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‘The industrious Dutchie’: recording the experiences of first generation Dutch immigrants to New Zealand

Abstract:

This paper is based on an oral history project that records the identity perceptions of post-war Dutch immigrants as constructed through pre-arrival and early period experiences and sense of contribution to New Zealand.

These Dutch immigrants came to New Zealand from post-war Netherlands through an assisted passage scheme, which provided monetary and other support incentives from the Dutch government to those wishing to immigrate to New Zealand.

The incentive for this project arose from the concerns of the trustees of the Dutch Connection, Museum of Aspirations and Achievements in New Zealand who felt that the voices of these early immigrants along with their unique war and immigration experiences would be lost with their death. The oral history research methodology was selected as the best approach to record their unique stories. This technique guarantees minimum interference by the researcher and allows the sensitive nature of their personal narratives to be defined by their voices.

The research project focuses on the post-war construction of immigrants’ identities and the process of their adaptation, integration and formation of their new identities. A group of 24 elderly Dutch people was selected from a list provided by the commissioning organisation; their narratives are recorded in audio and visual formats.

A guiding questionnaire was drawn up based on preliminary research and interviews with related professionals to provide contextual information. The questionnaire was divided into three main parts: pre-arrival memories, experiences, perceptions and expectations; early arrival experiences and first impressions; sense of contribution as immigrants to their new country; and current perceptions of identity.

El holandesito trabajador: Grabación de las experiencias de la primera generación de inmigrantes holandeses a Nueva Zelanda

Abstract:

Este artículo está basado en un proyecto de historia oral que recoge las percepciones de identidad de inmigrantes holandeses de la posguerra, según se manifiesta a través de sus experiencias tanto previas a la llegada como de la primera etapa y a través de su sensación de contribución a Nueva Zelanda.

Estos inmigrantes holandeses llegaron a Nueva Zelanda desde la Holanda de la posguerra a través de un programa de viaje asistido, que proporcionaba ayuda económica y otros incentivos de apoyo por parte del gobierno holandés a aquellos que deseaban emigrar a Nueva Zelanda.

El incentivo para este proyecto nació de la preocupación de los administradores de la “Dutch Connection, Museum of Aspirations and Achievements” de Nueva Zelanda, que sentían que las voces de estos primeros inmigrantes junto con sus experiencias únicas de la guerra y de la inmigración se perderían cuando éstos murieran. Se seleccionó el método de investigación de historia oral como el mejor acercamiento para recoger sus historias únicas. Esta técnica garantiza la mínima interferencia del investigador y permite que la delicada naturaleza de sus narrativas personales sea definida por sus propias voces.

El proyecto de investigación se centra en la construcción de la posguerra de las identidades de los inmigrantes y del proceso de adaptación, integración y formación de sus nuevas identidades. Se seleccionó a un grupo de 25 personas mayores holandesas de entre una lista proporcionada por la organización que encargó el trabajo.

Se elaboró un cuestionario de guía basado en una investigación preliminar y en entrevistas con profesionales relacionados, con el objeto de proporcionar información sobre el contexto. El cuestionario se dividió en tres partes principales: recuerdos, experiencias, percepciones y expectativas de pre-llegada; primeras experiencias e impresiones de la llegada; sensación de contribución a su nuevo país como inmigrantes; y opiniones actuales de la identidad.

1. Introduction

The research aims to first record and then analyse the contribution of Dutch immigrants to New Zealand society. The focus of this research project is an audio and visual record of the perceptions and experiences of Dutch immigrants to New Zealand in the 1950s. This is recorded through personal narrations of experiences of their pre-arrival, early settlement, adaptation, integration, and finally, sense of contribution to New Zealand. The project is viewed through a lens which takes received opinion of the Dutch people as industrious and hard working and sets this archetype against the participants' experiences. The oral history research methodology was selected as the best way to document their personal narratives in audio and visual formats.

New Zealanders of Dutch descent comprise a significant proportion of the New Zealand population and it is generally accepted that they have assimilated extremely well into New Zealand society. However, the stories of their adaptation, assimilation and identity validation are uniquely personal and enlightening.

