

Homelands

Jacobina's Amsterdam

When we think of Amsterdam today, the legendary coffeeshops, where hashish is available, come to our minds (besides tulips). Or one thinks of the not less legendary red-light district of the city.

If one goes a bit further back in time, we here in Germany might remember the period of the Seventies, when German women drove over to Amsterdam to get an abortion.

Maybe one remembers also the protests of the late Sixties, the squatting movement and the hippie era.



Damrak and Papenburg, ca. 1883

In any case, one has a mental picture of a city liberal through and through, open and easy-going. But this version of Amsterdam is a very young one, evolved only after the end of World War II.

At the end of the nineteenth century, one considered oneself indeed particularly liberal in Amsterdam – a judgement one finds hard to agree with from a modern perspective. For this liberality was valid only for certain social circles.

Contrary to other European countries, Dutch society did not consist of different bottom-up layers but was structured in something called pillarization: one social circle preferring to stick with one's kind, next to other

social circles, preferring to stick with their kind, too.

And of course any kind of liberalism of those days applied to men only.

From a modern perspective, Victorian England is the symbol for narrow-mindedness and strait-laced conventions, for double moral standards and repression of any kind of emancipation.

All the more surprising that during the research for this novel I realized that the Netherlands were even more strait-laced and conventional in the nineteenth century. More than I would have guessed and even more than English society at the same time.



Grimnessesluis, ca. 1860

With Grace and Ada in *Beyond the Nile*, set exactly in the same years, I was able to make a thorough comparison between England and the Netherlands in various aspects of social life.

Although Grace and Ada were quite privileged regarding their social origin and the associated financial means, although it was still not common to go to a college or even get a degree from a university, let alone to take up some kind of professional education: in spite of all obstacles, in spite the fact that these doors had only very recently been opened to girls and women, they now *had* these opportunities. Not only theoretically, but practically they had the chance to do all these things if they wished to.



Voorburgwaal, ca. 1883

Possibilities neither Jacobina nor Floortje had in the Netherlands at that time.

Although from a very similar background like Grace and Ada, Jacobina didn't have the chance to go to a high school or a college – there weren't any for girls.

Neither was there the possibility for some kind of professional occupation; nobody in the Netherlands would have hired Jacobina, not even as a governess. Daughters from good families like her had to marry and have children – or they were doomed to become an undesirable old maid, adjunct to their parents or their brothers and their respective families.

There were no other alternatives.

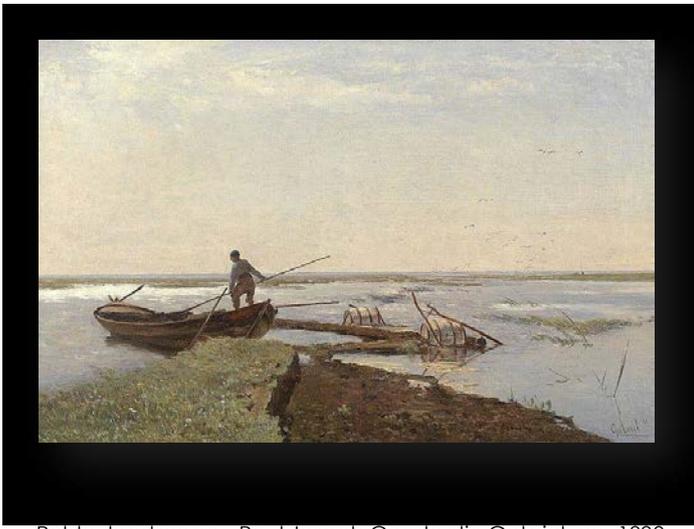
All the more astonishing is the casual, sensuous, almost decadent way of life maintained in the Dutch East Indies at the same time. One surely can imagine how shocked Dutch people of both sexes were when visiting relatives or friends in Java.

On the other hand, marriage and family were also held in high esteem in the colony, a good catch was still considered desirable for a woman – but nevertheless, there were good and respectable positions for women like Jacobina.

A chance she grabs with both of her hands, in order to escape this narrow path of life enforced on her – and to make something out of her life.

