

Ricerche di Storia Politica

Interview with prof. Cornelis A. van Minnen, July 12, 2013

Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands

Professor Cornelis A. (Kees) van Minnen is the director of the Roosevelt Study Center ([www.roosevelt.nl](http://www.roosevelt.nl)), a center for the study of modern U.S. history and transatlantic relations that is named after Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt whose common ancestors emigrated to the New World in the 1640s from the Dutch province of Zeeland. The Roosevelt Study Center (RSC) is located in a beautiful medieval abbey in the heart of Middelburg, the capital city of the province of Zeeland. Professor van Minnen shared with RSP his views on the state-of-the-art of American historiography in Europe and explained what are the main activities of the RSC.

**R - There are two main pillars of the RSC, which represent the reasons why it was founded here back in the mid-1980s with the strong support of historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, one of the RSC Founding Fathers. It's worth reminding that this was well before the Internet era. The first reason was to provide researchers with archival materials on U.S. modern history that were not available in Europe at that time. The RSC archive had to be of service to many European historians who were not able to cross the Atlantic. The other main reason was and still is to serve as a European venue for scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, a welcoming place where historians, political scientists, and American Studies scholars from other disciplines can meet, conduct research, and present and discuss their most recent work as well as discuss new developments in the field of American historiography.**

D- But, how did the RSC accomplish this mission? What have been its most important tools to foster such an international academic exchange?

**R - We have materialized this mainly by organizing every year international conferences in order to bring scholars together. We are also cooperating with other academic institutions, such as universities and professional organizations in the field of American Studies or transatlantic relations. For instance, the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA) has held its annual conferences at the RSC for over two decades. From the early 1990s on every other year the RSC has hosted a special conference for European and U.S. historians of the United States and this has led to a number of interesting conference volumes and follow-up research projects among participants. The European Beat Studies Network asked the RSC to host its inaugural conference in 2012 here in Middelburg. And in the same year the Historians of the Twentieth Century United States (HOTCUS) convened at the RSC for its first conference held outside the United Kingdom. Moreover, there's an important educational aspect of our mission, which includes the organization of seminars and workshops for PhD students, MA and BA theses supervision, and many other activities that make the educational effort a sort of third pillar of the RSC, which developed later on.**

D- RSP is a journal of political history that has always been interested in understanding and analyzing the new threads and trends in European historiography. Accordingly, which kind of contributions do you think the RSC has given to European historiography of the U.S.?

**R - It's no exaggeration to say that, especially as regards Dutch-American relations, the RSC staff has been involved in writing and editing THE standard book in the field: the 1200-page volume *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations, 1609-2009*, which was published in English both in the Netherlands and in the United States. We wanted to provide a comprehensive survey of the relations between the two countries and simultaneously set the state-of-the-art of the field. Therefore, we worked for more than three years in writing, collecting, and editing essays from more than 90 Dutch, American, British and German scholars.**

**For this huge project we had a clear historical fact as a starting point. In 2009, we commemorated the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's discovery of Manhattan Island and the river that was later named after him. Although he was British by birth, in 1609 he worked for the Dutch East India Company and was searching for a shorter passage to Asia via the West. His discovery is considered the first official contact between the Netherlands and what later became the United States. This gave us the initial impetus, as a research institute, to set up a historiographical survey. Furthermore, we knew in advance that this work would generate a wide interest, because the Dutch public in general has a strong interest in the subject and this is also the case for the descendants of Dutch immigrants in the U.S. in the vibrant and active communities in the states of Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, and New York. This interest among the public is, of course, something you have to take into consideration when starting a big research project like this. It also helped to secure funding for the publication.**

D - So, the center promoted the historical study of Dutch-American bilateral relations thoroughly. Was this also a deliberate methodological choice, which was intended to set a pattern for the study and analysis of transatlantic relations? An effort to promote a bilateral approach to the subject?

**R - When I look back at my almost 30 years as director of the RSC, I recognize that in the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a particular focus on the study of bilateral relations between European countries and the United States. This happened not only in the Netherlands, but in Germany, France and Italy as well. Since the 1990s, however, there emerged a strong interest in cultural and religious history, in gender history as well as in the history of ethnic minority groups. And in the last decade we have seen that the study of American history has become less focused on developments within the nation state as a political category but more and more from a transnational point of view. These changing perspectives have added new interpretations to the field. One of its main consequences is, for instance, that the nation state is not regarded anymore as the main actor in the**

**international arena. The study of American history is now centered on exchanges, contacts, and ideas of individuals or groups, within and outside of the national borders. This makes the subject on the one hand more complicated, but on the other hand also more multifaceted and more fascinating.**

D – You said that there has been a turn in the study of American history, which has tended to include a plurality of actors and elements in the explanation for the shaping of transatlantic relations. Did this turn also influence the acquisition policy of the RSC archival collections?

**R – The center is a small research organization and it very much depends on individual input coming from its staff members. When the RSC was opened to the public in 1986, its major focus was on FDR and TR, because the nucleus of our archive was mainly composed of book and archival donations from the Roosevelt Institute in New York and a donation from the Theodore Roosevelt Association: the complete Theodore Roosevelt Papers Collection on microfilm and duplicate copies of books in the TR collection at Harvard. This was unique in Europe. Then, in the years that followed, the RSC has purchased microfilm collections covering twentieth-century American presidencies, as far as microfilm collections are available. Other acquisitions were based on research interests from our staff and PhD students. For instance, Dr. Hans Krabbendam’s scholarly interest in Dutch emigration to the U.S. and the role of religion in shaping U.S. culture and its political system, Professor Giles Scott-Smith’s interest in transatlantic relations in the Cold War era and his interest in private, non-governmental networks, or my own interest in Dutch-American diplomatic and cultural relations and my current interest in the modern U.S. South, have obviously influenced the Center’s selection and acquisition of microfilm collections and books. Of course, we also try to keep our archive as much as possible up-to-date, for example by providing researchers who come to the Center with complete access to the very valuable Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS). In addition to our online subscription to the *New York Times*, the DDRS is one of the most used collections by our visitors.**

D – So, the center is definitely expanding its sources and promoting its research activities taking heed of the new tendencies of the field. Thank you for your cooperation, professor van Minnen.

**R – You are welcome.**