

Family ties: My grandfather and Mata Hari

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Leeuwarden, capital city of the Dutch province of Friesland, is attractive but well off the beaten track. Tourists tend to congregate in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and a few other places in the central and western parts of the Netherlands; they are unlikely to venture north. Although Leeuwarden was the birthplace of my maternal grandfather, Steven Anne Reitsma (1875-1958), I did not go there myself until the summer of 1976, when I was in my mid-thirties.

My visit was not a belated act of filial piety, for I had always associated him with Utrecht, where he resided for the last thirty years of his life. It was a spur-of-the-moment detour. I had done some research in the municipal archives of Groningen for a book about the Canadian armed forces in the Netherlands during and after World War II, and I was finished soon after lunch. A visit to Leeuwarden, 35 minutes by train, would, I thought, nicely 'improve the shining hour'. My main objective was the Fries Museum and its best-known holding, a portrait of Rembrandt's first wife, the Leeuwarden-born Saskia van Uylenburgh. It was by Rembrandt himself, or so a cousin had told me. She was mistaken. The work, long thought to be by Rembrandt's hand, has since the late 1960s been attributed to his star pupil Govert Flinck.¹ It is a beautiful painting all the same.

Soon after I arrived and began walking into town, I found that a commemoration of sorts was taking place. Leeuwarden was presenting itself, in Dutch, English and German (but not French!), as the city of Mata Hari; 1976 being the centenary of her birth. I was both amused and bemused. This woman was my disreputable distant cousin, an exotic dancer, courtesan and convicted spy: surely not the kind of person to have earned this recognition? It occurred to me much later that the homage to her might be an attempt to compensate for the 'loss' of that Rembrandt, giving tourists a new incentive to visit the city.

The family connection had been revealed to me fifteen years earlier by my mother's younger sister Sophia Suys-Reitsma, a classicist who taught in Amsterdam. (My mother refused to talk about Mata Hari, whom she regarded as

¹ <https://www.friesmuseum.nl/en/collection/icons/saskia-uylenburgh>

a disgrace to her father's family and not worth discussing.) My grandfather and Margaretha (Greet) Geertruida Zelle were second cousins, their maternal grandfathers being brothers. He was eleven months older than Greet; as children, they played together and went to the same dancing class. Both left Leeuwarden in their teens. Steven was ten years old when his father, a jeweler and goldsmith, died, but he left his family sufficiently well provided for so that his son was able to attend the Royal Military Academy in Breda. Greet, whose mother died in 1891 and whose father failed in the millinery business, went to live with her godfather in the small Friesian town of Sneek for a couple of years, briefly studied to become a teacher, and in 1895, aged 18, married Rudolf MacLeod, a well-connected captain in the KNIL,² the Royal Netherlands Indies Army.³

The newlyweds moved to Malang, Java, in early 1897; they had two children, a son and a daughter. The marriage, which had been far from being a love match, soon failed, for MacLeod, old enough to be Greet's father, was verbally and physically abusive. After their son died in obscure circumstances in 1899, MacLeod, his health compromised by years of excess, took early retirement. Because life was cheaper in the East Indies (now Indonesia) than in the Netherlands, the couple decided to stay, and in 1900 they moved to Bandung, an attractive city with an equable climate. (My mother, who spent most of her teens in that city, used to rave about its climate and scenery.) The move did not improve their marriage. In 1902 they returned to the Netherlands, where they soon separated and eventually divorced, with MacLeod getting custody of their daughter. Penniless, Greet had to look for a new source of income. She found it in Paris, where she went in 1903 and, forced by necessity, radically reinvented herself.

After a false start as an artist's model and a brief and unrewarding sojourn back in the Netherlands, Greet went to Paris for a second time under the protection of an aristocrat, Baron Henri de Marguerie, second secretary of the French embassy in The Hague. She needed a reliable source of income, however, and after considering circus work settled on 'Hindu or Indian dancing'. While on Java, she had learned a bit about Javanese theatre and music, and Marguerie helped her create a halfway-plausible story. By the time of her first performance, at a private gathering late in 1903, she was calling herself Lady MacLeod, pretending to be the daughter of a British aristocrat and a South Asian temple dancer. (This was cultural appropriation with a vengeance!) Accompanied by a violinist, she sensuously stripped down to the near-minimum: metallic breast cups

² KNIL stands for *Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger* ('Royal Netherlands Indies Army').

³ My chief source for Mata Hari's life is Howe (1986).