Floortje's Friesland

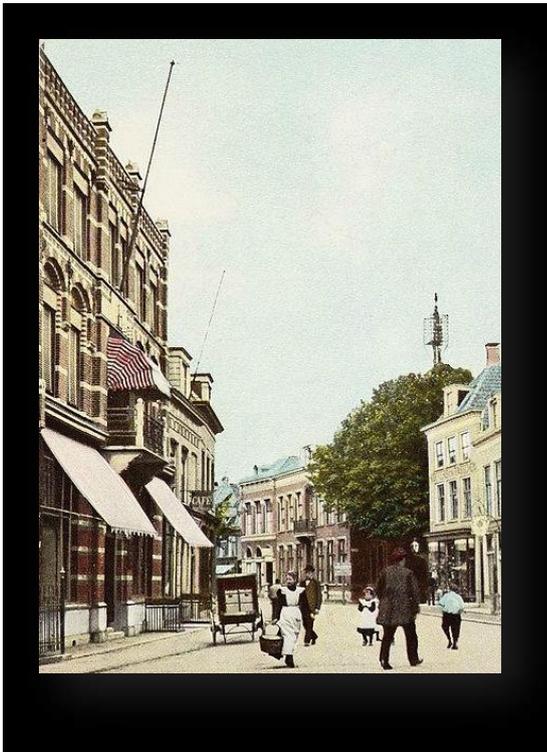
I loved the idea of two contrary young women meeting each other– two women who, under ordinary circumstances, would never have met because of their different backgrounds and also different characters.



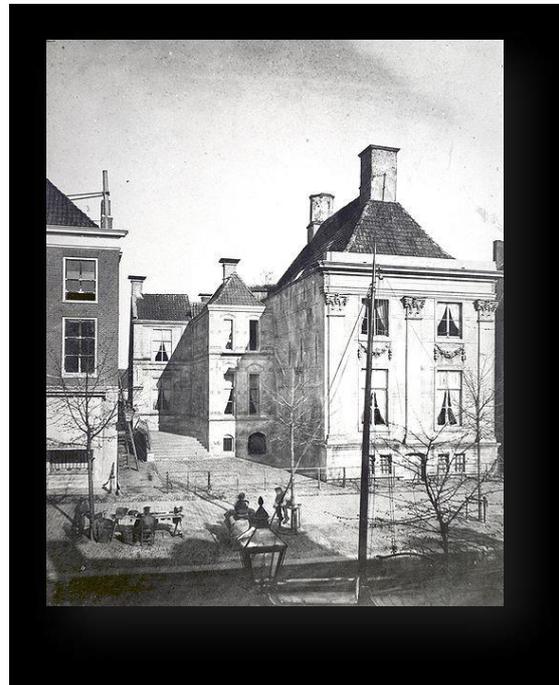
Polder landscape - Paul Joseph Constantin Gabriel, ca. 1890

While Jacobina comes from a good family, having grown up sheltered in the big city of Amsterdam, Floortje originates from rural Friesland, a region in the North, between the sea and beaches and dykes, fields, pastures, orchards and farms, with a language of its own: Frisian.

Amsterdam in the nineteenth century was conventional and philistine – Sneek and Leeuwarden, the towns Floortje had spent her life so far, were even more so.



Sneek, ca. 1910



Amelandshuis, Leeuwarden, ca. 1869

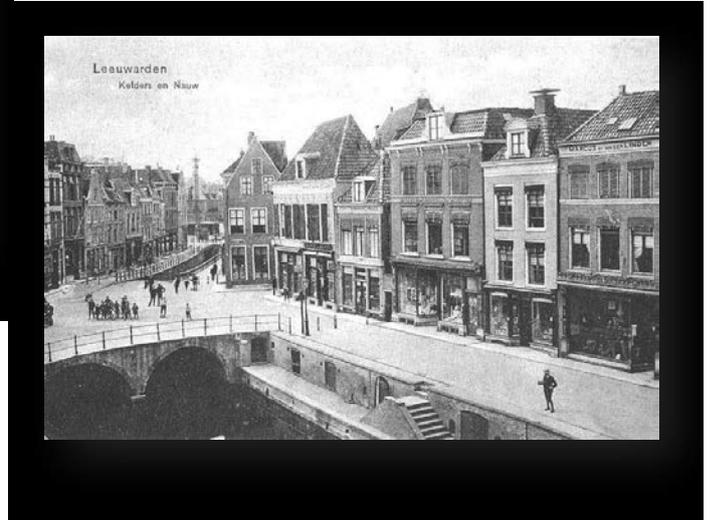
Floortje's biography and the way it had shaped her character is partly borrowed from the childhood and youth of the historical figure of Margaretha McLeod, née Zelle – much better known as the as famous as infamous Mata Hari.

Floortje's family history, her experiences as little girl and adolescent are based on the life of Margaretha Zelle – influenced by the partly rural, partly lower middle class life in Sneek und Leeuwarden, double moral standards and hypocrisy included.

A stifling, almost poisoning atmosphere both Jacobina and Floortje seeked to escape. As far as they were able to – to the East Indies.



Grote Kerkastraat, Leeuwarden, ca. 1900



Leeuwarden, ca. 1890

Image source: Wikimedia Commons