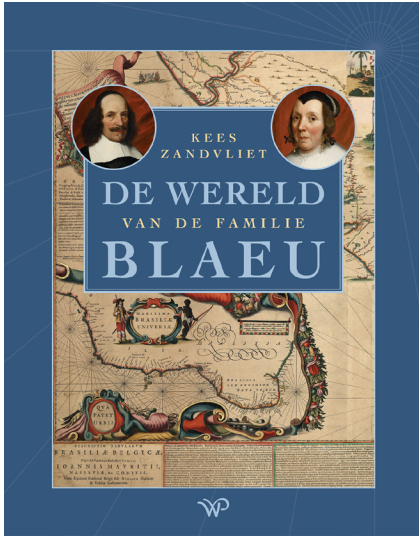


Review

Kees Zandvliet, *De wereld van de familie Blaeu*, Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2022, 384 pp. ISBN 9789462499416.



For publishers as for painters, lasting fame casts long shadows. Kees Zandvliet sheds welcome light on a myriad of microhistories formerly obscured by all-too-appealing narratives of rise and fall during the Dutch seventeenth century. Fresh detail makes a famous family of printer-publishers, the Blaeus, newly strange. Zandvliet's book finally dispels the myth of how three generations of a single family were made to embody a Golden Age of ascent (Willem Janszoon, 1571-1638), extension (Joan Blaeu, 1598-1673), and decline (Joan II, 1650-1712).

This narrative goes back a long way. In 1979 Herman de la Fontaine Verwey (1903-1989), the first P.A. Tiele Professor in the History of the Early Modern Book, used the hyperbole of those seeking to elevate parts of the past to advance a young discipline. He stated that 'the name Blaeu represents a grand period in our history. This name is closely connected to everything in which the [Dutch] Republic and Amsterdam excelled in those days, be it in politics, literature, economically, or scientifically. In the history of the three generations of Blaeu, one finds reflected the entire course of the seventeenth-century Netherlands.'¹ Without even mentioning the artistic qualities of Blaeu publications that De la Fontaine Verwey's work would equally bring to the attention of future generations, this was enough of a claim to secure the cultural canonisation of books and their makers. But Kees Zandvliet, Emeritus Professor of the History of Amsterdam, picked up on the broader, socio-political implications of aesthetics early in his career. His magisterial *Mapping for Money. Maps, Plans, and Topographic Paintings, and their Role in Overseas Expansion* (1998) taught us to see beyond the beauty of cartographic representation, by showing how visual and material culture, diplomacy, and conflict went hand in hand as the Dutch sought to establish predominance across the globe.

Zandvliet's latest book has another important point to make, but the author presents it too modestly: it is a bit of a shame that he only explicitly formulates his most important

contribution to scholarship at the very end of a lengthy and detailed study. The patience of expert and non-expert reader alike is rewarded by the book's final page: here Zandvliet concludes that the reputation of the Blaeus has given rise to an enticing, yet ultimately inadequate story of national success, that of a Dutch Golden Age neatly spanning three generations. 'This is an appealing image that, once evoked, is almost as alluring as that of the brilliant but underappreciated and poor artist' (300). The fact, however, that Susanna Veselaer successfully led the sale of Blaeu books into the final quarter of the seventeenth century, together with the collaboration that allowed Dutch publishers to hold their own amidst European competition and survive well into the eighteenth century, provides a powerful counternarrative. Ultimately, the nuanced picture of struggle *and* success, of competition *and* collaboration is more persuasive than any image of rise and decline, cast in black and white – especially since golden age thinking so often serves the ideological needs of a set time.

The histories of the book, of cartography, and a nation all needed its gods; yet this publication gives us back the mortal Blaeus, simply 'tirelessly at work' (in keeping with their printers' mark, *indefessus agendo*), so that no miracles were needed for them to reach 'cartographic Olympus' in the 1660s (174). More broadly, Zandvliet's book helps us rethink the role of the individual in the making of national pasts. Zandvliet also corroborates that the business of books proved a playground for new forms of female agency in the male-dominated Dutch Republic, which is the book's second most important contribution to the field at large.

The World of the Blaeu Family brings together the results of a lifetime of archival work to tell the lives of the many people who circled Amsterdam's beehive of bookish knowledge-making. Zandvliet's study provides a comprehensive overview (amounting to almost four hundred pages in total), complete with extensive genealogies and a timeline. It offers a wealth of new and interesting materials, from archival finds to occasional poetry. Together, these shed light on the Blaeus themselves, but also on those we may well consider their extended family, including distant relatives, acquaintances, and workers of all kinds. With characteristic understatement, Zandvliet for the first time establishes Joan's precise date of birth as 23 September 1598 (93-94): 'We now know, for instance, that Joan Blaeu died on 28 December 1673 at the age of 75 years, three months, and five days.' Zandvliet also shows that 'scruples regarding overseas slavery' certainly did not stop the Blaeus from investing in trade and agriculture (plantations) in the Atlantic. To Joan Blaeu and his sons, 'adaptation and violence are a necessary prerequisite to survive in the world beyond the Republic' (299). In sum, Zandvliet's micro-historical perspective on the Blaeus matters most because it helps us to uncover and appreciate more fully just how much of the visual and material splendour of the Dutch seventeenth century was the direct result of the labour of underrepresented individuals: women and the enslaved.

Occasionally uncomfortable, most of these stories do not feel very familiar yet. If some of the book's newly introduced case studies could clearly benefit from a bit more contextualisation, this equally means that Kees Zandvliet is a good sportsman: the rich primary

1 Herman de la Fontaine Verwey, *Uit de wereld van het boek*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam 1975-1979), III, 165-182. See also Herman de la Fontaine-Verwey, 'Dr. Joan Blaeu and his Sons', *Quaerendo* 11(1981/1) 5-23.

source material he brings to our attention should keep historians of art, books, and cartography busy for years to come. This will not be the last book about the Blaeus: the wheels of progress turn slowly but steadily.

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