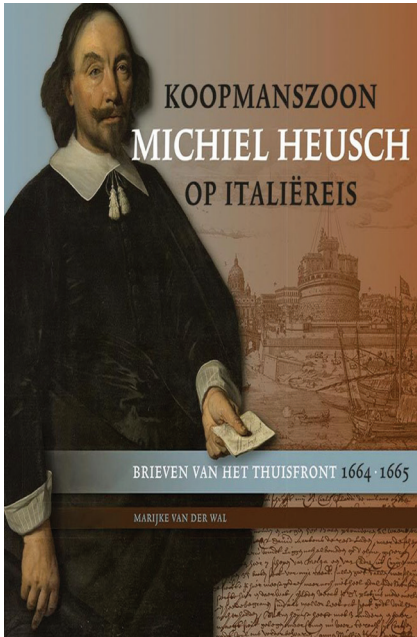


Review

Marijke van der Wal, *Koopmanszoon Michiel Heusch op Italiëreis. Brieven van het thuisfront, 1664-1665*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2019, 252 pp. ISBN 9789087047757.



Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the daily itineraries of many into a commute between bedroom, kitchen, and home office, allowing for the occasional raid of a corner supermarket, reading about the wanderlust of a young man on his Grand Tour feels somewhat like bittersweet escapism. In her richly illustrated coffee table book, *Koopmanszoon Michiel Heusch op Italiëreis*, historical linguist Marijke van der Wal examines the letters sent to Michiel Heusch on his educational voyage to Italy in 1664 and 1665. In these sunnier climes, Michiel, scion of a successful Dutch merchant family from Hamburg, fostered and rekindled business contacts and improved his language skills, invaluable undertakings for a future trade career. Van der Wal's edition is in itself a rare treat. Dutch Grand Tour journals have steadily appeared in print, but most travel letters remain confined to the archives. That fate is entirely undeserved, as letters present

ample material to investigate the social dynamics between parents and their itinerant children.

The provenance of Heusch's correspondence is intriguing. During the Anglo-Dutch Wars, when privateering was a common and legal tactic, corsairs often seized and looted enemy ships. Heusch's letters, part of a return shipment to his home town, were captured on the high seas and became part of the so-called Prize Papers. In 2015, the *Brieven als Buit* research project was initiated, which aimed to inventory and analyse this astoundingly large paper booty, kept today in the British National Archives in Kew, London. The approximately 38000 confiscated letters were written by Dutch men, women, and children from all walks of life, and allow researchers to probe the diversity of early modern

colloquial Dutch. While most authors and addressees do not reoccur in the vast Prize Papers corpora, offering but a brief glimpse into the homes of seventeenth-century sailors, the Heusch collection forms a rounded story of a young man abroad.

Van der Wal's anthology explores a variety of topics: the goals, tasks and day-to-day logistics of early modern travel, language-learning and travel advice, family affairs back in Hamburg, gossip, local and international news, trade networks and, as irony would have it, life during a plague outbreak. The letters sent to Michiel sometimes delve into the personal. They relate the sad news of his grandmother's funeral, his father's admonishments and his mother's worries. The letter dated 13 July 1663, for example, contains some touching lines about his mother's fears: 'We again recommend this: do watch out and make sure to avoid any danger. Mother is always very much worried and spills many tears for your sake. Let us know if you are in good health.'

Michiel's story ticks all the boxes of a traditional Grand Tour. The traveller is fascinated with Venice, for example, and ponders the best place to master his French. At the same time, the letters explore the edification of a future merchant. Michiel is asked to aid his cousin in his ventures and to help settle the estate of his late uncle. Many letters are strictly business and shift focus to the elder Heusch's trade opportunities in Hamburg, the bankruptcies of his competitors and contacts with foreign intermediaries. These passages are a means to better understand the intricacies of early modern trade networks and managing a family business. At the same time, they require rigorous contextualisation of names and numbers and often feel repetitive – the last chapter is aptly titled *Een herhaling van zetten* ('A repetition of moves').

Van der Wal was confronted by a series of difficulties presenting this anthology to a wider, layman audience. First and foremost is overcoming the collection's lacunar nature, a common shortcoming of historical correspondence. Michiel's own letters do not survive. Reading his father's advice and well-wishes therefore feels very much like eavesdropping on a telephone call, where you can only hear the replies and have to fill in the blanks. Similarly, many other letters were not present in the captured ship's cargo. Most of the elder Heusch's letters appear to be all accounted for, but unfortunately only a single note from his mother and sister still remain. In addition, the Heusch letters are riddled with trade jargon, borrowings, confusing foreign currencies, and elliptic sentences. Thankfully, Van der Wal has managed to provide clear explanatory notes and a comprehensive introduction that cut through most of the static. Fully comprehending the Heusch business savvy is nonetheless a difficult feat. It also begs the question if these specific letters about commerce are the most suitable for a popularising book.

Finally, as a historical linguist, Van der Wal is mainly interested in the language side of things. She explains spelling conventions, reflexive pronouns, and formulaic language. The bilingual situation in early modern Hamburg, where the constant dealings between Dutch and German merchants invariably influenced and altered language, is key to her analysis, as she highlights linguistic phenomena and loan words in each letter. For a layman to historical linguistics like myself, these comments shed new light on epistolary customs. One cannot help but think, however, that Van der Wal has had to curb her enthusiasm and is only scratching the surface here, especially as the overarching *Brieven als buit* project examines early modern colloquialisms in much more detail.

What remains is the formative journey of a young merchant on the road and his father's business dealings back home. While the letters do not make for the most accessible read and the reader cannot help but wonder about the missing voices in this tale, Van der Wal manages to assume the role of travel guide and present us with a variety of historical and linguistic topics pertinent to early modern mobility.

Alan Moss, Radboud University Nijmegen