2. Background

Context of the project

The incentive for this project arose from concerns of the trustees of the Dutch Connection, Museum of Aspirations and Achievements. The Dutch Heritage Museum Trust was founded in 2005 by a group of elderly Dutch New Zealanders who wanted to ensure the preservation of the tangible and intangible evidence of Dutch culture. They felt that the voices of these early immigrants along with their war and immigration experiences needed to be captured. Many of these immigrants are now entering their twilight years and so recording their unique stories is increasingly an imperative. The researchers were approached with a request to record the oral histories of Dutch residents in Auckland.

Dutch immigration to New Zealand

The first significant Dutch immigration occurred following World War Two. The immigrants came from the Netherlands and Indonesia (formerly the Dutch East Indies) drawn by an assurance of greater opportunities and a better standard of living (see Schouten, 1992).

In the Netherlands, the Second World War had caused widespread devastation, in particular, high unemployment and a shortage of affordable housing. Indonesia was similarly affected; indeed, many migrants were former interns of Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. As a result, many were keen to immigrate to countries offering better prospects and for its part, the Dutch government offered

monetary and other support incentives to facilitate this. In return, New Zealand, with a population of about 1.5 million and a low birth rate, needed skilled migrants, particularly labourers, dairy and farm workers. The assisted passage scheme, known formally as the Assisted Migration Programme, operated for migrants with special skills – single men or women aged 18-35 - the only proviso being that migrants had to remain in the job assigned to them for two years. The initial quota of 2,000 migrants was quickly exceeded as the attraction of moving to a high income country became recognized. The 1950 Migration Treaty negotiated between the two countries was thus pragmatic and mutually beneficial. A subsequent scheme, the Nomination System, operated between 1955-1957 and allowed families to migrate, provided they paid their own way, and had a guaranteed job and accommodation (see Hartog & Winkelmann, 2003; Schouten, 1992).

Related research

The most recent and related research was carried out by the New Zealand Netherlands Foundation (NZNF) in the 1990s. These comprised: Stage 1: 25 first generation Dutch immigrants were interviewed by the NZNF (1992 - 1993) as one of the 1992 Tasman year projects. The project recorded the contribution of Dutch immigrants to New Zealand society for use as an archive research resource. Stage 2: 22 interviews were conducted by the NZNF (1999-2000), focussing on success stories and people who have made a significant contribution to New Zealand society.

3. Research Design & Methods

Participants

A purposeful, non-probability sampling strategy was used. Participants were selected from a specific population of interest – elderly, Dutch immigrants to New Zealand in the 1950s. We conducted 24 interviews based on oral history guidelines issued by the New Zealand Ministry of Culture & Heritage. All participants were Auckland residents.

The names of all participants were supplied by the commissioning body. Initially, the researcher phoned to introduce herself, explained the nature of the project, suggested possible lines of enquiry, obtained the interviewees signed consent and arranged a convenient time to conduct the interview. Others were contacted directly by the commissioning body. This solicitation procedure was more successful as elderly people often feel more at ease speaking to someone from their own community before giving consent.

Procedures

Data for this study were collected over four months. The interviewer used a topical protocol to guide conversation about the participants' immigration experiences. The guiding questionnaire focused on

identity perceptions as constructed through pre-arrival and early period experiences and sense of contribution to New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s. Each interview lasted between 1 - 3 hours (average 2 hours).

Interviews were conducted at the interviewees' home. A list of questions, along with an information and consent sheet, was sent to all participants prior to the interview with the aim of familiarizing them with the overall scope of the project and helping them recall and organize their memories.

The survey was informed by research on the history of Dutch immigration to New Zealand and elsewhere after WW2, and consultations with related professionals and others to provide contextual information. These included a New Zealand-based oral historian, a former Dutch immigration official and the trustees of the Dutch Museum who all provided feedback on the suitability of the questions. Each interview was recorded both on a digital audio recorder (MP3 player) and with a digital camera (Sony Hi 8) and later transcribed verbatim. In addition, images, historical items and other significant memorabilia were photographed.

