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## Willem de Clercq's limitations and ambitions: his tenure as secretary of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij, circa 1824

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## Willem de Clercq's limitations and ambitions:

### his tenure as secretary of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij, circa 1824\*

#### I Introduction: Willem de Clercq on his way to a new post

Willem de Clercq was born in 1795 in Amsterdam where, following his father's death in 1817, he led the family's grain trading firm S & P de Clercq. In the city's business circles he was a well-known merchant and appreciated for his knowledge. An example of this is his fourteen-page *Memorandum on the improvement of the state of trade in Amsterdam* (1823) written at the request of the Governor of the northern part of the province of Holland.<sup>1</sup>

In the newspaper *Opregte Haarlemsche Courant* of 1 April 1824 De Clercq read about King Willem I's decision to found a company to further trade, industry and agriculture in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands), of which he had become king in March 1815. The initiative was called the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij (Netherlands Trading Society; hereafter NHM). De Clercq remarked in his diary: "Like a lightning flash it went through my soul, could this also mean something for me". At that time the grain trading business was far from prospering and the continued existence of his family's firm was uncertain.<sup>2</sup>

De Clercq began his campaign with great energy. On 7 April, on the recommendation of Minister of State W.F. Roëll, he had an audience with the King, who knew of his Memorandum. De Clercq had become acquainted with Roëll in Amsterdam some years before; they often discussed trade. From January 1820 until April 1824 Roëll chaired the State Commission for the review of import and export duties.

De Clercq registered for NHM shares as the new company had to obtain its capital by issuing shares. Lists were deposited with various Chambers of Commerce and Industry so that interested parties could register for shares. From the start there was enormous interest, not only in the Northern Netherlands but also in the Southern Netherlands, especially in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent. The initial capital was

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<sup>1</sup> IISG, Bijzondere Collecties 393, Collectie W. de Clercq, Amsterdam, no. 5. W.A. de Clercq, *Willem de Clercq (1795-1844)*, Amsterdam 1999, 152-153. See also M. van Tielhof, *The 'mother of all trades'. The Baltic grain trade in Amsterdam from the late 16th to the early 19th century*, Leiden 2002, 312-313.

<sup>2</sup> Willem de Clercq left an extensive series of *Particuliere aantekeningen* ('Personal notes') kept at Réveil Archive, U.B. Amsterdam (UvA). These diaries cover the years 1811 to 1844 and are an important contemporary source, thanks to De Clercq's regular and detailed notes on his reading material and people and events in Dutch society and abroad. A digital version is on <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/dagboekdeclercq> (hereafter: *Dagboek De Clercq*). *Dagboek De Clercq*, 1 April 1824: 'Daar ging het mij als een bliksemstraal door de ziel of dit ook iets voor mij zou kunnen opleveren'. W.A. de Clercq, *Willem de Clercq*, 170-172. For an analysis of the firm S & P de Clercq, see M. van Tielhof, *The 'mother of all trades'*, 302-312.

eventually set at 37 million guilders, with the King as the main shareholder.<sup>3</sup> From early May onwards De Clercq often travelled to The Hague as one of the elected representatives of the Amsterdam shareholders for meetings concerning the founding of the NHM. These founding meetings, and the various receptions and dinners involved<sup>4</sup>, gave De Clercq the perfect opportunity to expand his Amsterdam trade network in a political environment. He had another audience with the King in the summer, at which De Clercq's *Memorandum* and the NHM were discussed. Undoubtedly in preparation for the new post, De Clercq read a great deal about the Dutch East Indies and the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which was regarded as the NHM's precursor.<sup>5</sup>

The King, who at that time still ruled by royal decree, adopted the Articles of Association on 18 August 1824. Shortly after this De Clercq was appointed secretary. De Clercq had successfully achieved his goal by making his interest in the NHM known and by using his network relations; he felt that he owed his appointment to Roëll's advice and intercession.<sup>6</sup>

