

Dolley Deviates

My irregular ramblings

Monday February 7, 2005

Only in Holland, only the Dutch



I finished the book a few weeks ago and I wrote several drafts for this review. The problem is that I like a lot that this book had to offer, but at the same time it left me with a sour taste in my mouth. If the author Marc Resch wanted to debunk the myths and cliches of the Netherlands, i'm sad to say he wasn't a 100% succesful. If you see the Netherlands as a country that is mostly about coffeeshops, brothels and lots of rain, this book won't make you think otherwise.

And that is a shame, since he really did a good on job on 80% of the book. Actually the there were three versions of Resch talking in the book: the historian, the travellerer and the Holland expert.

Marc Resch the historian

Resch did a great job here. I really enjoyed the chapter *Brief history of the Netherlands*. In 30 pages, the author tells about the most important events in Dutch history and how he thinks it shaped the Dutch psyche. I think the Dutch interest for their own history is seriously lacking and I think that could change if history classes would start of with a summary like this, before going deeper on separate events like the 80 year war against the Spaniards, or WW2. Marc Resch really did me a favour by writing this chapter.

Marc Resch the traveller

Resch's adventures while roaming through Amsterdam, are sometimes hilarious. For example, he planned to learn Dutch, but his first encounter with the Dutch language discourages him to give

it a serious try. He is especially deterred by the fact that the Dutch name for the channels like you see them in Amsterdam, is gracht, and the channels have names like Prinsengracht, Herengracht, etc. He find the word impossible to pronounce and the fact that the area is known as the Grachtengordel, probably didn't help either. So he gives up right away (missing the opportunity to try out lovely tongue-breakers like *sinasappelsap*), and decides to take a detour. Resch concludes that it would be wisest to learn the language that is close related to Dutch and in his mind that his German. And by doing that, Resch soon finds out that the relationship between the Germans and Dutch is rather special. His piece about the yearly gay parade and a dispute with a hotel employee is also very enjoyable to read.

And you can't help it to love Resch's theories regarding the Dutch weather. "*A common stereotype about Dutch women is that they are unrefined and walk like farmers. The English especially like to reinforce this stereotype.*" Marc Resch comes to the rescue by stating that "*it's certainly hard to be refined and debonair while constantly stepping over puddles and struggling just to keep their heads dry.*" Thanks Marc, you were a great help here. :) Apart from trying to explain this rather extreme culturalist and offensive prejudice about the Dutch ladies, he also believes that the Dutch weather can be bad for your health: *One of my expatriate friends has lived in Holland for over eight years and he's been sick ever since!* Well, if that isn't scientific proof, I don't know what is.

Marc Resch the Holland expert

I like the chapter "Dutch Individualism: first and foremost". Marc Resch shows how some behaviour by the Dutch, that might be interpreted as being hopelessly indifferent, is only a way to create social space to make up for the lack of physical space. The Netherlands are one of the most densely populated countries in the world and leaving each other be is one of the ways to keep the country liveable for everyone. I never thought of the concept myself, but I think that Resch has something here. The chapter also shows that Resch sincerely tried to do more than just registering things that were odd from his perspective and describing the "oddness" of it.

The chapter "Dutch consensus building and compromise" is a good help for any foreigner who has to work or do bussiness in The Netherlands. It is true that the Dutch like to talk, talk, think over, negotiate and talk some with all parties involved, before taking decisions of any importance.

So Resch deserves some praise, but I must say that his role as an authority on Dutch culture, isn't Marc Resch' strongest. If we may believe him, a typical Dutchmen speaks fluent English, German, and French. It could be that he and I interpret the word "fluent" differently, but I would say that most Dutch speak reasonably good English, a very original form of German and very little French.

Resch has more to say about the Dutch linguistic skills: *Those living out in the rural areas may have more difficulty with these languages since they lack the exposure to foreigners.* My niece has some knowledge about the most important western dead languages, Latin and classic Greek. I don't expect you to believe that she met any ancient Romans and Greeks. My niece learned that stuff at school. Kids who live in rural areas also go to school and there they will have at least English classes. This depends on the school they go to, not on the area where they live. During

my time at highschool, I had a few classmates who came from Zandvoort, a small town by the sea that is flooded with Germans every summer. None of those kids were able to speak German. I don't know how Resch came up with this theory, it is as original as it is wrong.

My favorite assumption by Marc Resch, was the one where Resch states that Dutch parents encourages their children to have sex when they are in their early teens. Sadly, I forgot to mark the specific page, but believe me, he really wrote it.

Conclusion

Let me start off by saying that the prejudices I stated in an earlier post were unjust. Author Marc Resch made an sincere attempt to unravel the secrets of the Dutch and their culture. If the attempt was succesful is another matter. This is would be a great book if it wasn't contaminated with a lot of small errors and sometimes wild assumptions.

I also think that Resch spent way too many pages about topics like softdrugs, abortion, euthanasia, but I understand that this book was written for an American audience and it has to be said Resch sincerely tried hard to explain and even defend these phenomena's. But after pages and pages about coffeeshops, sex theaters, pissoirs, etc. I wished that Resch's exploration of Dutch culture, would have extended beyond checking hash menu's and gawking at prostitutes. Maybe he did visit museums and theaters, but he doesn't mention them.

I think Resch would have written a better book if he was able to understand Dutch. I believe that he was perfectly capable to communicate with the Dutch, but observing them is another matter. I also wonder if he spent a serious amount of time outside Amsterdam. Sometimes I got the feeling that "Only in Amsterdam, only the Amsterdammers" would have been a better title for the book, since a lot of the things Resch mentions are so typical for that city.

And if you are Dutch and need to be annoyed in a pleasant way, this book is a must. Parts like "*The Dutch don't have statues of great statesman or war heroes, which rewards people who stick their heads above the crowd, but they proudly exhibit the infamous penis with rotating testicles statue*", really are value for money.

posted by dollev