– these were padded; she was flat-chested and never exposed her breasts – and a bejeweled ornament at the groin.



Figure 1. Lady MacLeod (future Mata Hari) dancing in the library of the Musée Guimet de Paris, 1905. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The event was a spectacular success – men were thrilled by female nudity with religious and artistic associations – and soon led to other well-paid private and later public appearances. By 1905 she was appearing as “Lady MacLeod, Mata Hari” and was gaining an international reputation. Mata Hari means ‘the light of day’ in the Malay language and is synonymous with ‘dawn’. Why someone

claiming to be the daughter of a temple dancer in British India should present herself under a name derived from Southeast Asia seems to have interested no one. Her exotic dancing made her famous, not how she described herself.

According to my aunt, her father and Greet probably met for the last time in 1903. He knew she was embarking on a career of which he disapproved. More to the point was that he thought his in-laws would disapprove. In January 1904 he married Maria Elisabeth Brutel de la Rivière, member of a distinguished patrician family of Huguenot origin,⁴ and he must have been eager to keep his relationship with Greet under wraps. My aunt believed he succeeded in doing so.



Figure 2. Maria Elisabeth Brutel de la Rivière and Steven Anne Reitsma, 1904. Author's private collection.

⁴ Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, *Nederlands Patriciaat* (1947, 71).

At the time of his wedding, Steven was an infantry officer whose career was stalled. In 1895 he had graduated from the Royal Military Academy as the youngest and highest-ranking member of his graduating class, but he soon drew attention to himself as an outspoken critic of military education. This brought him into conflict with superior officers and blocked his advancement, so that in 1906 he transferred to the *KNIL* ('Royal Netherlands Indies Army'). Being an officer in a colonial army proved uncongenial, but my grandparents decided to stay in the Indies. (Three of their four surviving children, including my mother, were born there; two sons died in infancy.) Their decision made economic sense. The East Indian archipelago was a good place for middle-class men to forge careers. The competition for positions was less intense than in the Netherlands, salaries were good, consumer prices reasonable, the wages of domestic servants lower than in the home country and pension provisions generous, while regular year-long paid leaves of absence meant that contacts with family and friends back home could be maintained.

In 1907 Steven took a position in the administration of the Netherlands Indies Railroad Company, where he rose rapidly through the executive ranks. Upon returning in 1918 from leave, he became a director in the railroad's central administration, working first in Batavia (now Jakarta), then Bandung. In 1920 he was appointed mayor of Bandung, a position he held until 1928. It is unclear whether he continued to work for the railroad in some capacity, but in the 1920s he published several books and booklets focused on rail transportation and the tourist industry. One of them, a *Travellers' handbook for the Dutch East Indies*, appeared in an English translation in 1930. My grandmother was also an author. A novel appeared in 1921, but she was probably better known and certainly better paid for several books of short stories, based on Javanese fairy tales, that she wrote for use in the Netherlands East Indies school system.

While my grandparents were in the Netherlands in 1927 for a second leave of absence, my grandfather was offered a position that gave greater scope to his interest in writing: editor-in-chief of *Spoor- en tramwegen* ('Railroads and tramways'), the magazine of the Netherlands railroad system. He assumed his new position late in 1928, holding it until 1949. My memories of him date from that time. Our hometown, Baarn, was only 15 miles northeast of Utrecht, and he visited often. I remember him as Opa Reitsma, a kindly man who taught me to play chess and in 1950 gave me my first stamp album as a birthday gift. He looked prosperous, had a small *embonpoint*, and always appeared in public in a three-piece suit, with a watch on a chain tucked into his waistcoat pocket. To this day he is the only man I have met who wore spats.

Aside from carrying out his editorial responsibilities, my grandfather travelled widely and published several accounts of his travels. He also continued

to comment extensively on the physical, political and financial circumstances of railroads and transportation more generally, in the Netherlands, the Netherlands East Indies and elsewhere, notably the Balkans. The catalogue of the Royal Library in The Hague lists 97 titles under his name (there is some duplication). On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, a German scholar, A.F. Napp-Zinn of the University of Mainz, wrote a tribute in the *Zeitschrift für Verkehrswissenschaft* ('Journal of transportation studies') testifying to the importance of Steven Reitsma's career and accomplishments, describing him as "a man who will go down in history as an intellectual leader in the world of rail transportation".⁵



Figure 3. Steven Anne Reitsma, Mayor of Bandung, 1925. Author's private collection.