## II Establishment of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij

Between 1821 and 1824 a number of institutions were founded with the aim of uniting the North and South economically: the Fonds ter aanmoediging der Nationale Nijverheid, the Société Générale, the Amortisatie-syndicaat and, in particular, the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij. The NHM was to be the *motor* of the Dutch economy and had various tasks: it was a general import and export body, an economic information service for domestic and foreign business news and an advisory body to the government. Its main task was certainly the restoration of trade with the East.<sup>7</sup> In short, the NHM was an independent economic company, but one with close ties to the government.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J.L. van Zanden, A. van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914. Staat, instituties en economische ontwikkeling*, Amsterdam 2000, 139-140; W.M.F. Mansvelt, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, Haarlem 1924-1926, part I, 67-74. The Hague, Nationaal Archief, 2.20.01 Archief van de NHM, inv.no. 3775 Register van inschrijving van aandeelhouders (1824): Amsterdam no. 571 W. de Clercq.

<sup>4</sup> W.A. de Clercq, *Willem de Clercq*, 175-183.

<sup>5</sup> W.A. de Clercq, *Willem de Clercq*, 176, 181. According to J.L. van Zanden and A. van Riel only the large number of shareholders is reminiscent of the founding of the VOC in 1602; in all other matters the circumstances were 'radically different', see: *Nederland 1780-1914*, 139-140.

<sup>6</sup> *Dagboek De Clercq*, 11 October 1824. I am grateful to Marian Schouten (Huygens ING) for drawing my attention to her article *Van vrij koopman tot subalterne klerk. Willem de Clercq in 1824* (2014), see on: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/dagboekdeclercq/Willem%20de%20Clercq%20in%201824.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 6 'Revolutie in Noord en Zuid (1780-1830)', by J. Roegiers and N.C.F. van Sas in: *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*. Edited by J.C.H. Blom and E. Lamberts, Amsterdam 2014, 269-310, 304-305; T. de Graaf, *Voor Handel en Maatschappij, Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, Amsterdam 2012, 39-40.

<sup>8</sup> J. Koch, *Koning Willem I 1772-1843*, Amsterdam 2013, 362-363: 'Nog net geen staatsbedrijf' (Little short of a state-owned company), 402. In the original Royal Decree the ties to the government were significantly looser, see: W.M.F. Mansvelt, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, part I, 77-79. N.C.F. van Sas, *Onze Natuurlijkste Bondgenoot. Nederland, Engeland en Europa, 1813-1831*, Groningen 1985, 231 footnote 4, about the great personal involvement of the King in the founding of the NHM.

By September 1824 all the appointments to the board of the NHM, consisting of a chairman-director, four directors, each with their own department, and a secretary with no vote, had been made. After appointing three Amsterdam-based board members with an affinity with trade – Willem Gerrit van der Poll (1763-1836) as chairman-director, Gerrit Schimmelpenninck (1794-1863) as director and De Clercq as secretary – the King continued his search for suitable candidates for the position of director further ‘South’. He appointed Charles Pieters (1782-1863) from Ghent, Roch Cenie (1777-1854) from Antwerp and Hendrik van der Houven (1773-1852) from Rotterdam. Cenie and Pieters had, like De Clercq, made known their interest in the NHM.<sup>9</sup>

To the great disappointment of the Amsterdam shareholders, the NHM’s offices were not based in Amsterdam, but in The Hague – more centrally in the Kingdom – at premises on Noordeinde, close to the royal palace.<sup>10</sup> For his new position De Clercq moved from Amsterdam to The Hague. His first day in office was 2 September 1824; by going into employment he ceased to be a free merchant.

### III De Clercq’s tenure as secretary of the NHM: limitations and ambitions - research question

According to the NHM’s Articles of Association the secretary had to be a Dutchman permanently residing in the Kingdom, possess civil and political rights, be competent in trade, not be in charge of trading elsewhere, hold fifteen nominal NHM shares and swear loyalty to the NHM. The secretary’s duty was to assist all directors and the advisory board (made up of the directors and commissioners), and act as secretary at all their meetings. He was not allowed to take part in the deliberations. The rules and regulations agreed in February 1825 specified the main secretarial responsibilities: besides opening, recording, distributing and dispatching mail, these included taking and reading minutes of the meetings and co-signing agreements.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear from the above that, from a formal perspective, the opportunities to wield an influence were rather limited. To De Clercq’s disappointment his secretarial responsibilities were not yet very extensive in 1825.<sup>12</sup> This period of ‘calm’ did on the other hand allow him to immerse himself in acquiring the knowledge he felt was important for his position as secretary. This suited De Clercq very well as it was also NHM’s brief to act as an economic information service. De Clercq had a passion for reading and a strong interest in historical works, travel journals and Dutch, French, German and English literature.<sup>13</sup>

