

# Monthly Letter October 2009

## A hideous hurricane in the Caribbean



'The Great Hurricane of 1780' or the 'The Hurricane San Calixto II' is still on top of the list of the most devastating hurricanes in the Atlantic. Between 9 and 20 October 1780 it swept over large regions in the Caribbean. Wind-speeds of over 200 mph. and approximately 22.000 deadly victims have been reported. This disastrous hurricane is a topic in more than 50 letters from our corpus.

Some of our letter writers give a full report of the terrors that they had been through: *'until the 16th we had that terrible weather of thunder, lightning, wind and heavy rain as if the four elements would unite'*. Others describe just what they had heard or only briefly mention the hurricane and its effects. Eye-witnesses speak of a *'damage that no pen can describe'*, but of course they try to give their impression, for instance in the following section from a letter written from Saint-Eustatius:

*"A short while ago it pleased the Lord Almighty to show us his power. Here we had from 12 to 22 October of this year a very fierce wind & a heavy see that ruined a lot of houses and warehouses, yes even many ships were wrecked and many people were killed [...] the wall has been completely washed away by the sea and the back of the house has been left only on single struts, yes it was so heavy that the sea flew over our house but we may thank the Lord for his mercy that we have come off so well."*

Subsequently, the letter writer describes how severe the weather was on the other islands, for on Saint-Eustatius the hurricane had not reached its peak yet. The next section paints the situation on Martinique at first hand:

*"After we had been there for a while, on 12 October we were forced to leave the roadstead for a while because of a fierce wind [...] Because of this weather we left for the island of Martinique. Great damage had been done there: 154 houses on the beach were smashed to pieces by strong breakers, but the weirdest thing was to see a ship in the houses [...] The inhabitants told me that there had not been such a weather within living memory and a 120 years old castle, 6 to 8 foot deep in its foundation, had fallen down by the fierce wind."*

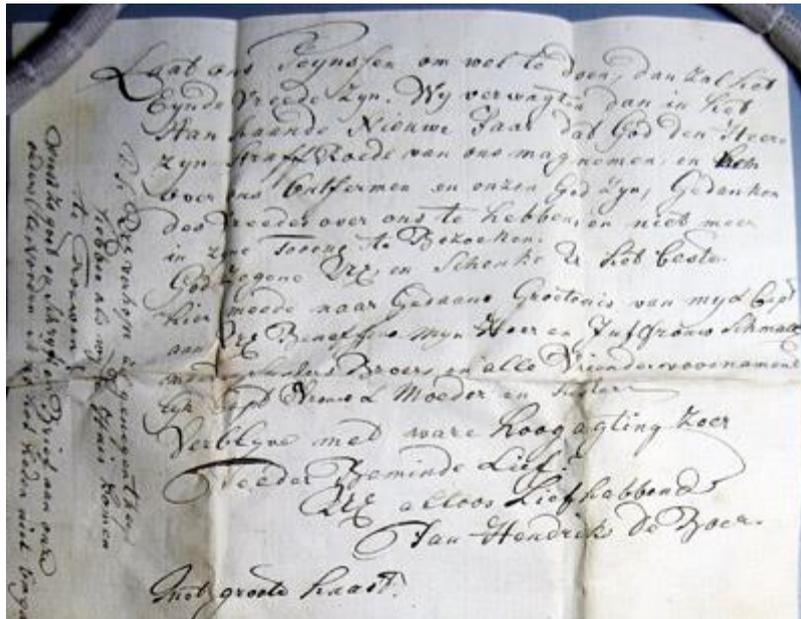
Of course many letter writers want to tell their loved ones at home that they are safe. A.J. van Halm, for instance, writes to his wife in Waalwijk:

*"Not many islands have been free from damage so it wouldn't surprise me if these tidings [that a lot of people have been killed] have reached Holland, but be convinced of the contrary: we are all in good health; there is no illness among the crew and I have not been hurt a finger."*

A very touching letter is written by captain Jan Roelofsz. de Groot who lost everything. He is concerned about his livelihood and writes to his employer:

*"It hurts me utmost in my hart and soul to lose such a beautiful ship & your fortune, but I can testify to God, and at all times to you that these accidents have not been caused by my seamanship, but only by Gods hand. I hope that you will not cast me out because of this accident. I can testify to you that the Almighty God has not only shown this to me, but to hundreds of ships of all nations, and people have fallen into similar accidents. It has made me poor, my goods and cargo are gone and lost without a penny insurance."*





Other letter writers pay attention to the hurricane, but they do not forget their own passions either. Jan Hendrik de Boer, for instance, writes to his tenderly beloved about the catastrophe and the many deceased. His letter is written in great haste but Jan Hendrik assures his Gesiena that she is never from his mind, not even for an hour. He even proposes to her. Since he puts his proposal in a postscript (see picture, on the left in the margin) that might strike us as not very romantic:

"P.S. I hope you are willing to marry me when we arrive at home?"

Lambertus de Koning is also concerned about matters of the heart. At first he gives a very detailed report of the October storm that made him face death more than once. Yet, by the end of his letter, he puts all his misery into perspective by swearing to his tenderly beloved darling that nothing caused him so much pain 'as the loss of your beautiful eyes would hurt me'. That he has not received a letter from her amiable hand since he has left bothers him very much.

Lambertus' letter may give us the impression that the hurricane was just a storm in a teacup compared to his personal grief. Yet, the many reports by eye-witnesses prove otherwise: they convince us of the devastating power shown by the Great Hurricane of October 1780, a devastating power that made a deep and unforgettable impression.

The comment on this monthly letter is provided by Tanja Simons.