

Monthly Letter March 2010

'I like her a lot'. The marriage of D.H. Macaré and L.G.J. van Bercheyck



In one of the boxes in The National Archives thirty wedding announcements were found, sent by Dirk Hendrik Macaré and his bride-to-be Laurentia Geertruida Jacoba van Bercheyck, who lived in Demerary (in present Guyana). With this announcement they let their family and friends know that on the 26th of October they were going to give notice of their intended marriage. The actual wedding took place on the 29th of December. The announcements - printed on fancy paper - were sent to relatives in the Netherlands. These relatives all originated from the highest ranks for as well Dirk Hendrik Macaré as Laurentia van Bercheyck were members of the upper-class. Laurentia was a daughter of the head of the department of Demerary, Laurens Lodewijk van Bercheyck. Dirk Hendrik's father, Dirk Macaré (1706-1774), studied law in Leiden and was appointed as bailiff of Middelburg (in the province of Zeeland) in 1747.

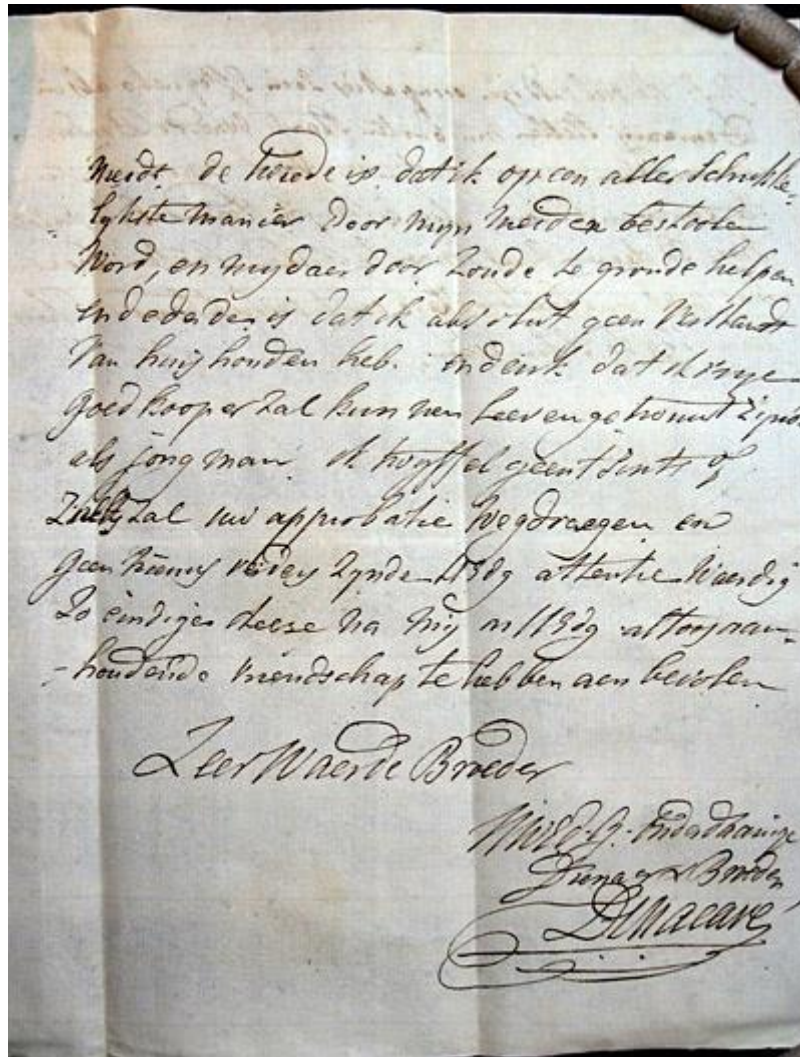
Important news to a brother-in-law

In another box we found a letter written by Dirk Hendrik Macaré to his brother-in-law, Mr. G.F. Meyners, married to Johanna Elisabeth Macaré. Meyners lived in Middelburg and had a high position as a justice in the Court of Flanders. Although Macaré addressed this letter just to his brother-in-law, he asks in a postscript to give the letter to his mother, his sister and his cousin because he is too busy to write to them separately. And he has very important news! After some standard health formulas Dirk Hendrik divulges a secret: "I have to tell you something that will surprise you very much: I am courting someone". After this surprising news he enlarges on the background of his future wife.



Outspoken about his grounds

Dirk Hendrik thinks he will be very happy with Laurentia and he underlines that he is not marrying her for her money. He does not even know whether she is wealthy: "she may have a lot or little money, it depends on a case still under discussion [...] I do not marry for money, and if it is there, so much the better". She has - besides her possible dowry - a lot of other qualities such as a very gentle character. She is also a very fine housekeeper and that suits him very well since his servants steal like magpies and he knows absolutely nothing about housekeeping. All in all this means that he will benefit financially from a marriage anyway: "I think I will be able to live cheaper being married as a young man". The first reason Macaré mentions in favour of his marriage is quite different by the way: "I cannot live like other gentlemen in Demerary with a black girl". Apparently it was quite common for a white man in the West-Indies to cohabit with a black woman. But Macaré did not fancy the idea.



Written in a different register

Some four months later the now newly-weds write to their mother(-in-law) Elisabeth Cornelia Cau, dowager of Dirk Macaré. Dirk Hendrik and Laurentia hope that their marriage will not displease her. The very short letter, dated the 14th of January 1781, contains not much more than a New Year's greeting. Compared to the frank letter to his brother-in-law, Dirk Hendrik approaches his mother in a very respectful and distant manner. He closes his letter with a very peculiar sentence to our modern view: "these are the wishes of those who do not dare to bother you any longer". To write to your mother in such a formal way; it really surprises us!

Continuation

Because the letters were never delivered the relatives must have been uncertain about the motives for this marriage. Dirk Hendrik, who had studied law too, followed his father's footsteps when he as well became bailiff of Middelburg after his return to Zeeland in 1785. He died quite young, at the age of 36, in 1792 and was buried in Serooskerke.

The letters are respectively found in box HCA 30-361, HCA 30-342 en HCA 30-350. The comment on this monthly letter is written by Tanja Simons.