

Child of the Enlightenment: Revolutionary Europe Reflected in a Boyhood Diary

Review Number: 1264

Publish date: Thursday, 7 June, 2012

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ISBN: 9789004172692

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £89.00

Pages: 512pp.

Publisher: Brill

Place of Publication: Leiden

Reviewer: Joanne Bailey

Child of the Enlightenment is a captivating book: charming, moving, and richly informative, it melds the intimate and distant, weaving together bodies, emotions and minds, Enlightenment ideas and philosophy, and revolutionary politics. Technically brilliant, it retains coherence under the potential centrifugal force of the authors' objective to 'let the diary pose the questions raised by its own world' (p. 1). Although a boyhood diary directs the study's horizons, Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker also draw upon a wealth of ego-documents, a panoply of print culture from pedagogy to conduct literature, travel writing to fiction, the minutes of political meetings, maps, and 164 vibrant images, which just in themselves must have taken huge effort to select and organise. This achievement is yet more remarkable when its co-authorship and translation are considered. Fortunately, their remarkable scholarship and prose are well served by Diane Webb's outstanding translation skills.

The Enlightenment child under scrutiny is Otto van Eck. He began his oft-resented diary in 1791, at the age of ten, writing regularly at his parents' behest for several years, until his entries declined, with a final one in November 1797. Thanks to Baggerman and Dekker's talents, Otto emerges as both archetypal Enlightenment product, grown in soil watered by Rousseau and German pedagogues, and as an individual personality: stubborn, occasionally grumpy and resentful, sometimes socially awkward, irritated by younger siblings, yet kindly and affectionate towards his family. Born of enlightened parents and discourses, and intended for the clerical profession, all Otto wanted was to spend his time outdoors on the family estate, De Ruit, and grow up to be a farmer. This is hardly surprising given his Rousseauvian upbringing and lack of enthusiasm for books.

Indeed, the authors sensitively contextualise Otto's education within Enlightenment pedagogy. Although influenced by Rousseau's innovative *Emile*, Otto's parents actually used the German version of this style of childrearing, developed from the 1770s, which was far more workable. These philanthropists or 'friends of mankind', still saw nature as important, but, in contrast with Rousseau, believed that human intervention was also crucial. Parents and pedagogues were to encourage children to channel their emotions, inculcating tenderness, compassion, sympathy and hope, and quelling destructive passions. Self-control was essential, as

was discipline through a combination of rewards and fines, and withholding parental affection from a naughty child. It is striking how these pedagogical values informed the rearing of elite children across Europe though moulded by particular cultural influences and diverse enlightenments.⁽¹⁾

Otto's diary was a central tool in this educational regime, since writing it inculcated self-examination. But it was no work of intimate introspection, for it was scrutinised daily by Otto's parents who regularly advised harder work and reprimanded laziness. In it Otto summarised his reading, not just his behaviour. Just as the German pedagogues advised, Charlotte and Lambert van Eck made good use of the expanding genre of children's publishing, and selected Otto's reading, for education and pleasure. Monitoring his extensive reading programme meant that they could guide him in the project of channelling feelings. His reading also reflected the van Eck's religious stance. Otto was reared in the Dutch Reformed Church, with a framework of regular church attendance and family prayers, supplemented by reading devotional literature. Traditional though this seems, Lambert was extremely liberal in his views, a proponent of the separation of Church and State and ecumenicalism, and drawn to deism and natural philosophy. His father's religious liberalism seems to have prevailed over ritual since Otto read the Bible very little, was not spiritual, and could even contemplate the possibility that there was no hereafter. This was a boy who was encouraged to think things through.

Thus Otto was no 'prisoner in a paper panopticon' as the authors so cleverly term it (p. 105). Baggerman and Dekker reveal Otto's agency as he struggled against parental supervision, avoiding writing daily entries, and rebelliously complaining when forced to do so. They also infer that although his reading followed that of idealised fictional children, Otto stolidly refused to love it for pleasure alone. While keeping the diary clearly led to tensions between Otto and his parents, one can also imagine that some of his grudging confessions to ill temper, sibling quarrels, and reported throwaway comments, such as telling his mother 'he wished that there were no pianos in the world', when obliged to repeat piano practice, might have prompted rueful smiles among his parents at the close of day (p. 110).