Open ended and broadly structured questions consistent with oral history practices in qualitative research were used to facilitate the participants' narratives. Closed questions were used to collect demographic data. The protocol comprised four sections, following guidelines from the NZ Ministry of Culture & Heritage on conducting oral history research (see references) and taking into consideration similar past projects by the Netherlands Foundation and an Australian Dutch immigrants' project (DIMEX-DACC).

Part A focused on recording basic information about the interviewee and their family, pre-arrival experiences in Holland (war experiences, living conditions), reasons for immigrating and expectations of NZ (i.e. What were your expectations of life and work in NZ?). **Part B** focused on collecting information on early immigration experiences that shaped their lives in New Zealand, their first impressions and ways of integrating into the new culture (i.e. Did you feel any pressure to assimilate and/or discard your Dutchness?). Such questions related to how an immigrant constructs his/her identity in a new homeland and how that affects their perception of their identity on an identity continuum: construction – adaptation – integration – consolidation. **Part C** focused on their sense of contribution as Dutch immigrants to the NZ society. (i.e. The 'Industrious Dutchie' was a national archetype at some point in NZ. Do you think it reflects reality?). This section aimed at getting supporting evidence on the commonly known archetype of the Dutch as industrious, hard working immigrants. **Part D** focused on current perceptions of their identity. Some of the questions asked how much Dutchness they retained, how much of this Dutchness they instilled in their

children, and whether they consider themselves as Dutch, New Zealanders or both (i.e. Can you give me some examples of when you feel like a New Zealander and when a Dutch?). There was also a concluding part, **Part E** which was devoted to more specific questions that had not been explored: missing details; sensitive memories etc. It provided also a good opportunity to ask for any family photos that we could record with their permission.

Ethical and sensitive issues, such as working with elderly people were carefully considered and addressed with the selection of a research assistant who demonstrated the ability to work with this age group.

Mode of analysis

Whilst there are various modes of analysing oral history data, in this case we followed an intuitive interpretation (Calliou, 2004), paying particular attention to any data that supported the argument of the *industrious Dutchie*. McCracken's (1988) guidelines for analysis also provided useful guidance for analysis. Research by Orbe (2004) on negotiating multiple identities for first generation students informed the research by providing a useful set of criteria for identity analysis. Narratives that focus on identity negotiation were isolated using three criteria as identified by Owen (1984, quoted in Orbe): repetition, recurrence and forcefulness.

4. Findings/Analysis

This group comprised 13 women and 11 men of which 10 were of assisted passage and 13 on non-assisted or partially assisted passage, 6 were from the Dutch West Indies and 17 from Holland, 21 came in the 50s (2 came in the 60s and one came in the 70s, included in the list because of their age but later excluded from the data analysis). The average age at arrival was early to mid 20s and their current average age is late 70s. There were an equal number of single and married/engaged people upon arrival.

The analysis of transcripts generated three main themes regarding the identity and overall experiences of this group of post-war Dutch immigrants, namely:

- Adaptation (early experiences: positive/negative; first impressions; homesickness; discrimination; attitudes of New Zealanders)
- Integration/assimilation (high achievers; work ethic; contribution to NZ society; marriage to Dutch or Kiwi)

- Identity formation & substantiation (aspects of Dutch life kept; degree of ‘Dutchness’/‘Kiwiness’; identity now; children’s identity; citizenship; contradictory feelings of ‘Dutchness’ vs ‘Kiwiness’)

Adaptation

The migrants of the 1950s settled easily; they were a stable group of ambitious and generally high achievers. Their migration addressed serious issues of skill shortages by bringing much needed skilled labour at no additional cost to the host country. First impressions were generally positive; the new migrants liked their newly adopted country and found native New Zealanders friendly and co-operative. Many treated the migration as an exciting adventure.

Indeed, many knew very little about New Zealand, nor did they know anyone living here when they arrived. Having left the family support network behind, many experienced some degree of homesickness, especially women: ‘...My wife did, she was a bit homesick... I was also the first six months, but then I started to speak English a bit better and it makes it easier’.

Language was not a big issue, either they already spoke English or were willing to learn it quickly. Some mentioned difficulties with New Zealand English: ‘You know New Zealanders speak so differently! It’s not proper English is it? It’s ki-wi...’.