⁵ My translation of the original German: "den Mann, der als ein geistiger Führer des Eisenbahnwesens in die Geschichte eingehen wird" (Napp-Zinn 1950, 137). The information about my grandfather's career is mainly drawn from this source, which can be accessed here: http://zeitschrift-fuer-verkehrswissenschaft.de/fileadmin/archiv/hefte---1950_1_2_3_4/1950-3/ZfV_1950_Heft_3_Napp-Zinn-Steven_Anne_Reitsma.pdf.

Going down in history, being widely remembered after one's death: this destiny is reserved for few. My grandfather is not among them. His cousin is, though not under her birth name. While he was making his mark as a railroad executive on Java, she continued dancing and became a notable courtesan whose clients apparently included the German crown prince and the composer Jules Massenet. Defying the stereotype of the frugal Netherlander, she lived well beyond her means. This necessitated a succession of well-heeled lovers, which reinforced her reputation as a *grande horizontale* ('courtesan').

When war broke out in August 1914, Mata Hari's star was in decline. She was nearing forty, and her appeal as a dancer was waning. She returned from Germany, where she had been performing, to the neutral Netherlands, where she was fortunate in finding a new protector, a Dutch aristocrat who installed her in a house in The Hague. (On this occasion Isaac Israels painted the famous full-length portrait of her that hangs in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.) She soon got bored, however, and in the spring of 1916, she was back in Paris. By this time, too, she was under surveillance as a suspected German spy. The grounds for suspicion were flimsy, but security agencies, then as now, earn their keep in part by being suspicious, sometimes for little or no reason. A description of how French intelligence built up a case against her lies beyond the scope of my account; I invite you to read *Mata Hari: The true story* by the British author Russell Warren Howe (1986, 109-260). In 1917, she was tried for espionage, convicted and, on October 15, 1917, executed by a firing squad in Vincennes, outside Paris.

If lasting fame was what she wanted, her untimely and violent death sealed the deal. She was already famous as an exotic dancer; her execution meant that she, using Howe's words, "has become, undeservedly, the most notorious, the most well-known of all spies, with a name that has meaning to hundreds of millions all over the world" (Howe 1986, 275). She became a legend, portrayed on the silver screen in 1927 by the German actress Magda Sonja, in 1931 by Greta Garbo in what was reportedly the Swedish star's commercially most successful film, and in 1964 by the French actress, singer and director Jeanne Moreau. In 2017 the French actress Vahina Giocante portrayed her in a 12-episode television series. A documentary about her and a film made for television were also released that year. The name of Mata Hari resonates to this day.

Was she guilty of the charge of revealing secrets to the Germans? Howe's assessment, based on the most extensive research carried out so far, is that she was not. The Australian journalist Philip Knightley (1986, 49) agrees, writing that she was shot "not because she was a dangerous spy, but because it was militarily and politically expedient to shoot her, and because of what she was". In 1917, France was weary of a war that had not gone well. Her prosecution provided a diversion, and the outcome may have led some people to believe that the

country's military plight was due in part to Mata Hari's allegedly nefarious activities. Besides, racism, misogyny and moral disapproval may all have played roles. She pretended to be Eurasian, and this may have been held against her. Moreover, she was not only a woman but a 'fallen' one. To some people this may have made the charge of spying more believable.

In October 1920, Bandung welcomed a prominent visitor from France. After a term as prime minister that began in November 1917 and ended in January 1920, Georges Clemenceau spent six months traveling through South and Southeast Asia. Bandung was among the places he visited, and, as mayor, Steven Reitsma was his host. According to my aunt, who heard the account from her father more than once, he used the encounter with his august guest to raise the matter of his cousin's execution three years earlier. The statesman was unapologetic, reportedly saying: "*Quand il s'agit d'exécuter des espions, mieux vaut un de plus qu'un de moins*" ('When it comes to executing spies, one too many is better than missing one').

My aunt's tale did not include what, if anything, her father said in response to Clemenceau's remark. I do know from her and from my cousin Tjitte Reitsma, who inherited some of his correspondence, that he went to his grave believing Greet to be innocent of spying for the Germans. What I do not and cannot know is how he would have reacted to the status she has come to enjoy in their town of birth. In the 1990s the Fries Museum opened a hall devoted to the life of the woman it describes as 'Friesland's most famous daughter'.⁶ (My aunt was miffed that she had not been invited to the opening: "*Ik ben toch een nicht van haar?*" ('But am I not a cousin of hers?')) In 2017, the museum marked the centenary of Mata Hari's death with a major exhibition that added to her legend. I am sure my grandfather would have recognized the irony, but I cannot believe he would have enjoyed it. He lived a long life marked by solid accomplishment on two continents and has been all but forgotten. His scandalous cousin's name is known around the world. He might have reflected on the difference between meritoriousness and celebrity. They are often unrelated.

