

What does late 16th and early 17th Century Dutch literature concerning beached whales reveal about the early-modern Netherlandish mindset?

In January this year, five sperm whales became beached on the island of Texel. Initially the Dutch authorities were hopeful of saving them but when treacherous weather caused rescue efforts to be abandoned, the creatures' fate was sealed and by the following afternoon marine biologists were already performing the grisly task of dissecting the carcasses in order to ascribe the episode a cause. Environmentalists were quick to blame the animals' demise on the activities of 21st Century man, perhaps correctly so, but if they assumed whale strandings to be an exclusively modern phenomenon, they were wrong.¹

As one might expect, the focus of Emmanuel van Meteren's *Historie van de Oorlogen en Geschiedenissen der Nederlanderen, en der Zelfer Naburen* (*History of the Wars and Events of the Netherlands and its Neighbours*) is the tremendous political and religious upheaval that engulfed the Netherlands in the latter part of the 16th Century. The entry for 2nd February 1598 therefore comes as something of a surprise.² The Antwerp chronicler, who lived from 1535 to 1612, recounts how, in Holland, on the beach between Katwijk and Scheveningen near a hamlet called Berckhey, a whale appeared. He says as follows:

'In Holland is in dit jaar den 2den van Sprockelmaand, po't strand tuschen Katwyk en Scheveningen omtrend een gehught, Bergey geheeten, een Walvisch aangekomen,'

He goes on to explain that the whale had become stranded as a result of the tide having receded and that it had been brought gradually closer to land by fishermen, howling and growling, with cables around it. It died there a few days later, having "burst internally" because of its heavy weight on the hard sand, as the blood and fat ran from its mouth. He tells us that, because of its nature, the creature was called a sperm whale.

'die zig an grond vindende, het water afgeloopen zynde groot getier en misbaar makte, daar hy van de visschers, met Kabels omslagen, allengjes nader by het Land gebragt werd daar hy naar eenige dagen gestorven is, inwendig geborsten zynde door zyn groot gewigt op het hard zand, want het bloed en smout hem pislings asliep uit het Bakhuis: hy werd naar zynen aard van de Vischers genoemd een Potwalvisch'

Van Meteren proceeds to describe the whale in detail, telling us that it was fifty-two feet long, that its eyes were fifteen feet from its mouth, that four feet behind its eyes it had a fin, that its mouth had a lower jaw of seven feet, but very narrow, in which there were forty-two teeth, as white as ivory, each sticking up like a large hen's egg, and that its long mouth closed at the top of the palate, in many "putter" which were hard. From the creature's six foot protruding member van Meteren was able to deduce that it was male! The creature's 'staerd' was thirteen feet high or wide. The creature's thickness could not be measured as it was lying in the sand but it was to be sure, a large beast, "as we have seen for ourselves".

‘Hy was lang tweenvyftig roeivoeten, zyne oogen stonden vystien voeten van zynen muil, vier voeten agter der oogen had hy eene vlim, de muil had onder eenen bek, uitstekende lang zeven voeten, maar geheel smal, en hier in stonden tweeneveertig tanden wit als yvoor elk uitstekende gelyk een groot Hoender Ei, en die lange bek sloot in ‘t gehemelte boven, in zo veele putter, die hard waren: deeze Visch was manlyk, want hy had zyn manlyk lid uitsteekende, en dood zynde zes voeten lanf: zyn staerd was hoog of breed dertien voeten, zyne dikte, vermits hy in’t zand lag, kon men niet meten, maar was, voorwaar! Een groot Beest, gelyk wy zelfs gezien hebben.’

Van Meteren concludes with what became of the whale’s carcass, noting that it was sold to the State of Holland for one hundred and twenty-six guilders – a bargain given that oil could be made from it - and that the mouth was given to Count Jan van Nassau and duly transported to Dillenburg, the ancestral seat of the House of Nassau.