They came with open minds and few preconceptions of the country. Early impressions were mostly focused on how undeveloped the country was, not only in terms of infrastructure but also in terms of social life and values: ‘...we often felt we had stepped back fifty to a hundred year’, ‘... You could see these half drunks rolling out of the pubs and fighting ... and that was a normal sight which we certainly weren’t used to in Holland...’.

One of the first impressions coming into the country had to do with social life and eating. Most missed the familiar customs of Dutch coffee and good food which later prompted some of them to open cafes and restaurants: ‘You couldn’t get a good cup of coffee in the early days when you first came here...’. But for many this backwardness was seen as an opportunity: ‘... most of the people coming to New Zealand in the earlier days they all wanted to do something for themselves and when we came here we could see that the opportunities were here...’. They liked the sense of space, coming from Holland where there was shortage of housing, and found the possibility of owning their own home a dream come true: ‘...you could buy a house here on your weekly income ... What a marvellous system. This meant you had your home; you had a base, the Labour dream’. Most were accepting of their new country: ‘You’ve heard of the Abel Tasman legacy, that they’ve called us ‘the

silent immigrants' because we did not make waves, we sort of accepted out everything they dished out'.

(video clip)

Integration/assimilation

A comprehensive assimilation programme allowed the migrants to settle into their new homeland with relative ease. "The determination of Dutch migrants to assimilate completely into their adopted society is due in part to the Dutch character. Industrious, thorough, enthusiastic and conformist, they were determined to be the 'perfect' migrants, merging into the local community and becoming indistinguishable within a generation" (Schouten, 1992, p. 169).

The new settlers were generally keen to integrate into their new country, and encouraged to disperse widely throughout New Zealand. Generally, they experienced few difficulties integrating; their positive 'can do' attitude along with the ethic of hard work served them well as they and their families assimilated and adopted aspects of their new culture; '...we had to integrate and when you came here, that is what we do we integrated'. For some, the desire to assimilate meant they forsook their Dutch heritage and embraced their new-found Kiwi culture. Not all became members of Dutch clubs or social networks. Indeed, there was deliberate pressure from the New Zealand government to discard their Dutchness and blend in.

There is a consensus that the Dutch are hard working – a view confirmed by our research; immigrants are often more motivated to work harder as they have to start from zero. However, strong traditions of British industrial relations and struggles to assert workers rights meant that the trade union movement was strong in New Zealand. As a result, the Dutch were often criticised for working too hard and told to slow down: '...The unions nearly went on strike against the Dutch people because they worked hard', '....the foreman came and said 'oh you work far too hard, you upset the whole system', 'It was actually easy work, because in Holland in those days when you were in the building trade you go, go, but here ... they take it easy, go to the toilet, have a smoke. I was told 'Theo. you work too bloody hard'. But in those days I couldn't speak much English, so what do you do but work, work, work...?'

Language was an issue in terms of integration but all participants learnt their new language quickly as they considered it important for their integration: 'I always said to myself at the beginning too, if you want to stay here you've got to learn that language boy. That's the only way of communicating and selling yourself, got to learn English'. Male immigrants commented on the language problem

when it came to looking for a local girlfriend or partner: ‘There weren’t a lot of young girls here. And it was hard to make contact with girls here because you also had a language problem’

Marriage was a way of integrating into local society; however most of the early immigrants either came married or married a Dutch person soon after their arrival. ‘they said ‘why didn’t you marry a New Zealander’ and I said ‘nobody asked me’. It’s true ...I guess when you met some Dutch person you felt more alike in a lot of things’. The drive to succeed was not often shared in mixed marriages which often failed. This contributed to a feeling of dissatisfaction with the country as it was seen as a failure to integrate. Those who did marry a non-Dutch person appeared to experience difficulties of assimilation as cultural/social differences were harder to deal with at relational level: ‘... our marriage was a disaster. And that came I think more through our backgrounds too, different backgrounds, different cultures... But she was not an industrious type’.

