

1618 AND THE WEST INDIES COMPANY

by Jacob Gelt Dekker, 12 February 2009, MOWIC conference in Curacao

In 1618 an old man lost his head and a young man was born. These two men influenced the West Indies Compagnie of the Republic of the Netherlands more than any other man in history

Maurits, Count of Nassau, Prince of Oranje and Stadholder of the Republic of the United Netherlands was ambitiously lusting for a crown as king of The Netherlands. His chances diminished dramatically when Secretary of State, Raadspensionaris Johan van Oldenbarneveldt, brokered a cease fire with Spain in 1609 and aimed for a lasting peace. Maurits needed a feisty navy to fight his arch enemy, King Phillipps II of Spain and had to do away with van Oldenbarneveldt.

In a carefully orchestrated coup d'etat, Maurits used a the pretext of a theological quibble between Gomaris and Arminius, concerning predestination and free will to get the old Secretary of State arrested for treason, and in a show trial convicted and decapitated.

With the cease fire- lobby out of the way, Maurits founded the West Indies Company and raised sufficient capital from the member states, in 1621. Immediately, the WIC became a legendary war machine against the Spanish, Portuguese, British, Barbarians and French. Maurits died in 1625 and was succeeded as Stadholder by his cousin, Frederick Hendrik and his wife very ambitious Amalia Von Solms, who equally much lusted for a crown as Maurits had done.

A ruthless pirate Piet Hein joined the WIC fleet in 1621 as lieutenant-admiral and sailed for South America where he occupied Salvador de Bahia, the capital of Brazil precluding a total occupation of the colony by the Dutch in (1630-1654).

Hein's most significant contribution to the WIC came in 1628 when he drove a Spanish fleet laden with silver, gold and precious stone into the Bay of Matanza in Cuba. The loot he captured was over 12 million Dutch guilders, in those days an astronomical amount. Hein himself did not get to enjoy it very much since he was killed in action at Dunkirk fighting local pirates in 1629.

Admirals Tromp and De Ruyter carried on the fame of the WIC fleet and extended the sphere of influence to the Barbary Coast all the way to Istanbul, the West Coast of Africa and Curacao. In 1634, Curacao, as the New Amsterdam of the Caribbean, became the new center of WIC trade and warfare. The Peace of Munster of 1648, did not diminish the WIC efforts, especially since the death of Frederick Hendrik in 1647. His son, Willem II was determined that the crown of the rich Netherlands would never escape him and he set out to re-enforce the WIC fleet and expand war efforts. With his sudden death of 1654, a total absence occurred from the Netherlands stage of the Princes of Orange that lasted till 1672, when an 18 year old Willem III became Stadholder, in a year of total disaster. The Republic was attacked by France, England, and the Bishop of Munster. Willem III followed in the footsteps of his ancestor, Maurits, and had the Secretary of State and his brother, the Brothers Witte de Wit, arrested and lynched by an angry mob of Oranje-loyalists in The Hague.

That was also the year when the WIC- war machine became exhausted and filed for bankruptcy. Only in 1675 a new company was formed ; this time only as a trading company.

The young man who was born in Haarlem 1618, was Willem Balthasar Coymans, the son of a rich trading and banking family. We know little about Willem Balthasar except that he admired his uncle Jasper Coymans who was arrested in 1631 for stealing tulip bulbs in a garden between the Heren- and Keizersgracht in Amsterdam. By that time the Coymans family had invested the formidable amount of 300,000 Dutch guilders in tulips.

In 1640 at the age of 22, Willem Balthasar had himself portrayed by Frans Hals, just before he left for Cadiz. The portrait of a insolent flamboyant young man can still be admired at the National Gallery in Washington DC. It was somewhat unusual that a Dutch heretic protestant young man could set up office in Cadiz, the Phoenician city on the threshold of Spain and Portugal, both countries The Netherlands was fighting a bloody war with.

Willem Balthasar made his in-route into Spain, by trading and exchanging prisoners of war for the WIC. In those days POW-camps did not exist. Captives were exchanged or sold to the Bey of Tunis

on the Barbary Coast into slavery. Christian slaves in North Africa amounted to more than a million in the 17th century. Both Tromp and de Ruyter benefited from substantial commissions of the enormous ransom amounts that were paid. Jacob Leisler, later the first British mayor of New York was amongst the many sailors who were captured and ransomed

Willem Balthasar was well connected with the Spanish because of human trades. In 1660 the Spanish decided to reactivate the Asiento, the right to trade and ship captive and slave labor to the Spanish colonies in South America.

Two Genoese businessmen, Lomelin and Grillo, borrowed from Willem Balthasar Coymans over 25,000 Dutch guilders to obtain and carry out the business. Soon their bankruptcy followed in 1665 and Willem Balthasar was able to secure the Asiento directly from the Spanish for the Coymans Company and the WIC fleet in 1666. He paid the formidable price of at least 200,000 Dutch guilders.

Unfortunately, the business became a disaster resulting in bankruptcy of the WIC company in 1672.

That is how two men, both of 1618, determined the fate of the West Indies Company more than any other person.