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Isabella Henriette van Eeghen, a Biography

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ISABELLA HENRIETTE VAN EEGHEN, A BIOGRAPHY

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EEGHEN, Isabella Henriette van. Archivist and historian (born in Amsterdam, February 3, 1913— died in Amsterdam, November 26, 1996). Daughter of Christiaan Pieter van Eeghen (1880–1968), a banker, and Henriëtte Heldring (1883–1984). Isabella van Eeghen remained unmarried. DOI: [10.5092/jhna.2012.4.2](https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2012.4.2).



Portrait of I. H. van Eeghen, photographer W. M. Alberts, 1978 (in *Jaarboek van het Genootschap Amstelodamum* 70 [1978]).

- 1 Isabella (Isa) van Eeghen was the fourth of six children of a prominent Mennonite patrician family in Amsterdam. Until 1924 her father was a partner in Van Eeghen and Company, a trading company, and was later the director of the Dutch-India Trading Bank. Her mother came from the well-known Heldring family of Christian revivalists. Isa grew up in a stately house (no. 497) in “de bocht” (The Golden Bend) on the Herengracht in Amsterdam, which the family had owned since 1885. Today it is occupied by the Amsterdam Kattenkabinet, a museum devoted to cats. Although affluent, the family was strict and emphasized modesty. Later Van Eeghen said that she had little recollection of her father’s presence and that her mother only became a mother after grandchildren came along. Taking care of the Van Eeghen children was the role of the children’s nurse.

Training and Career

- 2 Isa was a reclusive child who read a lot, but since one of her older sisters had failed at school and

she herself had difficulties with spelling, her parents sent her to the Middelbare Meisjes School (Girls High School) instead of the local gymnasium. This caused great sadness for Isa, who had always been fascinated by the past and wanted to pursue a more demanding course of study. Therefore once she finished high school she continued her schooling at the gymnasium. After graduating in 1931, she studied history at the University of Amsterdam.

- 3 Upon earning her Master's degree there in 1937, she undertook doctoral research with Professor Hajo Brugmans on the women's convents of Amsterdam. After Brugmans's death in 1939, Jan Romein became Isa's supervisor. Romein's attempts to convince his doctoral candidate to conduct research along broader lines were unsuccessful. On December 9, 1941, Isa received her Ph.D. for an archival study entitled "Female Monastics and the Begijnhof in Amsterdam from the 14th- through the 16th- Century." Her dissertation was immediately recognized as a groundbreaking study, especially due to its richness of factual detail. Nevertheless, it also received criticism about its form, including her punctuation.
- 4 With a doctorate in hand Miss Van Eeghen, as she would be called all her life, started cataloguing the inventory of the Walloon congregation of Amsterdam. As no arrangement for a paid position at the Amsterdamse Gemeentearchief (Amsterdam Municipal Archive) was possible at the time, she did this as a volunteer. In 1943, though she had received her degree, the archive was still unable to offer her formal employment. She persisted with her work and once a position became available in 1944, Van Eeghen began her career as an administrator at the Gemeentearchief. Three years later, in 1947, she was appointed a deputy archivist but only after threatening to leave for a position at the archive in Maastricht.
- 5 At the age of thirty-two, Van Eeghen left her parents' home. She moved to a house near the Prinsengracht, which she shared with five other women. Still she continued an almost daily routine of eating meals at her parents' home. Marriage, as she stated later, was not something she sought. Although she was a close friend of the conservative-libertarian politician and historical publicist Harm van Riel, theirs was not a romantic relationship: "I did not really feel any need. If you married in those days you were immediately dismissed by the municipality. To leave work was unacceptable for me."
- 6 From 1951 until her retirement in 1978 Miss Van Eeghen held the position of adjunct-archivist at the Amsterdam archive. She never aspired to a higher function, because "administrative *bis-billes* (squabbles)" -- in Van Riel's words -- would have distracted her from her scholarly work. Psychologically, he remained an "adjunct" her entire life, with all the freedom such a position allowed. In that capacity she often knew how to get what she wanted. Such was the case in 1960 when the Amsterdam archive bought a unique collection of negatives from the photographer Jacob Olie (1834–1905), which even today provides an unrivaled window into Amsterdam during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Publications and Hobbies

- 7 In 1946 Van Eeghen joined the board of the Genootschap Amstelodamum (Amsterdam Society) as the first and only female member until 1967. Between 1950 and 1984 she also became editor of the society's journal, *Maandblad Amstelodamum*, and its yearbook, *Jaarboek Amstelodamum*.

In these two periodicals she found her forum for publishing. When she left the society's board, her colleagues and friends decided to organize a *Liber Amicorum* issue of the *Jaarboek* as a farewell. Refusing to understand the tradition that would have excluded her own work from the volume -- after all, she had published in every year's issue! -- she, of course, got what she wanted. She contributed the article "Thirty Years Archival Research: Casanova-Symons-Hooff" to her own *Liber Amicorum*. The bibliography in that book lists more than 600 authored publications in her name, on very diverse areas -- among them many inventories and collections of primary sources -- in addition to more than 250 book reviews.