Many migrants were assiduous in maintaining their Dutch cultural roots – teaching the Dutch language to their children, cooking Dutch food and preserving the significant religious traditions of Christmas and Easter. Dutch groups were common and many migrants found support from regular meetings. They allowed the migrants to socialise, exchange information about jobs and accommodation – they served as informal networking organisations. This evidence is in contrast to a belief that the 1950s migrants were a ‘lost generation’ whose suppression of their Dutch heritage eased the process of assimilation (Settling in, 2007).

A recurrent theme is the desire of these first generation immigrants to assimilate their children into New Zealand society and one way of doing this was not to speak Dutch at home; many regretted this later: ‘...This is for me a great regret; I now feel we made a massive mistake there ... we were determined our kids were going to integrate into school and we didn’t pressure them about the Dutch, which I’m now sorry about’.

There were some immigrants that felt trapped, who although not happy here were not sure if they could fit back in the old country either: ‘...No, no, I would never go back, I’ve been back, it took me thirty-eight years before I went back,... Holland is not the place for me anymore. If I left here I would not know where to go’.

Some experienced discrimination at the beginning of their stay others found people most hospitable and friendly. Most had few regrets about coming to New Zealand or desire to return to Holland. Indeed, some commented that they felt they would not be welcome in Holland if they returned. For others who did revisit Holland, the experience was good but they were equally pleased to return to New Zealand.

There was a feeling that the Dutch contributed to diverse aspects of New Zealand society: ‘The Dutch probably on the whole have changed the feeling of a lot of New Zealanders, that there is a little bit more in the world than just growing sheep and cows, and doing a bit of fishing, the Dutch have brought to begin with jolly good coffee and restaurants too’. Farming was an area where Dutch immigrants excelled. Many had grown up on farms and found it easy to apply their skills: ‘There was a lot of farming in New Zealand, farming country, its things you know if everything else doesn’t work out in my own trade you can always go back to farming...’.

Opinion was split between those participants who were modest about their accomplishments and did not feel they were high achievers and others who were less reticent: ‘They are high achievers, a lot of them, but the Dutch were ignored by the government and basically by everybody else’, ‘...I think the Dutch were high achievers, they were good employees. I don’t think that any Dutchmen went out specifically as high achievers but they realised that when they did their normal work they achieved a bit better than the average Kiwi. ..If you had a Dutchman on a job you could rely on him a bit better’.

Overall, Dutch immigrants are considered to be one of the most successful groups to have integrated into New Zealand: ‘Dutch people seem to have integrated much easier than the other ethnic people. I did it myself because seeing as we were going to stay here anyhow; the sooner we integrated with other people the easier it was for us too’, ‘...the Dutch would be one of the best races of immigrants they’ve ever had for this country... I think that we did very well for the country, the country did well with us too. We were good mixers.

(video clip)

Identity formation and validation

The research identified ambivalent feelings regarding the extent to which participants retained their Dutchness or embraced being a Kiwi suggesting an enduring ambivalence in terms of their identity and nationhood. For some their Dutchness faded with time as they became increasingly integrated, for others, especially those retiring to the Dutch village of Ons Dorp, Henderson in West Auckland, it has remained. Indeed, some became New Zealand citizens and others retained their Dutch citizenship, seeing anything less as a form of second-class citizenship. (They were not allowed to have dual citizenship). Although most describe a positive experience, and want to be called Kiwis, they often made statements that contradict this, either by indicating that they have kept their Dutch passport, or arguing that even if they want to be seen as Kiwis others will always perceive them as foreigners, reminding them that they are different. Some seem to be happy with a dual identity: ‘there

are a lot of things where I feel I'm more a New Zealander and then on the other hand there's still a lot of Dutch in me...' Others preferred the term 'world citizens' as a more accurate explanation of their nationality. 'I feel myself more like a world citizen. [Its] nothing particularly to do with a particular state or nation'.

One respondent, although very disappointed by his immigration experiences, was determined to be called a New Zealander: 'English, more a New Zealander than Dutch. I get remarks made over here in the village about 'why the hell don't you speak Dutch'? Several gave practical reasons like work for becoming a New Zealand citizen: '...it was seen as better to be a New Zealand citizen to get on in that company. So we got our citizenship. A lot of Dutchmen got the citizenship as soon as possible'. While others were happy to become naturalised in a genuine desire to integrate: '...we're Kiwis. My father was very insistent on that, he said this country is good to us and we're going to be good to it and we're going to be Kiwis'.

