

Letter from the Editors

In the past two months Henk Wesseling (82) and George Winius (89) passed away: two admirable historians, though totally different in character. The following short note about these two men is written by a younger (but also aging) colleague who prides himself on having been their close friend and colleague in Leiden for many years.

In 1974, shortly after he was appointed to the chair of *Algemene Geschiedenis* (general history, which in those years really meant European history), Henk Wesseling founded the Center for the History of European Expansion and Reaction within the Leiden history department. Some fifteen years earlier the department had abolished its chair of colonial history, because in a time of decolonization it was deemed a relic of the past that should be buried. Yet, in an age in which Marxist approaches to past and present were focusing on such themes as ‘the development of the underdevelopment of the third world’, and were challenging historians to reconsider Europe’s historical relations, Wesseling deemed that the department’s decision to move away from the colonial past amounted to throwing the baby out with the bath water. He felt that, more than ever, European historians and archivists of former colonial powers had a task to fulfill. As custodians of hundreds of kilometers of shelves filled with invaluable archival and published materials about the world, they should not turn their backs on, but rather critically assess, the colonial past and decolonisation.

Instead of aiming to establish a new chair in overseas history—labels like global history and world history were not yet in vogue—with the help of *collega proximus* Ivo Schöffer, indologist Jan Heesterman, and sinologist Erik Zürcher, Wesseling created the Center for the History of European Expansion within the history department. This well-timed move was not welcomed by all of his colleagues, and actually met with some resistance within the department. I suppose that recently many American history departments have been witnessing the same reaction to the introduction of global history into the curriculum.

A small team of young lions was recruited: Pieter Emmer for the Atlantic World, Robert Ross for Africa, the undersigned for East and Southeast Asia, and, in addition to these, a documentalist, Gerard Telkamp, later succeeded by Jaap de Moor, who had first temporarily joined the Centre as a conscientious objector to military service. In 1977, George Winius came over from Florida and joined the history department as

a Lusitanian specialist with the tacit understanding that he would also research and teach about the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Under Wesseling's deft leadership, the new centre acquired almost immediate international recognition as a result of annual workshops on a variety of subjects attended by many famous historians such as Fernand Braudel, Henri Brunschwig, Jean-Louis Miège, Ronald Robinson, Chris Bayly, Niels Steengaard, William McNeill, Immanuel Wallerstein, Bob Darnton, Wolfgang Mommsen, Ashin Das Gupta, Om Prakash, Dharma Kumar, Zhang Zhilian, and Sartono Kartodirdjo, among many others. It strikes me that almost all of these historians have now become themselves part of the past.

The bilingual newsletter in French and English started by Piet Emmer was in 1977 replaced by the research journal *Itinerario* under the direction of George and myself. Initially the journal was sent free of charge to members of the international community, who in turn sent their own articles and books to the Leiden documentation center. Those were definitely different times! An interesting feature of the young *Itinerario* was—and remains—its published interviews with prominent historians. Winius (1991) and Wesseling (1995) both shared their views with *Itinerario* when they left Leiden: Henk left to become rector of the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies, while George left Leiden to retire and return to the United States.

Here I shall not venture to comment on what Henk and George said about themselves when interviewed; I shall merely try to characterize both of them in a few words. Henk Wesseling was a veritable multitasker. As an historian, he will be remembered as the author of widely-read studies on imperialism, the partition of Africa, French military, intellectual, and cultural history, and a gem of a biography of General De Gaulle. Yet he was also a great manager and keen academic mover and doer, initiator with Pieter Emmer of new projects such as the European summer schools. I was happy to co-organize with him and Chris Bayly the Cambridge, Leiden, Delhi, Yogya (CDLY) project for the comparative study of India and Indonesia, and the Transfer of Science and Technology Program.

For a considerable time, Henk contributed a biweekly column to the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, published thoughtful essays in literary periodicals, and was a gifted speaker on many official occasions. In addition to this, Henk and his wife Marijke were formidable hosts at their lovely house in Oegstgeest. Only one year before his death, a long debilitating illness notwithstanding, Henk published *Scheffer-Renan-Psichari*, a masterful biographical overview of intellectual developments in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. Last, but by no means least, Henk was a gourmet and lover of French wine who loved to share these pleasures with his friends and colleagues. *Ah, ces jours d'antan!*

The amiable George Winius could not have been more different. Gifted and precise writer that he was, he could be so loquacious in conversation that colleagues and even students would sneak off to avoid meeting him in the street. As co-founder of *Itinerario*, I treasure the hours we spent together with George holding forth about all kinds of interesting historical issues instead of focusing on the articles that we were supposed to be editing. One afternoon, George suddenly realized he had to present a

paper at a conference two days later and wondered whether I could possibly furnish him with an idea. On the spur of the moment we co-authored in one afternoon a short article that is still, surprisingly, quite often cited.

Apart from his scholarship about the Portuguese abroad, much of which have become standard works—including his original thoughts about the Portuguese “shadow empire”—George wrote *The Brats of Briarcliff*, a playful retrospective on his terribly spoilt youth as an only child in St. Louis.

After his early retirement from Leiden, George moved restlessly from one place to another, teaching at Brown University, Dartmouth College, and the University of Charleston, then moving to Portugal before returning to the USA several years later. He finally settled down in Florida. In the meantime, however, he continued work on what he called his ‘famous last words’ on the history of European expansion. Inspired by the courses on European expansion he had taken as a student at Columbia University in the nineteen fifties, he intended to publish his own final statement on the history of the overseas expansion of Europe. The good news is that George finished his manuscript just a few weeks before his death. The draft is now in the hands of his old friend and colleague Anthony Disney of LaTrobe University, in Melbourne, who has volunteered to edit it for publication.

In short, two very dissimilar careers of two very different historians, both of whom played instrumental roles in the early years of *Itinerario* and the Leiden Center for European Expansion. To Henk Wesseling’s delight, of the three young historians he selected in the 1970s, two were appointed extraordinary professors of Atlantic and African history. The third was invited to create the new chair of the history of Asian-European relations. With the appointment of my successor Jos Gommans in 2012, this was renamed the chair of Colonial and Global history: *plus ça change plus c’est la même chose*.

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