

## **An Addendum:**

### **Excerpts from--**

Jan J. Boer, *A Bruised Reed: The history of a farmers' clan in the Groningen Peat Colonies*. Trans. and Ed. Dr. Jan H. Boer.

Original Dutch title: *Het gekrookte riet: De Geschiedenis van een boerengeslacht in de Groninger Veenkolonien*. Wildervank, Dekker & Huisman, 1980.

Excerpts selected about the religious and economic background to the above series about the Christian Reformed Church from an author whose ancestors lived through it all. The page numbers refer to Jan J. Boer's book. The materials below are an intertwined combination of translation and translator's comments.

### **Brief introduction by Dr. Jan H. Boer, trans. and ed.**

To avoid confusion, the first introduction must be of the various Boers involved in this history. With apologies, I start with Jan H. Boer, myself, due to my position as proprietor of this website and writer / editor of all this Boer material. The series and this Addendum can be described as a "Boer Festival."

Dr. Jan H. Boer—writer / editor

Frances A. Boer-Prins—wife to above, co-editor and administrator.

Pastor Harry H. Boer—brother to the above; author of the first book in this series.

Dr. Barbara Boer-Van Haitsma—wife to and co-writer with Harry H.

Pastor Geert E. Boer—author of *A Man of the People*, shirttail relation to Jan H. and Harry H. First docent of what is now Calvin University.

Jan J. Boer—author of *Het gekrookte riet*. No known relationship to the other Boers. Similarity of name is purely coincidental.

Dr. Harry H. Boer—not involved in any of this history, but to those knowledgeable of it, his name crops up. His relationship to Jan H. and Harry H. is disputed, but some kind is most likely. His career was parallel to that of myself, Jan H. He was a CRC missionary in Nigeria

and a writer. He graduated from the Free University in Missiology—and both of us tended to make our mission administrators nervous.

Dr. Wiebe K. Y. Boer—Son to Jan and Frances above. Just now appointed President of Calvin University. He plays no part in this history, except that he is stepping into the shoes of Geert Egberts and thus is slated to continue the Boer Festival. He is also a prolific writer. See the LEGACY page of this website.

Welcome to the “Boer Festival!”

The other purpose of this brief addendum is to provide a bit of the background of the Gereformeerde Dutch immigrants to West Michigan back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to some degree beneficiaries of Abraham Kuyper, but more Pietistic than Reformational. A minimal familiarity with these background factors will help understand the early Christian Reformed Church better and help give credence to the books in this series.

### **The Major Problem: The Liberal Factor-- Quotations and Interlocutions**

p. 56\* It is an abomination for Jan Jacobs. He has many problems with the sermons he listens to every Sunday. Faithful church attendance leads too often to a disappointment for him.

Since 1816, the members of the church councils are directly appointed by the King, while the preachers are no longer obligated to faithfully adhere to the three Forms of Unity as they were determined by the Synod of Dordt of 1618, in which “election” was flagged as the heart of the confession. Liberalism has come to be celebrated in the Reformed Church. Everything is all too easy. The sermon contents are marked by superficiality; humans are thought to have good intentions; a prevalence of naïve trust in humans. What is missing is the awareness and violence of sin and of the unlimited depth of God’s free grace—none of that is heard anymore.

p. 57\*--1834 A trumpet blast. A canon shot.

Pastor Hendrik de Cock published and defended a controversial brochure, “Defense of the true Reformed doctrine and of the true Reformed believers,

attacked by two so-called Reformed preachers OR the sheep pen of Christ attacked by two wolves and defended by Hendrik de Cock, Gereformeerd<sup>1</sup> pastor in Ulrum, Groningen.” This was about two Reformed pastors in his area. He was promptly deposed and imprisoned.

Upon his release the (in)famous Secession took place. De Cock is now sought out to help other Seceders throughout the province of Groningen. At 33, he preaches in homes and in barns, counsels various church councils, gives advice in situations of various differences of opinion and becomes an ecclesiastical consultant.

On November 7, he preaches in the barn of Jan Jacobs. Over a hundred persons listen attentively, sitting on pews made up of wooden boards which rest on blocks of dried peat often used for domestic fuel. Jan is promptly fined by the court in Winschoten because of transgressing the Penal Code. That Code, dating from the Napoleonic days, (loosely translated) states

that no company or group of more than twenty persons will be allowed to gather or organize for religious, literary, political or any other purposes except with government permit. Anyone who allows the use of his house without permit from the authorities will be penalized with a fine ranging from sixteen to two hundred francs.