- 8 Throughout her long career Van Eeghen continually broadened the scope of her historical research on Amsterdam, with her investigations ranging from literary history, art history, and the humanities to social economy. An example is *De Amsterdamse Boekhandel 1680–1725*, a *monkish work on the book trade during the early modern period that she published in five parts (in six volumes) between 1960 and 1978. That publication has become a treasure trove for the history of European publishing. In 1965, Van Eeghen published 'Fibula-tje' De gilden (The Guilds), a valuable piece of socioeconomical research on guilds in the Low Countries. In 1959–60, Van Eeghen discovered and published the Dagboek van broeder Wouter Jacobsz, a diary written by Wouter Jacobsz, a monk from Gouda who had been a refugee in Amsterdam at a time, between 1572 and 1578, when the city was still loyal to the Hapsburg king. This was a significant contribution that changed historians' views about the Dutch Revolt during its early years.*
- 9 Van Eeghen's archival detective work also helped art historians to assign more accurate dates and attributions. A well-known example was her 1969 article "Elsje Christiaens en de kunsthistorici" (Elsje Christiaens and the Art Historians). Here she demonstrated that Rembrandt experts had wrongly dated the master's drawing *Hanged Woman on the Gallows* to 1655. In procedural interview documents at the Amsterdam juridical archive she found the name Elsje Christiaens and concluded that the sketch must depict this Danish maid who had been found guilty of murder and sentenced to death on May 1, 1664. That must have been a great triumph for Van Eeghen as her simple archival work proved more effective than the art historians' use of style as a basis for dating.
- 10 Miss van Eeghen was an avid collector. She continued managing her father's collection of Amsterdam prints and drawings, which taken together constitutes one of the few historical-topographic atlases that have *survived in their entirety*; today it is kept at the Gemeentearchief. She herself assembled a uniquely rich collection of fans that she later bequeathed to the *Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap* (Dutch Royal Antiquarian Society). In 1983 a large collection of 138 drawings from the diary of a nineteenth-century artist named Christiaan Andriessen appeared at an auction. Van Eeghen had discovered the artist herself and went on to personally fund the acquisition of these drawings by the Gemeentearchief.
- 11 Van Eeghen continued writing on a variety of themes literally until her death. When publishing short studies she used the initials of her name "I.H.v.E." Among other topics, Van Eeghen wrote on monasteries, family archives, maids, artists, guilds, churches, believers, printers and booksellers, poets, newspapers, trade, houses, crafts, murder, fans, paintings, drawings, prints, courtyards, children, women, diaries -- in short, on everything the past had to offer as subject matter. This

broad interest can partially be explained by her eagerness to answer questions that arose out of her work as an archivist. She then vigorously investigated any given subject and published her findings. Another reason for the diversity was her associative manner of working: one research endeavor spun into another. She was unable to resist; once her curiosity was aroused it had to be satisfied.

- 12 Miss van Eeghen was undisciplined in her zeal: the only time she did not work was when she slept. Even after her retirement she visited the archives every day until she was no longer able. During the last phase of her life, she suffered from diabetes, which caused some mental impairment. At that time she was intrigued by the mysticism in the work of the seventeenth-century poet and etcher Jan Luyken. Her articles on Luyken ended up becoming so confusing that the editors of the *Jaarboek van het Genootschap Amstelodamum* decided to discontinue the whole series on Luyken. “You are killing me” she shouted on that occasion, but eventually accepted their decision. Her final study on Jan Luyken appeared in 1993. During the last phase of her life Van Eeghen hardly came out of her house on the Prinsengracht, where she was most comfortable working on a kitchen table between the pots and pans. Isabella van Eeghen died in 1996 from a stroke, at the age of eighty-three.

Significance

- 13 The significance of Miss Van Eeghen’s chronicling of the history of Amsterdam cannot be overestimated. Among others, she received the *Bucheliusprijs* in 1958, the *Menno Herzbergerprijs* in 1965, and two awards from the City of Amsterdam: the *Zilveren Penning* in 1971 and the *Zilveren Museummedaille* in 1988. Van Eeghen understood historical research as detective work and was rightly labeled the “Miss Marple of Amsterdam Historical Writing.” Her style was personal; she often started a publication with a reference to a conversation with the person who had acquainted her with the theme of that study. Van Eeghen enjoyed describing her quests, discoveries, and surprises, often adding her own childhood memories and private experiences. She was never willing to pay too much attention to the style of her writing. Appearances were of absolutely no interest to her (including her own physical appearance). Perhaps had she devoted more attention to the presentation of her results her work would have had even more impact. It is difficult to detect many of her findings because they are hidden behind overwhelming amounts of detail. Curiosity and human interest were her drivers, and in regards to the latter Isa van Eeghen was ahead of her time. She devoted attention to children, women, marriage, criminality, and testimonials, long before these themes became fashionable for historians.

Els Kloek studied history at the University of Amsterdam. She has published various books, among them *Gezinshistorici over vrouwen* (1981), *Vrouw des huizes: Een cultuurgeschiedenis van de Hollandse huisvrouw* (3rd ed, 2011), and *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-century Holland, England and Italy*, Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen, and Marijke Huisma, eds. (1994). Since 2003, she has worked at Huygens ING as editor of *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland* (DVN). She is also project leader of “Biografische Portaal van Nederland.” Since 2011, she is head of the department of Reference Works Online at Huygens ING.

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Illustration:

Portrait of I. H. van Eeghen, photographer W. M. Alberts, 1978 (in *Jaarboek van het Genootschap Amstelodamum* 70 [1978]).

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