As the acquisition of knowledge from written sources is more extensively recorded than in the case of oral sources, I will focus on the former. The following two questions are relevant: how did De Clercq get

<sup>9</sup> W.M.F. Mansvelt, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, part I, 111-115; T. de Graaf, *Voor Handel en Maatschappij*, appendix IV Directeuren en commissarissen. The Hague, Nationaal Archief, 2.02.01 Staatssecretarie, inv.nos. 2047 (11-12 September 1824 - Cenie) and 2054 (19 September 1824 – Pieters).

<sup>10</sup> W.M.F. Mansvelt, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, part I, 76-79, 115-116; *Dagboek De Clercq*, 4-5 October 1825.

<sup>11</sup> *Artikelen van overeenkomst voor de Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, K.B. 18 augustus 1824, no. 138, and *Huishoudelijk Reglement voor de Directie der Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, K.B. 4 februari 1825, no. 91.

<sup>12</sup> *Dagboek De Clercq*, March, November 1825.

<sup>13</sup> M.H. Schenkeveld, *Willem de Clercq en de literatuur*, Groningen 1962, 14-15, 69.

his information, did he for instance orientate himself transnationally? And what did he do with his new acquired knowledge? These questions fall into the new research field of “information history”, in which Toni Weller is a leading researcher. She describes the field as the study of “how it [= information] was understood, used, organised, managed, collected, censored, feared, revered, published, disseminated, presented, displayed”.<sup>14</sup> Another distinction can be made between information and knowledge: “knowledge is an accumulation of information. Whereas information comprises a flow that changes rapidly, knowledge is a stock that changes only incrementally”.<sup>15</sup> Mapping the knowledge that De Clercq found important for his position as secretary is a new research question which will make De Clercq’s key position in Dutch economic and political life more explicit.

#### IV Building a personal *knowledge* network<sup>16</sup>

De Clercq initially acquainted himself with the field through prominent, internationally influential British periodicals: “It is exceedingly pleasant that we now have the Quarterly Review & Edinburgh Review, as well as the Asiatic Journal at the Library. I always learn a great deal from the Reviews & Asiatic Journal,” he writes. The renowned *Revue Encyclopédique* was another important source of information to him. These periodicals, all founded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, offered the reader articles, book reviews and bibliographic information and played an important role as centres or nodes for the distribution of literature. De Clercq made sure he was well-informed about recent publications and was clearly on the lookout for writings related to his new area of work. “Voor de HM” or “voor de Maat.” [for the Trading Society] he would jot down, or he would note that he should be at least a little familiar with Hall & Raynall “weges Indië” [because of the Indies]. He made a note of titles about Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, the colonial history of Portugal in Asia and other topics. Apart from acquainting himself with the overseas territories in the East and the West and enlarging his knowledge about them, De Clercq was also interested in political issues from the very recent history of the Netherlands, in particular the revolutionary period at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Batavian-French period. On his reading list we find the Dutch authors Adriaan Kluit, Cornelis Rogge and Samuel Wiselius.<sup>17</sup> Something of the way in which De Clercq used his newly acquired knowledge is already evident in his review of a pamphlet by former merchant Pieter de Haan, where he writes:

“I have read Pieter de Haan's *Het handelstelsel van Java met koophandel, scheepvaart en fabriekstaat van Nederland, in betrekking gebragt*. The pamphlet is somewhat rambling, with too many repetitions. There

<sup>14</sup> T. Weller, *Information history – an introduction: exploring an emergent field*, Oxford 2008, 4 (citation) and 25-26 Conclusions chapter 1. See also her ‘Introduction’ and ‘Conclusion’ in: *Information history in the modern world. Histories of the information age*, ed. by T. Weller, Basingstoke 2011, 1-12, 199-203.

