 23, fol. 48-48v.

that the many peoples of the Indies were too diverse to have descended from a single “tribe”.

What is of course rather striking, is that this work was translated from Spanish into Dutch in 1598, in the midst of the war between the Spanish Kingdom and the provinces of the Netherlands trying to fight for their independence. How can we explain this phenomenon?

For one thing, the Spanish Kingdom, although facing difficulties, was still one of the world’s major powers at the end of the sixteenth century. In the Northern Netherlands relatively few people spoke Spanish, certainly compared to the Southern Netherlands, which remained in Spanish possession, although there are indications that many important Dutch authors at the time at least mastered some of the language. For instance, important litterateurs such as Coornhert, Hooft, and Cats were probably able to read some of the major Spanish literature of their time.<sup>21</sup> Translating it, however, was quite a different matter.

Most probably the genuine interest of Acosta’s translator, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, played a decisive role in the creation of the *Historie Naturael*. Van Linschoten was a Dutch merchant and explorer, who served the Portuguese for many years, and as secretary to the bishop of Goa. He travelled to the East Indies only returning to the Netherlands in 1592. He devoted four years of his life to writing his *Itinerario. Voyage ofte schipvaert, naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien inhoudende een corte beschryvinghe der selver landen ende zee-custen* (1596). This work, in which he apparently relied heavily on earlier Portuguese accounts of the natural and social descriptions of Portuguese India, became well-known and was used frequently by later VOC sailors who sailed to the East Indies. According to Kern and Terpstra, Linschoten was captivated by Acosta’s eloquent descriptions of the West Indies, and he felt obliged to translate them into Dutch as a counterpart to his own descriptions of the East Indies. Linschoten, who in his *Itinerario* had also



Jan Huygen van Linschoten (ca. 1563-1611).  
Collection Maritiem Museum Rotterdam.

21 G.S. Overdiep, *Geschiedenis van de letterkunde der Nederlanden*. Deel 3 (Antwerpen/Brussel/s-Hertogenbosch, [1944]), pp. 60-62.

made some remarks on the West Indies, stated that in no way could these compare to Acosta's descriptions, which were "in all of the writings of the author's intention in case more highly taken, more gracefully described, and more perspicaciously elaborated than my own exercise and humble mind encompassed, or ever could encompass".<sup>22</sup>

### **Chance and the Wider Meaning of the *Historie Naturael* as Part of the IISH-Collection**

As we have seen above, much of the history of the *Historie Naturael* as well as its acquisition by the IISH were accidental. If it hadn't been for the particular interest of Jan Huygen van Linschoten, the book may not have been translated into Dutch in the first place. While we do not know exactly how the manuscript became part of the KNAW Library, we may safely assume that it was part of one of the inventories that were bequeathed to this collection over the past 200 years. And, finally, if it hadn't been for the particular circumstances in which the directors of the KNAW and the IISH happened to talk about this library collection in the mid-2000s, it may not even have been saved for posterity.

On the other hand, this particular item is not unique in the Netherlands. According to [antiqubook.com](http://antiqubook.com), it is available in at least one Dutch antique shop, although it costs almost 3,000 euros. Also, Huygen van Linschoten's translation is available in various Dutch libraries, such as the Royal Library in The Hague and libraries of the University of Amsterdam and of Utrecht University. The *Historie Naturael* may not be the most pressing example of the need to preserve a rather haphazard but historical collection of books and other manuscripts (known as the KNAW Library). Still, the manuscript is valuable enough, and other pieces in the large collection are indeed more exceptional and rare.

The history of the KNAW Library shows that history and its artefacts are far from always coherent and logical. They are to a certain extent based on chance. And although it may not be the prevailing attitude today, it is entirely legitimate also to acquire archival material and books in this way, out of a genuine interest and love for the historically contingent. Just to avoid the chance that some very valuable material may get lost forever. Moreover, the chances are great that parts of these seemingly coincidental acquisitions may in the end perfectly fit and complement existing collections. The same may be argued for (parts of) other collections that

---

22 "[...] in alle stucken des schrijvers voornemen in dien hoogher ghenomen, cierlijcker vervaet, ende scherpsinnigher uytghevoert te zijn, dan mijn oeffeninghe ende gheringh verstandt bedroech, ofte noch soude bedraghen". Introduction to the second edition of Jan Huygen Linschoten's *Itinerario* (first edition 1596), edited by H. Kern and H. Terpstra, (Den Haag, 1955), p. xxxvi. [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/lins001itino1\\_01/lins001itino1\\_01\\_0006.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/lins001itino1_01/lins001itino1_01_0006.php); last accessed 24 April 2014.

are currently under threat, or will be in the near future, not necessarily far from home.<sup>23</sup> As was recently argued, library collections can be highly informative, not only by studying their contents, but also by studying their histories.<sup>24</sup> As we have seen above, the KNAW Library can also be considered an “autobiography of a culture,”<sup>25</sup> and it is thus advisable to keep it as a separate collection instead of blending it with other parts of the IISH collection.

- 
- 23 Until recently, for instance, the unique KIT-Library collections were severely threatened. Remarkably, the Alexandrina Library in Egypt decided to rescue two-thirds (c. 700,000 items) of the collection of the Royal Institute for the Tropics (KIT). See e.g. “Veel boeken Instituut Tropen gered”, *NRC Handelsblad* (1 November 2013), p. 16.
- 24 Jaap Kloosterman, “Unwritten autobiography: Labor history libraries before World War I”, in Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (eds), *Working on Labor: Essays in honor of Jan Lucassen* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 395-416.
- 25 As quoted in Kloosterman, “Unwritten autobiography”, p. 395.