

New Letter

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Fax message to MRS. T. Winoto
FaxNR 9653-3444

WHERE WATERS MEET

Bonegilla, the Dutch migrant experience.

The exhibition is now in its third week and it will continue till May 18 at the Old Treasury Building. It is being viewed by visitors from all over the world, going by entries in the visitor's book. Tourists from Holland are surprised to find a Dutch exhibition in the middle of Melbourne. The Old Treasury building, of course, is worth visiting because of its splendid architecture, in- and outside, which is truly a striking contrast with the galvanised Bonegilla huts on show.

The book 'Where Waters Meet' chronicles Dutch migration history from the early beginnings to its post World War II hey-days and beyond. The book is richly illustrated with many photographs from private and government sources in Australia and the Netherlands. It also features poignant cartoons by renowned Dutch artist Nico van Dalen, who arrived in 1955 and spent some time in Bonegilla. Nico van Dalen was also one of the artists displaying work in 'The Second Landing', an exhibition initiated by Dirk Eysbertse in 1993.

In his forward, Cornelis Vleeskens has captured the essence of the book, subtly penned down in metaphors of swollen rivers and melting waters. The title 'Where Waters Meet' comes from the aboriginal 'bone' ('place') and 'gilla' ('meeting of the waters') referring not only to the meeting of Victoria's rivers, the Murray, Kiewa and Mitta Mitta, in the Hume Weir, but also to the more symbolic meeting of more than 30 nationalities in the Bonegilla camp.

Through the exhibition and the book, Dirk and Marijke have attempted to paint a true to life picture of Dutch migration to Australia. They are indebted to the many Dutch migrants who enthusiastically shared their memories in the form of photographs, interviews, letters, diaries, songs, etc. Chapters such as 'The Holiday we never had', 'The Promised Land', 'First Impressions', 'Camp Conditions', 'Women and Children', 'How to make a Living', 'The Great Australian Dream', 'Come to sunny Australia' and 'To stay or not to stay' bring to life a largely neglected piece of migrant history through the eyes of different people, women, men, boys and girls, migrants who stayed or those who returned to the Netherlands. This latter group amounted to 30% of the total who went.

Chapters such as 'Migration Madness' show the other side of the coin, describing quite insidious propaganda by the Dutch and Australian governments to lure people away from their home country. Showing images of the Bonegilla exhibition 'Where Waters Meet' on SBS TV recently, Mary Kostakidis said: "The patriotic Dutch felt it was their duty to leave their homeland."

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image of Australia, which left many disappointed.

The book, a nostalgic piece of social history, is selling very well according to staff at the Old Treasury Building with some people buying ten copies at once for children and grandchildren. To keep Dutch migrant history alive for future generations is also one of the reasons why the authors embarked on this project.

Sir Arvi Parbo, who opened the exhibition and launched the book on April 8, said in his opening speech: "We are particularly indebted to the book 'Where Waters Meet' by Dirk and Marijke Eysbertse, for giving us an in-depth record of the experiences of many of the Dutch people who left Holland in the 1950s and '60s, including the experiences of many of them in Bonegilla. It is interesting to read that some were happy to be on the road to something better while others were critical of the conditions and facilities. I never had the latter problem - the refugee camps in Europe had been a good training ground! According to the book, some 320.000 immigrants of many nationalities passed through Bonegilla until it was closed in December 1971, of which the Dutch were one of the largest groups. I must admit I did not know that there were schools and even churches in Bonegilla. I just did not come across them in 1949. The accommodation in Bonegilla in the days I was there was in Nissen huts, with wooden floors and perhaps twenty iron bedsteads with army style mattresses and blankets in each. There were separate toilet blocks and dining halls, all of corrugated galvanised iron construction on timber framework and mostly without lining. It was not luxurious accommodation, but not all that different from what I had experienced in the refugee camps. In the dining hall we were introduced for the first time to cold mutton, which was not exactly wildly popular with any of us.

What Dutch people thought of Bonegilla, often coming from a cosy Dutch house in a typical Dutch town, is a question that intrigued the authors. You will find the answers in this book and at the exhibition.

Opening times for the exhibition are: Monday to Friday 9 - 5, Saturday and Sunday 10 - 4. The book is for sale @ \$9.95 at the Old Treasury Building or at the Dutch Consulate in Melbourne, or by mail from the Erasmus Foundation, PO Box 2014, North Brighton 3186 for \$14.95 including postage.

The convenors would like to take this opportunity to thank the Bonegilla subcommittee, Thea Winoto and Monique van der Weert, for their hard work and dedication. Monique van der Weert and Stef Wildekamp expertly organised the catering on opening night. The convenors would further like to thank the members of Erasmus who assisted them on opening night and in many other ways.