‘Hy werd, wegens de Graaflykheid van Holland verkogt voor honderd zesentwintig Guldens, dat goed koop was gerekend voor de geen en, die Traan Olie daar van maken: de bek werd geschonken aan Graaf Jan van Nassau, en naar Dillenburg gevoerd.’

In his account, Van Meteren refers to “groot getier en misbaar” which roughly translates as “howling and growling” or “great uproar and clamor.” He appears to attribute this to the whale. However, using the same words, other chroniclers such as Petrus Christiaanszoon Bor, (referred in Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches*³) suggest that the disquiet may have emanated not from the whale itself but from troubled onlookers. Based on other accounts, this is entirely plausible. Writing in Latin alongside a print of the whale, the Haarlem born writer, poet and classicist, Theodore Schrevelius (1572-1649), commented:

‘A large whale, thrown up out of the blue sea (gods, let it not be a bad omen!), washed up on the beach near Katwijk. What a terror of the deep Ocean is a whale, when it is driven by the wind and its own power on to the shore of the land and lies captive on the dry sand.’ (Fig.1)

In a further text produced some years later for a widely-circulated pamphlet about another stranding, the same Schrevelius, today best known for his *Harlemias* (a history of Haarlem) returns to the notion of the whale as omen. Referring to it as “mortalibus omen” and “monstro portenditur” he talks of the “many calamities and bloodbaths” that have occurred subsequently, specifically the siege of Ostend, reports of a Spanish armada headed for the Netherlands; an earthquake, and a severe outbreak of the plague. An accompanying illustration by the celebrated artist Jan Saenradam (1565 -1607) shows Death, in the form of a skeleton, executing the helpless Maid of Amsterdam with a crossbow. (Fig.2)

In yet a further pamphlet, an image of the Berckhey stranding was printed alongside a map of the Principality of Cleves, which in August 1598 was occupied by Spanish soldiers and subjected to atrocities. The whale is accredited with having heralded this.⁴

It almost goes without saying that the respective analyses of van Meteren and Schrevelius could not be more different. Van Meteren’s matter-of-fact, unsensational account of the stranding appears as ‘rational’ or ‘modern’ in outlook. Everything that is said about the whale, from the physical control exerted over it by the fishermen, to its reduction into everyday vocabulary and units of measurement and its ultimate appropriation by the

political establishment, emphasises humankind's control over nature: the extraordinary – in so far as it even exists – is comprehensively absorbed by the everyday. Moreover, the attempt to analyse and document the creature can be seen as proto-scientific in outlook and characteristic of an increasing drive to understand the natural world.

By contrast, for Schrevlius the natural world is wild, savage and mysterious, a force that not only illustrates the subjection of human beings to a higher power, but which plays a key role in maintaining it. This viewpoint – here manifested in the notion that a beached whale could in some sense serve as omen or portent - merits further consideration and, to that end, I wish to devote the remainder of this essay to exploring two particular issues, firstly the origin and character of such a mentality, and secondly, how widespread it was.

To some extent, the portentous significance of the beached whale at Berckhey can be attributed to Christianity. Both the Old Testament and the New are littered with examples of God expressing his will through natural phenomena. The Book of Jonah recounts how, having been told by God to travel to and confront the sinful city of Nineveh, Jonah instead sought to flee from "the presence of the Lord" by boarding a ship travelling in the opposite direction. A tempest arose and after admitting to his fellow sailors that he was the cause, Jonah was ultimately thrown overboard in an attempt to calm the sea, the dumping of cargo having failed to alleviate the ship's invidious predicament. Jonah's life was miraculously saved when he was swallowed by a large whale in whose belly he spent three days and three nights. While in the whale, Jonah prayed to God who subsequently commanded the fish to spew him out. Jonah then did as requested and visited Nineveh.

