

Monthly Letter April 2010

The song of (pro)longing: a message from a seized ship



Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen: a Dutch merchant is attacked by an English privateer off the coast of La Rochelle

Numerous letter writers mention the English privateers who are indirectly responsible for the fact that we can still read the *Sailing Letters* today. Sailor's wives warn their husbands and sons about ships that have been seized by the English and give the names of captains and friends who are being held in England for an indefinite period of time. Some sailors let their loved ones know that their journey will take longer because they are planning to come home "round the back". This means that they will travel along a northern route around the British Isles hoping to steer clear of the privateers in the hoop net of the Channel. In the course of the past centuries the English have captured countless ships and thousands of crewmembers must have fallen into enemy hands. These unfortunate ones must have tried to contact home, but until now we have only retrieved a couple of letters written by captured Dutchmen. One of those letters is written by Pouwel Pietersz Schuitemaker who describes the situation in England.

A letter from England to an old friend

On 12 February 1665 Pouwel writes to his wife Maartje Nannings who lives in the town of Hoorn. Maartje is an old friend of ours: the Letters-as-Loot corpus contains five of her letters written to her husband. A couple of these have already been discussed by the historian Roelof van Gelder in *Zeepost. Nooit bezorgde brieven uit de 17de en 18de eeuw* (Amsterdam: Atlas 2008). Pouwel's letter, sent from England, shows the other side of the correspondence. It is not clear where precisely we should situate Pouwel. At the top of his letter he says that his ship *Het graafschap Marke* is in "faelmuijen" (Falmouth, Cornwall), but in the first lines he mentions "pleijmuijen" (Plymouth) as the ship's mooring place. Since Pouwel writes about several captains working together, we know that the ship on which he sailed as chief carpenter was probably in convoy when it was captured.

Faith in the future

Pouwel does not produce a panicky letter; he writes lucidly and composedly. He trusts that the English will soon allow them to set sail for Cadiz. According to Pouwel the entire situation is the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding: the English think that the ships' home port and final destination is Holland, which would mean they are a legitimate catch. But the ships are not Dutch and since privateering is bound by strict rules, none of them can be taken as a prize. The captains spare no efforts in trying to get their ships back out to sea as quickly as possible. They expect higher authorities to interfere and secure free passage for them:

"but we hope to have letters that declare us free from London soon from the ambassador of the Elector and from the King of England as well [...] so that we do not have to worry, we hope, about being declared a prize"

This outcome would be good news for the captains, since it would mean that



they can keep their ships and cargo and that they are able to sail to the Spanish harbour town unhindered. In Cadiz then they should have no trouble finding cargos since they would be “free men” who cannot be harmed by the English. The English, however, are not very keen on letting them go and they try to stall the case: “they seek to make the song of prolonging with us”. Pouwel and the crewmembers of other captured ships – several French and German ships, two Dutch ships and a Swedish one – can do nothing but wait for the decision of the High Court of Admiralty.

No cause for alarm

All things considered, Pouwel is actually doing quite well. His ship is taken by the English, but the chief carpenter expects to be released soon. He does not complain about a bad treatment by the enemy and he is in good health. Pouwel and his comrades have good prospects concerning the trade and the journey will probably still be very profitable. In the meantime Pouwel has also become good friends with the captain of his ship and he proudly writes to his wife that the captain really likes him and that he “is in the captain’s good books”. It is a pity that Maartje never received this message, because we know from a letter written by her on 15 March 1665 that she was very anxious about her husband.

Consternation in Hoorn

In this letter Maartje lets her husband know that they found out through a letter from the captains that the ship was in England. The news caused “great sadness and not a little consternation”. Maartje was so upset that she made little of the joys of winter:

“this winter I have learned to skate so well that I should be able to skate behind my beloved one and I would have learned a lot more still but then we received the news that you were in England and then it was over”

Apparently Maartje did not feel like skating anymore or did not think it appropriate to glide over the ice while her husband was held prisoner in England. But luckily she did not have to be sorrowful for long, because she soon received good news as well.

“and now we have understood from the captains’ letter that they are free again and ready to set sail”

So Pouwel was right when he wrote that they would surely be allowed to leave again and the English had not been able to stall the release of the ships for another month.



Hendrick Avercamp: Fun on the ice

... and relief

Maartje therefore ends her letter cheerfully, writing about the hard winter, the skating and her friendship with the captain’s wife, which seems to echo Pouwel’s friendship with the captain. She reassures her husband: everyone is healthy and she often meets relatives and friends. Maartje has been very worried, but now she is a happy woman. She only reproaches her husband once for not letting her know that he was in England while she is desperate for news about him. But we know better: the faithful Pouwel did write elaborately to his wife about the situation of the seized ship and he did try to reassure her. Only his comforting words never reached the other side of the Channel.

The letters were found in box HCA 30-647. The comment on this monthly letter is written by Judith Nobels.