The element of contradiction is evident in those who, whilst considering themselves Kiwis '...we're still Dutch. I was going to for a while, but there's no advantage for us anymore,...', still have Dutch citizenship: 'I'm kiwi by choice. That's how I actually call myself'. Keeping a Dutch passport was very important to some of them: 'I still have a Dutch passport and I wouldn't change it for all the tea in China'. Some, despite the sense of pride in terms of their achievements and contribution, do not feel fully integrated, accepted or appreciated by the Kiwis: 'I admire people who have totally settled but I've never had that feeling... With hindsight ... I should never have left'. Others bridged the cultural divide very effectively: 'We just got on with and we kept our Dutchness in the Dutch group and we became kiwis with the New Zealanders'. Another stressed the potency of her Dutchness: 'The Dutch nationality still is foremost. I'm happy to live here and I think my children are very grateful that I emigrated from the Netherlands but personally I still feel very Dutch'.

Some found that as they get older, they revert to Dutch ways or come to terms with who they are: '... I've found you're still who you are, I'm still Dutch. I can communicate with anybody in New Zealand but I will not be a real Kiwi...' 'Often, the degree of successful integration is measured by a certain pride in their children's achievement and 'Kiwiness': 'I'm happy I've come to New Zealand, and my kids are happy too, they really feel like kiwis, they wouldn't say they're Dutch, they're kiwis'. This generation of immigrants, despite integrating well into New Zealand society, have kept in touch with home, either by regular correspondence and/or visiting home as often as they could: 'So every few years, I worked and saved money and went back again, spent a few weeks there. Came back here, worked again, next trip'.

(video clip)

5 Analysis

Industriousness is a common thread which is woven through the tapestry of these personal narratives. One may propose that the possession of a strong work ethic assisted the adaptation process on arrival in a foreign country, a ‘can do’ ‘lets get on with it’ attitude that proved more enduring than the occasional and inevitable negativity caused by challenging circumstances. First impressions were shaped by common feelings of positivism which allowed the migrants to welcome the new opportunities they met in a constructive and optimistic manner.

In terms of integration and assimilation, it is clear that the characteristic Dutch quality of industriousness served the migrants well. They were a sociable group who mixed easily with their new compatriots apart from occasional rebukes for working too hard in a strongly unionised Kiwi society. Dutch language, food and culture enriched an otherwise drab New Zealand society of the 1950s and contributed a distinctive allusion to a shared European heritage. A certain diffidence is apparent when questioned about the extent to which migrants see themselves as high achievers yet theirs is a record of considerable accomplishment in challenging times.

Indeed, one may even suggest that the migrants worked diligently to construct and validate their identity; experiencing varying and intrinsically personal degrees of ‘Dutchness’ and ‘Kiwiness’. Some retained their Dutch citizenship while others embraced New Zealand nationality in its entirety. For a third group, it evinced ambivalent feelings of cultural belonging and the articulation of the phenomenon ‘world citizen’ to explain a culturally uncomfortable dilemma. Aspects of Dutch life were retained or discarded in equal measure yet once decided were practised with typical Dutch vigour.

These migrants’ stories, although sharing common threads, are all unique; they are coloured by personal circumstances and historical context. Although their migration was primarily motivated by survival and the desire of betterment under challenging post-war conditions, each one of them built a unique life in their new homeland that contributes to the rich tapestry of contemporary New Zealand society.

Conclusions

The recordings will be used in a number of ways: as an archive research resource by the Dutch Museum Trust Board who commissioned the research; for radio documentaries; for further publications on Dutch immigrants in New Zealand; for a possible audiovisual exhibition and finally for future reference and research by social historians. These personal narratives thus form a unique

resource that will shed light on the distinctive character of Dutch settlers and their contribution to New Zealand society.

In addition, the researchers experimented with giving an image to the recorded voice through the use of an audiovisual camera with the aim of producing a documentary; thus allowing the interviewee to also become a performer. This will provide material for further exploration and analysis.

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