As Schama notes, the Book of Jonah - and by extension whales - seem to have held a special place in the Netherlandish consciousness. An unusually large number of prints and drawings were produced of the subject⁵, including one now in the British Museum bearing the inscription, "Jonas vliet Godt doch even wel hem vint Door tempeest naer een visch he slint" or "Jonas fled from God, who found him anyway a tempest led him to a fish." (Fig.3). At the same time, "to cast barrels before a whale" was a popular Flemish proverb warning against greed." For Schama, whales were the writing on the wall: a reminder of the consequences of disobeying God and the "bearers of bad tidings to the sinful." ⁶

Support for the above notion can be found in a Dutch poem accompanying a version of a print by Jacob Matham (1571-1631) of the Berckhey whale (Fig.4). After describing the whale's dimensions, the poet considers what it all means, asking whether it is perhaps "a threat or warning about vain people's clothes" or an attempt to "frighten", something which should not be necessary as "God already warns us enough in his holy word which each person has to obey well-intentioned while bowing, spreading the praise of his high name on and on whose miracles are great and confirm his highness." The poem reads:

*'wat brenghet u burgher ons aenboort
Ist dreyghingh of waerschouw of ydel volx costuymen
Hem hier verschricken in, welck niet gheschieden hoort
Godt waerschouwt al ghenook ons in syn hegligh woor
Daer elck goetwillich most ghehoorsaem onder buyghen
Den lof syns hooghen naems verbreydt sy voort en voort
Wies wonder wercken groot syn heerlyckheyt betuyghen.'*

With respect to the above, it seems important to note that the use of the English words “miracle” and “wonder” and the Dutch ones “mirakel” and “wonder” appears to have evolved somewhat. Whilst today they may refer to a welcome and unexpected event, in previous centuries they more probably connoted an omen or message, having been translated from the Greek ‘semeion’ the literal meaning of which is ‘sign.’

Whales were by no means the only way in which the almighty communicated his displeasure. The whale formed part of a wider visual vocabulary. An example can be found in an extract from an almanac-cum-song-and-verse-book published by the town of Maassluis, a herring and fishing port near Rotterdam, where, in 1661, the appearance of a shooting star was interpreted with considerable foreboding.⁷ After asking whether the Netherlands will not turn from sin and righteousness and walk once more in the ways of God, the poem observes that a star has been seen in the southeast with rays both great and small. “What is this,” asks the writer, “if not a sign that God will punish all our sins?”

*‘Heeft men hier onlans niet vernomen.
Een Sterre Aan des Hemels-pleyn,
Die men in’T Zuyd-Oost Op zag komen,
Met Veele Stralen Groot en kleyn,
Wat is het anders als een teeken?
Dat Godt wil onze Zonden wreeken.’*

However, for all the importance of religion it seems that to fully appreciate the response to the beached whale at Berckhey we also need to be conscious of a deeper folklore that had existed since pagan times and which tended to see any departure from the natural order as ominous. Willem Frijhoff has noted that “Protestant Reform did not all of a sudden succeed in eradicating the practices, rituals, symbolisms, images and gestures embodied for generations, if not centuries, in the minds of men and women, and even in their social organization. In it some see the persistence of a pagan world that Christianity only very gradually succeeded in converting to a more internalised and intensely felt Christian faith” and this proclivity to “wallow in an ancient visual world” seems to have manifested itself whenever there was an unfamiliar event for which there was no obvious explanation.⁸ Whilst the sighting of comets and shooting stars are perhaps the most obvious examples, it seems that the appearances of whales on beaches also fall into the same category.

Given that whale strandings were few and far between – only fifteen are recorded in the North Sea between 1560 and 1600⁹ – and that, in spite of Holland’s maritime traditions, relatively few of its citizens would have sailed on the open ocean, to most, whales would have been as rare and unusual a sight as a comet or shooting star. The lack of familiarity with whales would explain why various artists were so keen to sketch the whale. It would also explain why Jacob Matham made errors in doing so, supposing the creatures’ fins to be ears and representing them as such.