⁶ <https://www.friesmuseum.nl/en/collection/icons/mata-hari>

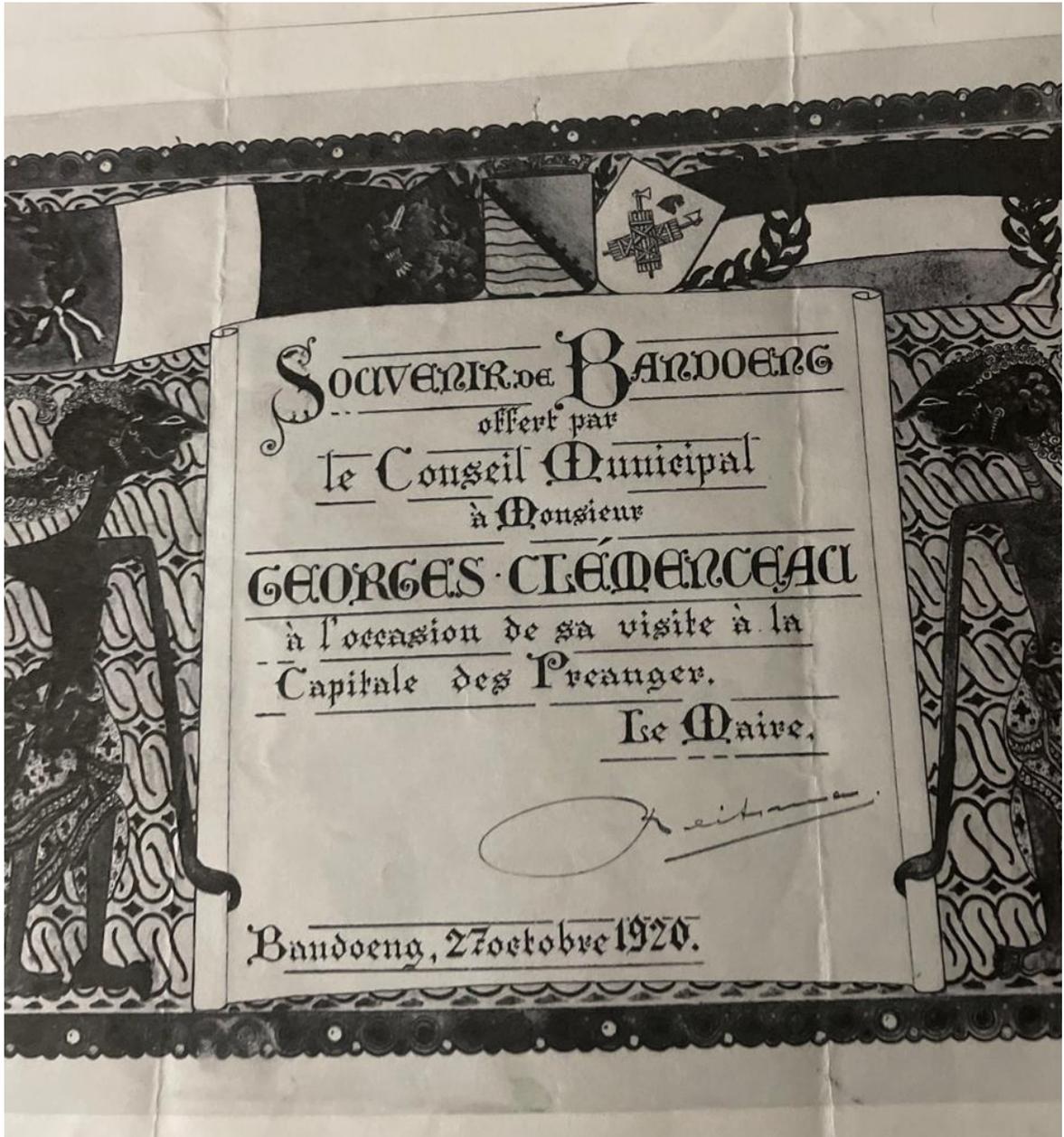


Figure 4. Memento presented to Georges Clemenceau on his visit to Bandung in 1920, signed by Steven Anne Reitsma. Author's private collection.

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