The central section of the book opens up Otto's wider world. Drawn together in one insightful chapter are his delight in outdoor pursuits in the family's country estate, new vogues in landscape gardening, the view that children were best reared in the countryside, away from worldly vices and temptations, and the metaphor of the child as tender plant. Indeed, the Enlightenment electrified all these aspects of child-rearing, nature, and landscape in the 1770s in the Netherlands. The formal gardens of elite estates were made over in the natural English country style, symbolic of the desire for a purer, virtuous lifestyle and offering a suitably rural location to nurture minds and bodies. Tellingly, the van Ecks remodelled De Ruit at the same time as they were putting novel child-rearing ideas into practice. As his Papa explained to Otto, 'one of the main reasons we live in the country both summer and winter is to teach us from an early age that simplicity, moderation and industry are inextricably bound to our basic happiness' (p. 191). Raised with such metaphors of cultivation, which frequently revisited classical antecedents to praise rural life as the seat of moral virtues, the poets and autobiographers of Otto's generation went on to describe youth as a paradisiacal garden that they had to leave behind to enter the next stage of life. Yet, the age of feeling's bucolic bliss was not sentimentalised. Otto was permitted to attend the slaughter of livestock in autumn, an agricultural activity which he relished. His unsentimental view of the animal kingdom was perfectly valid: animals were not considered to feel; therefore, while needless cruelty was forbidden, one did not need to extend sympathy over their rational use as human nourishment.

Baggerman and Dekker use Otto's diary to trace the ways in which his world expanded as he grew older. Nestled first in the loving arms of his immediate family members, Otto increasingly travelled beyond them. He was familiarised with his own family lineage, essential to acquiring maturity since it marked status and prestige. He went further afield to extended kin and friends, eventually visiting them without his parents. All this was to prepare him for sociability, the driving force of society and social relations. Although sociability was compelled by the engine of politeness in England, in Dutch society it seems to have been a value shaped by new social-scientific methods of studying society: an invaluable form of conduct, after all, in a society newly deemed to be shaped by its people. Otto's physical world was also extended. His first experiences

were in the parental home and its environs. Thus the authors describe the van Ecks' splendid houses in the country and in town in The Hague, reminders of Otto's luxurious lifestyle. He explored the world beyond his homes through the new discipline of geography. One feature of his rich material culture was his access to maps, aesthetical and pedagogical devices and embodiment of nationalist interests. In a striking image from *Vaderlandsch A-B-boek* (1781), a father cradles his toddler in his arms and points to a vast map on the wall, explaining: 'The Netherlands is your fatherland, where you live in utmost security. When you grow up, you too, will surely dwell here with your family' (p. 275).

As the rest of the book shows, this security was illusory, disrupted by time and events. Otto's perception of time passing is placed within the changing understandings of time from the mid 18th century. In the aftermath of the French Revolution understandings of time went from cyclical to linear. Not just a characteristic of industrialisation, time was measured through industriousness: the less sleep and more useful activities the better. Time was also the resource of the powerful, who controlled the time of others; a feature of age as well as social hierarchy, as Otto discovered when sent to bed early as punishment for bad behaviour. Baggerman and Dekker trace this new notion of linear time through Utopian writing. Later 18th-century utopias were set in the future rather than an undiscovered place. Child-rearing was fundamental to them, the marker and mechanism for reconstructing society. Otto experienced these conceptual shifts in body and mind. Inoculation was part of improving society and the van Ecks used it to protect their children. Gauging the right time to implement it was, however, agonising. Otto and his sister Cootje were inoculated as older children at their house in The Hague. While they recovered well, their infant sister Annemietje stayed with her grandparents in Delft, deemed by the doctor too young to inoculate. She contracted smallpox and died. No wonder Otto's diary entries describe time as short, all too quickly lost, to be carefully harvested and used efficiently. These are signs of 'modern' time-keeping, but his diary nonetheless reveals that 'traditional' ideas of time persisted. Otto also structured his entries around these older markers of time, like the New Year, annual events like fairs, and the changing seasons.