After having been fined a number of times, Jan tried to find loopholes in the law. He would divide the living room of his house in two by means of curtains so that he could “legally” host forty people, twenty in each side. He removed the back of the clothes closet in the living room and replaced it with a door leading to the barn. This would enable at least a part of the audience to escape quickly.

Later, he built a kind of pulpit under a tarpaulin outside, a tactic that avoided an in-house service. It does not help him much. Fines of florence (fl.) of 25, fl. 100, another fl. 100 and still another.... But the gatherings continue, sometimes in Jan’s barn, then in the homes of de Cock’s mother-in-law, of the widower Hendrik Kerks Venema, or in the house of the deposed catechism teacher Poppe Rijkens de Wit.

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<sup>1</sup> The former state church is called “Hervormd” or “Reformed”, while “Gereformeerd” applies to the church associated with Abraham Kuyper and its people and culture. In English, both translate into “Reformed.” I use “Gereformeerd” to avoid confusion. Both churches reunited towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the “Protestant Churches in the Netherlands.”

There was a lot of resistance on the part of the population. *Burgomaster* Tjaarda de Cock found himself between two fires. On the one hand, he had to maintain the law, but on the other hand, he had to take the necessary measures against his own son and his followers. Sometimes things went out of control. He would regularly send the police to the meetings. Windows were busted and people mishandled. These were restless times in Wildervank, as well as in the entire province of Groningen and beyond.

On April 9, 1835, another meeting is scheduled. The news is spread in whispers: “Tonight, at ten o’clock there will be a meeting at the home of Jannes Rengers Brouwer.” A strange time for meetings; most people are already sleeping. The time is chosen in order to meet in all quietness without disturbance.

It turns out to be a historic evening. De Cock will lead. The Christian Seceder Church (*Christelijk Afgescheiden Kerk*) in Wildervank is established and three middle-aged elders are appointed, including Jan Jacobs, and three middle-aged deacons, all but one being farmers. De Cock preached on Joshua 24:15—“But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” The service continues till well after midnight.

The first synod of the Seceders in 1836, wrote the following letter to King Willem I:

It is therefore, You Majesty, that we repeatedly testify that we have neither formed new religious associations nor intend to do so. We intend to do so no more than the Reformed did in the days of the Synod of Dordt of 1618-1619, when they separated from the domination of the Remonstrants, endured the risk of losing goods and freedom, and of their elected church councils who were installed by faithful shepherds and who therefore had to tolerate fines as well as having their meeting places messed up and destroyed.

In January 1841, the first Seceder preacher was installed at Wildervank, namely pastor G. J. Huiskes. It was decided to build a parsonage for him with a church building on the same property.

## **The School Struggle**

p. 72\* But there was still another aspect to the persecution, namely the struggle for Christian schools. In 1852, the church established a Christian primary school. In summary, this involved a lot of hassle between them and the authorities, but permission was granted on November 13, 1851. It meant a high financial pressure for the church and its members, which they courageously accepted. But then....

p. 73\* In 1878, a restlessness takes hold of the country because of a new education law. Johannes Kappeyne van de Coppelle, a liberal minister in the government, introduced a new law in 1877. So-called “public” education was under government control, but special or religious education was free, though the government made no money available for it. This situation, according to Kappeyne, would make public education a luxury to be enjoyed only by the rich but only alms for the poor.

Not a penny for religious education. That was prevented by the constitution, according to the liberals, for it states that public education is a matter of ongoing government responsibility. That is not only mandated in the constitution, they claimed, but that is natural; that’s the way it ought to be. Kappeyne was trying to give public education an almost unassailably strong position. Amongst measures taken to ensure that position the number of teachers in public schools was greatly increased along with their salaries.