By the 18th Century, nearly 14,000 Dutchmen would be involved in the whaling industry and a whole quarter of Amsterdam would be occupied by the rendering works and warehouses of the trade, the area being affectionately known as “de stinkerijen.”¹⁰ It is thus no coincidence that by this time, whales had long ceased to hold the same mysterious visual-

resonance and that a dead whale was removed from a painting by the landscape painter Hendrik van Anthonissen (1605-1656), turning it into an innocuous and more saleable beach scene.¹¹ However, in 1598 the appropriation of the whale into everyday life was far off and the only people possessing any familiarity would have been mariners. Indeed, it is telling that in van Meteren's account it is fishermen who approach the beast and are able to name it. A similar instance is recorded in a poem about a stranding at Zandvoort – once again printed alongside an image thus stressing the significance of visual culture in this context (Fig.5) - where sailors are able to inform bystanders that the dead fish in question is not in fact a whale but rather a tuna:

*'Als men duyfent, vijf hondert, heeft gheschreven
Ende vier en tneghentich, in de maent
November, eenentWintich, aenghedreven
Quam t'Sandtvoort, in Hollandt, dus van ghedaent,
Eenen dooden Visch, die men eenen Walvisch waent:
Maer Tanijn ghenamt Wordt van den Zee luyden'*

Thus, it seems that, independently of religion, the unusual was conflated with the ominous.

As for the extent of this mind-set, writing in Latin, the celebrated jurist and scholar, Huigh de Groot (1583-1645) (also known as Hugo Grotius) divided the onlookers at Berckhey into two groups. He recounted how the more learned had been concerned with the natural processes that had driven the whale onto the shore, speculating on the role of storms, while others, "among the common people," debated its ominous significance, some taking it as a sign that "the Hollanders would triumph over their enemies, others that it was a portent of disaster."¹² Whilst the above distinction may, to some extent, be representative of how different sections of society viewed the world, it nevertheless seems overly simplistic to say that the educated leaned towards an enlightened interpretation while the lower echelons remained routed in superstition.

Instead, it appears that society was characterised by a dualism, a curious mixture of the rational and the superstitious, and that omens were very much embedded in the collective consciousness. Schama notes that the habit of regarding apparently extraterrestrial phenomena as the mark of God's wrath was so deeply ingrained that when it was attacked by the writer of a treatise on comets, the Rotterdam magistrates withheld his stipend as a penalty.¹³ Similarly, van Deursen notes how, in its resolutions, the State of Holland recorded the way in which omens had spurred them to fear the wrath of God.¹⁴

Nor was belief in omens confined to a particular religious confession. In *Plain Lives*, van Deursen comments that churches were unanimous in their belief that God spoke to man through signs¹⁵ while Frijhoff argues that until far into the early modern era Catholics and Protestants still largely shared a similar physical and symbolic mental universe including perceptions of natural phenomena and stories about the causalities of the earthly and heavenly world¹⁶. There are documented instances of people of all major confessions – Lutheran, Mennonite and Catholic – purporting to witness signs in 17th Century Holland.¹⁷

It seems that this common language of perception, understood by everyone and based on collective observation, was so ubiquitous that even those who did not necessarily subscribe

to it ended up engaging with it. For example, Florike Egmond notes how, in a pamphlet commissioned by Stadhouder Maurits to commemorate his ride along the coast in a wind powered car (illustration at Fig.6) Grotius alludes to the whale and its supposed meaning, *'De gravure is omlijst door 24 gedichtes van de jeuduge Hugo de Groot. In een daarvan komen niet alleen de zeilwagen maar ook de aardbeving en de walvisstranding ter sprake.'*¹⁸ Grotius's poem, by no means a neutral report, sings the praises of the countryside and its liberator, seemingly rejoicing in the way his patron has defied the omen and prospered:

*'Doen hier de walvisch lagh so groot schier als het strandt
Daer catwijck houdt den naem van't oude Vaderlandt'*

To quote the old Flemish proverb, Maurits has 'shat on the gallows' (de galg beschijten)!

The contrasting responses that one sees to the stranded whale at Berckhey typify the mind-set of the time. On the one hand, this was a period of scientific advancement and a growing recognition that the world was governed by discernible, rational laws. However, at the same time it seems that the new learning had a limited impact on the collective consciousness, which remained characterised by what was essentially a medieval outlook.

