

Peters, Marion, *De wijze koopman. Het wereldwijde onderzoek van Nicolaes Witsen (1641-1717), burgemeester en VOC-bewindhebber van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2010, 519 blz., ISBN 978 90 351 3412 6).

Marion Peters has given us with an impressive study of Nicolaes Witsen an example of the early modern Dutch 'wijze koopman'. The phrase is taken from Caspar Barlaeus' *Mercator sapiens*, his inaugural address to the leading members of the city in 1632. In it, he praised Amsterdam's leaders for encouraging learning, and indicated the main subjects that they should cultivate: to their classical educations he wanted them to add the study of geography, natural history, astronomy, languages, and peoples. Born less than a decade after Barlaeus' speech, Witsen epitomized his ideal almost perfectly.

This is a rich intellectual biography that connects Witsen to the events of his time and shows him to have been not only a learned person in his own right but a very influential patron, too. Somehow, neither Witsen's inner life nor the ways in which he was shaped by fate are entirely in focus, nor does he fully become an example of the values of the regents more generally, but that is due to the strategy Peters has chosen for presenting her investigations into his complex activities, striving for precision more than generalisation. She divides her work into three parts: Witsen's life, his studies, and his support for the advancement of knowledge. This organization allows Peters to explore various aspects of his efforts with clarity and gives scope to present the enormous research she has carried out not only into Witsen's life but into the lives of many of the learned men in his network.

Witsen, whose motto was *labor omnia vincit*, rose from a wealthy family of Muscovy merchants into the lower ranks of the Amsterdam regents. He received formal education among the Cartesians of Leiden (including the anti-Voetian, Johannes Coccejus), studied law, was one of the members of student circles who later became well-known for their contributions to the 'new philosophy', and then obtained some seasoning as a member of a delegation to Moscow before embarking on a Grand Tour of France and Italy and a couple of short trips to England. He obtained seats on the Amsterdam city council and board of the *voc*. In 1717, he died after a long decline of body and mind.

Peters explores Witsen's indefatigable efforts to acquire knowledge, and to assimilate and redistribute some of it through publication. Peters notes that Witsen's efforts could only have been undertaken by a person of the wealth, contacts, and authority of a regent, despite the press of other business. It is no surprise, perhaps, to discover that Witsen cared a great deal for matters having to do with ships, land and sea routes and maps, languages and peoples. He is best known for his books on shipbuilding. In addition, Witsen promoted expeditions to Namaqualand in southern Africa and to the maritime 'southland' (western Australia, or Nieuw Holland), and was a patron of many men of learning and the arts. There can be no doubt that Witsen was a true 'Mercator sapiens'.

Witsen's more general importance through his support for learning is the aim of the third section. Clearly,

many of his interests were practical and utilitarian concerns that flowed from his position as a regent and merchant, but Peters notes that Witsen also occasionally referred to the responsibility to acknowledge God through his creation. Exactly what Witsen's religious views were would be interesting to know, although as with so many of his regent contemporaries it is a difficult matter to assess. His sizeable but not outstanding library, she demonstrates, was for his use and for the collection of information rather than for speculative philosophy or display. Moreover, he sat at the apex of a pyramid of informants and agents who answered his numerous and exacting questions and funneled objects, specimens, illustrations, lists, and manuscripts to him, such as the three-volume 'Codex Witsenii' from southern Africa. Most significant of all are the passages in which Peters comments on Witsen's emphasis on finding out facts and ascertaining the 'truth' of things in the midst of misinformation, rumor, and legend. To probe the world in this way he not only assessed his agents and compared accounts, but took account of pencil-sketches of people, places, and things.

Peters has therefore produced an important modern study of a very important figure in the world of early modern learning, in which one can clearly see some of the reasons for the development of the new science, which depended so much on the personal interests and patronage of merchants and governors who concerned themselves with truths arising from matters of fact. Although she writes in the biographical mode, by carefully documenting Witsen's relationships with a host of other people of learning, she restores the work and effects of this particular Maecenas to our attention. I am sure that I am not the only one who is grateful for her efforts.

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