74\* Seceders had first to pay taxes to contribute towards the rising costs of public education and then also pay for Christian education out of their own pockets, the cost of which was also rising due to Kappeyne’s law. There was great fear among its supporters that eventually the cost of the Christian system would exceed their financial strength. Kappeyne did not have to worry about opposition in the parliament. It did not bother him that Kuyper on a daily basis published his increasingly sharp arguments against these developments in his *Standaard* newspaper. All the liberal media were on the government’s side.

p. 75\* When the government’s position was finally secured and fixed, a counter movement for a people’s petition to the King arose . Kuyper wrote the petition, but De Savornin Lohman wrote the introduction.<sup>2</sup> The organizers were hoping for some 100,000 signatures, but when they came in, it was enough to be still. It

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<sup>22</sup> Other sources on this Kuyperiana page inform us that, in spite of his strong political, cultural and religious leadership, due to his membership in a lower class, Kuyper was not qualified to be part of the presentation of the petition to the King.

appeared that the citizenry had awoken. A heave rolled through the country. In the middle of the week in some villages prayer services were held. The total number of signatures was not merely 100,000 but more than 300,000! Yet, the end of the story was not favourable: the King signed the onerous law.

In Utrecht, the union “School with the Bible” was established, which from then on held annual collections on August 17. The “*kleine luyden*” of Abraham Kuyper or the “common people,” the masses, being hard working folk, conscientious and loyal to church and confession, want a school with the Bible regardless of cost. And the school struggle continues....<sup>3</sup>

### **Economic Issues**

Jan J. Boer also makes brief mention of some economic reasons that drove these “*kleine luyden*” or “common people” to the US.

pp. 45\* and 50\* Farmers needed fertilizer that came in the form of street sweepings from the city of Groningen that became increasingly expensive till it became too much and undermined the agricultural economy.

The second economic issue was an unknown potato sickness in 1845. One July morning, people woke up to see an unfamiliar sticky layer on the foliage. 70% of the potato harvest failed. A bitter poverty took over the place so that many left for the US.

### **Quarrels and Conflicts**

pp. 61\* and 69\* But there were also internal reasons for the difficulties of the Seceders—disunity and squabbles, sometimes bitter ones and serious. Jan J. wrote of the “anger of the people at pastor Oosterbeek,” without giving details. “It was serious. But even worse were the conflicts the members had among themselves,” some having to do with extra- or premarital sex. One elder came home after a stormy council meeting “totally upset.”

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<sup>3</sup> At the time this Jan H. Boer (me!), the translator of this document and proprietor of this website, was a student in Grand Rapids from 1958-1965. I noticed that the descendants of these immigrants in West Michigan all insisted on Christian schools free from government subsidies, whereas their ancestors in the Netherlands considered this situation one of persecution. The Canadian Christian Reformed constituency from the 1950s on, like Kuyper, struggled for government support, considering it a human right and successfully going to court for it.

An important council meeting that included the leader of the emerging denomination, pastor Hendrik de Cock, to find a solution to some stubborn members' issues. He asked "Whether both parties to this particular conflict were finally inclined to forgive the mutual insults without foregoing the full truth, to forget the past and together to reach out to the future?" When all agreed, there was more than a little joy that Satan, who had triumphed for so long over the congregation, was finally defeated by the Lord Himself. Jan J. concluded, "The church in Wildervank did not have an easy time of it."

(This situation was not unusual. The Gereformeerde Church of Lutjegast, where I, Jan H. Boer was baptized in my early infancy, was similarly racked by quarrels and personal vendettas, sometimes having to do with baptism and thus between members and the council. It might also be about Sabbath observance or about extra- or premarital sex. Just as often it would be between the members. Some of the conflicts had wide implications so that they left no one indifferent, since they affected many relationships. The conflicts even spilled over into fights between children. G. J. Kok, *Vele geestelijke en stoffelijke zegeningen: 100 jaar geschiedenis van de Gereformeerde Kerk van Lutjegast (1893-1993)*. Lutjegast, Groningen, the Netherlands: Kerkeraad Gereformeerde Kerk Lutjegast, 1993. Pp. 23-24, 27-30.] Harry & Barbara Boer describe a similar quarrelsome atmosphere in the early Christian Reformed Church in Michigan. It appears the virus followed them across the Atlantic. The CRC is still not free from it in 2022.)

These and other factors summarized above, contributed to a wide-spread immigration movement of Seceders to the USA, especially to West Michigan, the place described by Harry and Barbara's book in this series and which Geert Egbert also experienced.

p. 79\* Reverend Kuiper, who had served in the Seceder Church of Wildervank since 1853, received a call in 1879 from the Christian Reformed Church in Michigan.<sup>4</sup> The same story applied to Geert Egberts Boer. An increasing number emigrated in those days to the vicinity of Grand Rapids MI. As Jan J. put it, "Many more Seceders went to the new world in those days."

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<sup>4</sup> See a similar story about still another Boer--Geert Egbert-- in his book above this addendum.