

Review

Jan Simonis, Jaap Kottman, and Hans van Bommel (eds.), *Elsenburg, de verdwenen buitenplaats. Het ontstaan van het buitenleven aan de Vecht*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2020, 228 pp. ISBN 9789087048341.



In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, around four hundred wealthy merchants, regents, bankers, lawyers, and tax collectors, living along one of the fancy canals of Amsterdam, possessed a country estate. Having a ‘holiday home’ to stay during the summer months allowed a family to escape, amongst others, the filthy water with its unhealthy airs of Amsterdam’s waterways. Since inhaling bad odors, *mal aria* in Italian, was thought to make you very ill, it was best avoided. Thus, between June and September, people who had the financial resources left the city. Living in their country homes allowed them to lead a healthier life, away from the sordid city life of sinful pleasures.

Just a day’s travel away from Amsterdam, families could enjoy the fruits of the countryside. Country estates were usually located along a river or a constructed waterway, side

by side, like a string of pearls. The houses were relatively small, but the grounds surrounding them were large and designed for pleasure and profit. The gardens in front of a house consisted of elegant broderies and parterres, with clipped boxwood, topiary, flowers, waterworks, and various ornaments. On one side of the house, close to the kitchen, were the kitchen and herb gardens, and further along orchards and hothouses. Strolling along one would find fishponds and aviaries. The gardens provided food and fun for the entire family, as well as for passing friends and relatives. Owning an estate was promoted as ‘the most enjoyable, profitable, healthiest and even blessed way of life’ by the gardener Jan van der Groen in his 1669 book *The Dutch Gardener (Den Nederlantsen Hovenier)*. Such books idealised country life as good and honest enjoyment, which was profitable and

pleasurable, pious and virtuous. Escaping the city during the summer months became very popular amongst the rich merchants.

The book on Elsenburg (Alder Castle in English) presents the history of one of those vanished country estates along the River Vecht, close to Amsterdam. Through the lens of this particular estate and its owners, the authors explore the rise of country living in the Dutch Republic. The book introduces the 'real estate development' of country houses along the river and explains why wealthy inhabitants of Amsterdam opted for a second home. Not only the rise and the heydays of country estates are addressed, the authors also explain the decline of countryside living in the nineteenth century. The volume covers a period of around two hundred years, focusing on the detailed history of the house and its owners, the architecture, interiors, and gardens, and maps the broader socio-cultural setting of the phenomenon of the country estate.

One such real-estate developer was Jan Jacobsz Bal (1541-1624), a tanner and leather trader by profession. Tanning was a filthy and smelly occupation, and it took time and a lot of effort to process a hide into workable leather. Tanners doing the manual labor were placed at the lower end of the craft's society and were paid accordingly. However, as master or 'manager' of a workshop who sold the finished leather product, one could achieve a higher status and make an above average income. Bal changed his name to Huydecoper ('hide buyer') and rose to the city's regent class after the Alteration of Amsterdam in 1578. Together with his son Joan, Huydecoper started to buy up land and built a country estate called Goudestein (Golden Stone) along the River Vecht. The family investments in the Dutch East India Company (voc) brought them immense wealth, which was invested in real estate development along the banks of the Vecht. This involved buying farmlands, turning these wet lands into dry building sites, and parcel out plots to sell. The Huydecopers' next move up the social ladder was to purchase land with a title. Joan Huydecoper bought the title and village of Maarsseveen, also along the Vecht. From now on, the family name was Huydecoper van Maarsseveen. The book spends two chapters (chapters two and three) on this family's history, one of which is based on an article published in 1983. The Huydecopers did not own or live in Elsenburg though: it was actually one of their circa forty development projects.

Eight chapters are dedicated to the long history of Elsenburg's buildings and gardens. The book is written by five authors, who in conjunction discuss the Huydecoper family, the building histories of the subsequent mansions, and separately various chapters on the gardens. In doing so, the authors are moving back and forth in their discussion of the country estates' history. Three versions of Elsenburg were built in its two-hundred-year history. The first house, built in 1637, had to make way for a second and larger building around 1700, which was in turn torn down for a third edifice: in 1795 a new owner built a grand house that was demolished in 1812, when there were no buyers for the estate. Here, the book goes back and forth a few times. Chapters four and five discuss the first building, while in chapter ten the authors return to Elsenburg I to discuss its garden. The same happens with the two other versions of the estate and gardens. Besides the overlap, however, discussing a garden separately is missing the point of having a country estate: the ensemble of mansion and garden were seen as one, and therefore cannot be taken apart.

Chapter twelve focusses on the history of the village Maarsseveen and the country estates that were developed there. This brings us back to the Huydecoper family and their history, but it would have made more sense to group this chapter with chapters two and three, so as to have the whole entrepreneurial story of the Huydecoper family together.

The penultimate chapter places the phenomenon of country estates and their rise and decline in a broader socio-cultural setting. Chapter fourteen presents a kind of recap of the book, returning to the three versions of Elsenburg and their respective gardens. This time, the authors also draw attention to the social aspects of country house life: group culture, family ties, and marriage connections. The last section of this chapter is dedicated to the period after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, with the decline of the country estate in favour of the rise of the villa (fit for permanent habitation and manageable for a single family).

The authors show an enthusiasm for the history of Maarsseveen; two of them are also members of Maarsseveen's Historic Circle. Their field of expertise is local history rather than garden architecture or art history. At times, this leads to mistakes. On the painted portrait of Michiel Pompe van Slingelandt by Jacob Cuyp (chapter thirteen), for instance, the boy is not holding a peregrine falcon, but a kestrel. The first was a used for falconry, the second not. Similarly, in chapter fourteen, Willem Buytewech's painting titled *Elegant couples courting* (1616-1620) is not about a loving and faithful couple versus a lustful couple. As the Rijksmuseum website informs us, 'the seated woman tries to entice the young man by offering him rosebuds. He turns away from her, resting his hand on the head of his dog, his wise mentor. No harm will come to this young man. The other couple, however, choose wanton love; they leave the glove – a symbol of marriage – lying on the ground.' This book could have benefitted greatly from more rigorous editing to prevent such errors as well as the repetition and scattering of relevant information. Nevertheless, the authors have unearthed a most interesting local history and presented wonderful archival gems. Their passion for the history of Maarsseveen and the Vecht oozes from the pages of this book.

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