The particular tendency to see beached whales as portents of doom appears to reflect the general mood of anxiety arising out of decades of war and the possibility of decades more, with a favourable outcome by no means a forgone conclusion. It is no coincidence that at the end of the 17th Century, in a time of greater prosperity, people came to see the natural world as a sign of the benevolence of God rather than his wrath, the worried forebodings of Schrevelius giving way to the placid reflections of the entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647 – 1717), to whom the metamorphosis of the butterfly, which emerges from a lifeless hull and joyfully flies heavenward, was a hope-giving symbol for the resurrection of the soul from the dead physical shell of the Christian's body.¹⁹ The final stanza of a song at the end of the book – set to the tune of *Jesus, You, Who my soul* - reads as follows:

*'Dearest God / thus you will deal
With us, too / in due course;
As the caterpillars change themselves /
And / by dying /
Come again to life /
Like the dead / in the ground:
Let me, poor worm,
Be thus commanded unto you.'*²⁰

**Robin Jacobs
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Notes

- 1.) See for example, *Five Sperm Whales Die after Getting Stranded on Dutch Beach*
Mail Online at
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3398316/Five-sperm-whales-die-getting-stranded-Dutch-beach-scientists-begun-grisly-task-working-WHY.html>
Last accessed: 13/07/2016
- 2.) Emmanuel van Meteren, *Historie van de Oorlogen en Geschiedenissen der Nederlanderen, en der Zelfer Naburen*
Google Books at
https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=sBBjAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
Last accessed: 13/07/16
- 3.) Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (Random House Inc. 1987), p.133
- 4.) Ibid.
- 5.) Ibid p.142
- 6.) Ibid p.143
- 7.) Ibid p.148
- 8.) Willem Frijhoff, *Embodied Belief* (Uitgeverij Verloren, 2002), p.138
- 9.) Smeenk, C. " C. Smeenk, *Strandings of sperm whales *Physeter macrocephalus* in the North Sea: History and Patterns*. (Bulletin de L'institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique, Biologie 67 (1997): 15-28.)
- 10.) Schama, p.144
- 11.) Unknown, *Whale Tale: A Dutch Seascape and its Lost Leviathan*,
The University of Cambridge Research Blog at
<http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/whale-tale-a-dutch-seascape-and-its-lost-leviathan>
Last accessed: 13/07/2016
- 12.) Schama p.133
- 13.) Ibid p.148
- 14.) Van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age* (Cambridge, 1978), p.254
- 15.) Ibid
- 16.) Frijhoff, p.140
- 17.) Van Deursen, p.254

- 18.) Florike Egmond, *Hugo de Groot en de Hoge Rad: over connecties tussen geleerden, kunstenaars, juristen en politici* (in Henk J. M. Nellen & J. Trapman *De Hollandse jaren van Hugo de Groot (1583-1621): lezingen van het* (Uitgeverij Verloren, 2006)), p.32
- 19.) Boris Friedewald, *A Butterfly Journey* (Prestel, 2015), p.52
- 20.) Ibid, p.51

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Figure One

Jacob Matham

A Sperm Whale Beached near Berkhey on 3 February 1598

Engraving, with text by Theodore Schrevelius

Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

Figure Two

Jan Saenredam

Beached whale near Beverwijk witnessed by Count Ernst Casimir of Nassau-Dietz

Engraving, with text by Theodore Schrevelius

British Museum, London and Museum Boijmans, Rotterdam

Figure Three

After Paul Bril

The Story of Jonah

Engraving, with text by unknown author

British Museum, London

Figure Four

Jacob Matham

Image of a Sperm Whale

Engraving, with text

British Museum, London

Figure Five

The School of Goltzius,

The Stranded Whale on the Beach at Zandvoort,

Engraving, with text

Fleming Museum, Vermont

Figure Six

After Jacques de Gheyn II

Sailing Cars,

Engraving, with text by Hugo Grotius

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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Illustrations