<sup>15</sup> Cited from: W.H. Starbuck and P. Porrini, ‘Information and knowledge: organizational’, in: *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, Amsterdam etc. 2001, 7453.

<sup>16</sup> This section is based on research I did for a paper in 2014; a shortened Dutch version of this paper, titled *Netwerken voor de staat*, is on <https://www.historici.nl/nieuws/uitgelicht-resources-dagboeken-van-de-clercq> (published 27 november 2014). Remind the publications *The Dutch trading companies as knowledge networks*. Ed. by S. Huigen, J.L. de Jong and E. Kolfin, Leiden-Boston 2010 and *Centres and cycles of accumulation in and around the Netherlands during the early modern period*. Ed. by L. Roberts, Zürich 2011.

<sup>17</sup> *Dagboek De Clercq, 1825* (search for specific words).

is much truth in it and I particularly agree with two of his conclusions. 1. that the freedom of trade professed by England is not really a freedom, but an attempt to deprive us of what little we still possess. 2. that cotton has been hitherto neglected in the most irresponsible manner by our merchants, and I add a third conclusion, that compared to all other goods, the NHM has shipped too few cotton linnens to the Indies and should forcibly ensure that a warehouse for cotton is built at the *Factorij*".<sup>18</sup>

Not only his book reviews and summaries are indicative of De Clercq's acquisition of knowledge, his references to the writings of others are as well. I shall give two examples of this. In December 1825, while discussing Amsterdam's role in trade, De Clercq wrote "because regarding all these causes one can safely refer to Horstmann's 'lets voor de handel'". In the same discussion, he wrote: "See Barend Klijn's letters to me regarding sugar".<sup>19</sup>

## V Concluding remarks

In this phase of my research it is a real challenge for me to give specific examples of what Willem de Clercq did with his newly acquired information and how he used this knowledge to wield an influence in the public domain in which he performed his job as secretary of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij. On his first day in office, 2 September 1824, De Clercq decided to keep a secret business diary as well. Unfortunately, in 1886 his two sons Stephanus and Gideon decided to destroy these *Confidentieele Aantekeningen* (Confidential notes) on exciting business matters.<sup>20</sup> I expect the examples to become clearer when De Clercq gains influence over the company and power as a voting member within the board. This happens for the first time in 1827 when he took the place of director Cenie during his long-lasting illness. In 1831 he is finally appointed director when the Kingdom collapses after the Belgian Revolution in 1830.

My first aim now is to further explore De Clercq's network-building through written sources of information from a transnational perspective. Knowledge is power.

Marijcke Schillings

Amsterdam, Huygens ING, March 2017

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<sup>18</sup> *Dagboek De Clercq*, 9 November 1825. "Het werkje is enigszins diffuus en met te veel herhalingen. Veel waars is erin en vooral stem ik met twee van zijn conclusies in 1/ dat de voorgewende handelsliberaliteit van Engeland geen liberaliteit is, maar wilzucht om ons het enige dat wij nog bezitten te ontnemen 2/ dat de tak der Kat lijnen door onze kooplieden tot nu toe op een onverantwoordelijke wijze verwaarloosd is en voeg ik er ten 3e bij dat de HM ook in vergelijking met al het andere te weinig katoen lijnwaden naar Indië gezonden heeft en met kracht moet zorgen dat er een magazijn van dezelve bij de Factorij komt".

<sup>19</sup> *Dagboek De Clercq*, 1825. De Clercq is referring to Arend Horstman, *lets over en voor den koophandel van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 1824-1825, 2 parts. Horstman was a member of the Chamber of Commerce. Nine letters from Barend Klijn to De Clercq from the years 1824-1826 have been preserved, De Clercq Collection, Réveil Archive, U.B. Amsterdam, especially 19 and 26 September 1825. The brothers Hendrik and Barend Klijn from Amsterdam ran a sugar factory together.

<sup>20</sup> W. A. De Clercq, *Willem de Clercq*, 184, 220.

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