The Netherlands faced political insecurity too. Baggerman and Dekker give a precise account of the Batavian Revolution, an episode in Dutch history which has received little scholarly attention. Otto's father Lambert and uncle Pieter Paulus were key players. On the heels of French occupation in 1795 Lambert led the 'velvet' revolution in The Hague. The Stadholder Willem V fled and the Patriots took power. By May 1795 he represented The Hague in the new government of the province of Holland and Paulus was elected president of the provincial assembly of Holland. By March 1796 a National Assembly had been voted in by something approaching universal male suffrage. Paulus was elected chairman, and Lambert joined the assembly in October. For all this, the van Eck family did not profit from these major national events. Otto's beloved Uncle Pieter died soon after his installation as chairman. In January 1797 Lambert was himself elected chairman of the National Assembly and Otto's diary reflects his father's demanding role largely by bemoaning his absences from home at work. Lambert next became embroiled in debate about the new Dutch constitution. Perhaps explaining why Otto missed his father so much was van Eck's proposed amendment to the constitution that 'no one lacking in domestic virtues can be a good citizen' (p.370). The debates triggered conflict that ended in a *coup d'état* in January 1798 that ousted him. In February van Eck and other revolutionaries were imprisoned in Huis ten Bosch. A more moderate group staged a further coup in June 1798 and a new 'governing regulation' was imposed in July, at which point it was declared that the revolution was ended. What gave hope to van Eck and his companions 'in misfortune' was their firm belief that it would be 'future generations – who by virtue of their enlightened educations would be deserving of, and equal to, that true freedom' (p. 394–5). Certainly, revolutionary ideals of liberty and egalitarianism were transmitted through policies on education, catechisms for the young and symbolic festivities.

Did Otto inherit his father's hoped-for liberties? From the start we know that Otto had a short life, yet Baggerman and Dekker avoid the shadow that this could have cast over the whole book. Instead they move us through what is fundamentally an optimistic Enlightened Dutch world seen through Otto's eyes. The brightness of the new ideas radiates in Otto's generation, who grew to adulthood around 1800. Yet the book draws to an unwelcome and painful close, for Otto was excluded from his generation's potential to enjoy the benefits of the Batavian revolution. The closing chapters centre on the vulnerable body, both physical and

political. Here we see Otto struggling with a long, life-threatening, painful attack of psoriasis in 1792, when he was 12, and numerous severe colds and fevers, which often rendered him deaf. The van Ecks did all they could, adopting a regimen in the countryside intended to make the body hardier and able to withstand illness. More unusual, it seems that when very ill Otto was given his mother's breast milk, available since she had just given birth to another sibling. The authors are largely silent on this report. Even in a society that promoted maternal breastfeeding, surely this was strange to contemporaries? How was it delivered to Otto [expressed, one hopes]? What is all too apparent, however, is Otto's recognition that life itself was precarious. Death was overly familiar to Otto: he operated in a culture that moped melancholically via poetry like Young's *Night Thoughts*, Harvey's *Meditations among the Tombs* and Gray's *Elegy* and their Dutch imitators; his relatives died frequently; and his family subscribed to new initiatives which moved cemeteries outside cities to make burials more hygienic.

Otto's diary ended on 29 November 1797 and so the rest of his story is told largely via his father's words. It is a depressing one for the reader who has accompanied Otto and his loving family so far. Just as he became seriously ill, at only 17, early in 1798, his father was imprisoned. In mid-March Lambert was permitted a visit from his children. His joy at seeing them was destroyed, however, by seeing the full extent of the ravages caused by his son's illness, newly diagnosed as consumption. The following week the authorities allowed Lambert to return home to be with his dying child. Otto died in his 18th year at the end of March and was buried in the family's new cemetery plot. His father returned to prison until he was released that summer following the second *coup*. Emotionally and physically shattered, he also succumbed to TB on 5 October 1803. The book ends movingly with family memories of Otto's vivacity, promise, and his parents' consuming love for him

This is a book that is indispensable to scholars of diverse historical topics and countries. It shows the application of Enlightenment principles in home, culture, and politics and thus enriches scholars' understanding of the long 18th century. It is indispensable for anyone interested in the development of pedagogy, the values inculcated in elite child-rearing, and family life, but also the dissemination of political rhetoric across generations, changing conceptions of nature, time, space and religion. In fact it is exemplary in revealing how ideas and practice interweave. In some ways, the original Dutch title of the book is especially apt: *The Wonderful World of Otto van Eck: a Cultural History of the Batavian Revolution*, for this is a truly wonderful evocation of his world and a superb book.

Notes

1. Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England c. 1760–1830: Emotions, Identity and Generation* (Oxford, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The authors believe that this review gives a good overview of the content of their book, and the reviewer also presents with insight their intentions, and they are therefore happy to accept this review.

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