

Monthly Letter July/August 2009

A children's letter?

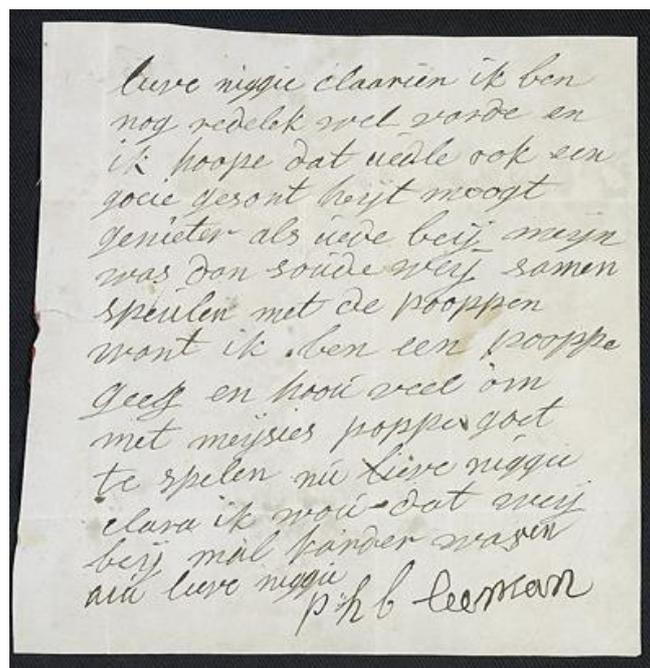


We are always pleasantly surprised when we find a children's letter in the *Sailing Letters*. Children's letters from the past are after all quite rare. One such nice finding was the short letter written in December 1780 by a certain P.H.B. Leeman. The sender of the letter lets his cousin Clara Josiena Sluijsken know that he would love to play with the dolls together. The small boy confesses that he prefers *meijsies poppe goet* (girls' toys). The addressee Clara Josiena lived in Colombo on the island of Ceylon (now Sri-Lanka). She was a daughter of Pieter Sluijsken and Suzanna Petronella Charlotte Medeler. Clara Josiena was born on 14 May 1776 and thus four years old when this letter was sent to her. But who is this mysterious sender P.H. B. Leeman? To find out, we need to know more about the family of Clara's father, Pieter Sluijsken.

Pieter Sluijsken (born in Amsterdam in 1740) left the Netherlands in 1758 and made a career for himself serving the VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie/United East-India Company) at Ceylon. He left behind several sisters when he moved to Ceylon: among them were Clara, Lucretia, Gerharda Catharina and Anna Hendrina. Several *Sailing letters* have been written by these sisters or their husbands, either to Pieter or to his wife Suzanna. Some of the letters mention a 'brother' and a 'sister' Leeman. They turn out to be the parents of the sender of the 'children's letter', Peter Hendrik Benjamin Leeman.

Anna Hendrina Sluijsken was married to Benjamin Libregt Leeman and their son Peter was baptized on 10 July 1776 in the Lutheran church in Amsterdam. Apparently Peter's birth had long been wished for, because his aunt Lucretia writes on 4 December 1780: "*after nine years of marriage a little leeman appeared [...] who is a model of sweetness because this little leeman is becoming such a nice boy*".

Not only was Peter very sweet, he was also extraordinarily clever. Aunt Clara wrote about him in December 1780: "*our little nephew peter is also a nice and very gifted child*". In addition she wrote that he kept talking about his cousins (Pieter Sluijsken's daughters) and that he preferred to play with girls and girls' toys. Peter was only four and a half years old when he sent his cousin a letter in December 1780. This raises some questions. Is it possible that a child of this age writes such a letter himself? Peter's cleverness and the fact that he was an only child count in his favour. Nevertheless the letter proves to be not self-written. A comparison with aunt Clara's handwriting leaves no doubt: she wrote Peter's letter for him. The only part of it written by Peter is probably his last name.



Me Vuyrou veel geerde
 suster
 iijft uede nesuse ye seer hulle
 ye goeie weelkent die ueds be
 neren uede luse man en kinden
 ye nietende was was mijn
 lief om te ver nemen wat ons
 an gaat genieten tons een soot
 ye soont huyt boaven veel onder
 want tons is hier de sichte en
 de slette on der de mense in
 menigte man weij seijn alle
 nog wel varde uede soon
 is tons soo gesont als huy in vaden
 kent nog niet genooder het en
 is tons een veel wasse mens per
 soon huy avansent ook in seijn
 studie dat ik wil hoop dat in
 twee jaar der dier sel wesen en
 dat uede hem dan in een cool
 makte gesont huyt weer sult
 sien het seij in vaderkent et

The pictures clearly show that the two letters have been written in the same hand, only the signature on the 'children's letter' is different. By the looks of it, aunt Clara has also written Peter's initials; they deviate too much from the handwriting in the last name. Furthermore, more or less the same passage shows up in both letters. Aunt Clara writes about Peter: "because he dearly loves to play with the girls because he plays with girl's toys all the time". And in Peter's letter we read: "because I am fond of dolls and I love to play with girls' toys". The choice of words and the spelling in both letters shows similarity as well: for instance the word 'wel varde' (healthy), the use of the word 'niggie' (cousin) and the spelling *weij* (we) and *seijn* (are). So sadly enough this letter is not an example of children's language after all, but a note, written by a loving aunt helping out her little cousin who desperately wanted to write his cousin a letter.

The letter is kept in HCA 30-336. The picture of the children's letter has been put at our disposal by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek at The Hague. The picture of the letter of Clara Shuijsken is taken from our own collection. The transcription of the children's note and the comment on this monthly letter are by Tanja Simons. The quotations have been translated freely.