

The Life of Governor Joan Gideon Loten (1710-1789)



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A Personal History of a Dutch Virtuoso

ALEXANDER J.P. RAAT



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Cover illustration: Front cover: Pieter Cornelis de Bevere, *Collection of birds from Sri Lanka*, circa 1754. Loten collection Natural History Museum, London. The black bird on the right is Loten's Sunbird, *Cinnyris lotenia lotenia* (Linnaeus, 1766); Peter Mazell, engraving after watercolours in the Loten collection of the Orange Minivet, *Pericrocotus flammeus* (Forster, 1781) and the Ceylon little Minivet, *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* (Linnaeus, 1766). Detail of plate XV in Johann Reinhold Forster *Indische Zoologie* (1781).
Back cover: Jean Michel Aubert, *Waterfall near Maros, Sulawesi*, circa 1745. Detail of drawing in pen and brush. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam (RP-T-00-3230); John Bird, *Portable astronomical 12-inch quadrant* from the collection of Joan Gideon Loten, circa 1772. University Museum, Utrecht. Background front cover and back cover: Pieter Cornelis de Bevere or Balthasar van Lier, *Country seat of Governor of Ceylon Uytvlught*, circa 1755. Detail of watercolour. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam (RP-T-00-3250).

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A Personal History of a Dutch Virtuoso



John Gideon Loten, F.R.S. & F.S.A.

All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an action of the imagination, that realises the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motion would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves.

Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* no 60, 13 October 1750

Voor Annemarie van Santen
uit liefde
en in bewondering

Preface

I met Joan Gideon Loten in Leiden's Natural History Museum in August of 1976. In the room of late professor Hilbrand Boschma, former director of this Museum,¹ I discovered a letter written to him by Alex C. Townsend who at that time was librarian at the British Museum (Natural History) in London. The letter had been posted in August of 1958 and contained the original manuscript of Joan Gideon Loten's description of watercolours with birds and plants from Sri Lanka, Sulawesi and Java.² In his letter mr Townsend asked professor Boschma to comment on this document. However, professor Boschma never responded to this request, possibly because the letter had disappeared in the chaotic pile of manuscripts and correspondence to be found on Boschma's desk. I decided to answer mr Townsend's letter. Thus, more than fifty years after the receipt of Alex Townsend's letter, this is the belated response to his question.

From August 1976 until May 1978, I did short-term contract work for Leiden's Natural History Museum and my efforts during that time were mainly concentrated on Loten's watercolour collections in London and Haarlem. I studied and described the drawings, and compared them with their engraved copies in eighteenth-century ornithological books. It was evident that more than forty watercolours had a taxonomical type status. I also prepared a short biographical sketch of Loten as an introduction to my inventory of his natural history collection. I had completed most of this work by 1978 when I changed jobs and became a fish biologist. Unfortunately, the career that took me into freshwater fisheries did not give me the opportunity to complete my catalogue of the Loten collection. Even so, I did publish three papers in Dutch which summarised Loten's life and gave details of his natural history collection. Then, in September of 2005 when I had concluded my last project in fisheries, I was finally able to resume my studies of Joan Gideon Loten.

Loten's private documents introduced me to an impulsive and charming man, whose emotions were as lifelike as those of my most intimate friends. Loten had many interests, his natural history activities formed only part of these; he was also active in astronomy, cartography and navigation. His manuscripts and book collection show his lifelong interest in history, genealogy and heraldry. Loten lived not only in Utrecht, my own place of residence, but also in the Dutch East Indies and in Horace Walpole and Samuel Johnson's fascinating London.

After studying Loten for over 30 years I realise that in August of 1976, I had met my eighteenth-century alter ego. I changed my initial idea to write a short study of the life of the ‘naturalist Governor of Ceylon’ and resolved to write a detailed reconstruction based primarily upon ego-documents. Being fascinated by a person is a serious pitfall for a biographer, identifying with the subject’s experiences a horror to the critics of the genre. There is the danger that such stories spiral into hagiography. Nevertheless I decided to confront my affections and to go ahead and write the life of this Dutch version of the English eighteenth-century *virtuoso* in the hope of finding out what forces drove him personally and what issues influenced his career and his achievements.

Utrecht December 2009
Lex Raat

Contents

Preface	7
Introduction	17
Biography of a Dutch <i>Virtuoso</i>	17
An Account of Loten's life	19
Printed Sources	21
Loten's Natural History Collection	25
Transcription, translation of terminology and annotation	26
Currency conversion and purchasing power	27
Chronology Life Joan Gideon Loten	29
Acknowledgements	32
Chapter 1 Ancestry and Youth 1710-1731	34
1 Loten's Ancestry	34
<i>Genealogy</i>	34
2 Youth Joan Gideon Loten	40
<i>Loten's Parents</i>	40
<i>Early impressions</i>	42
<i>Family life at Schadeshoeve</i>	46
<i>School and University</i>	49
<i>Joseph Loten</i>	53
<i>Apprenticeship</i>	55
<i>Arnout Loten</i>	56
Chapter 2 Loten's VOC-Career 1731-1757	60
1 Voyage To Batavia	60
<i>Sea voyage to Batavia</i>	60
<i>Natural history observations</i>	66
<i>Batavia 1732-1733</i>	68
<i>Marriage</i>	69
2 Loten's VOC-career	71
<i>Loten's Indian career</i>	71
<i>Role of Loten's family</i>	72
3 Company Servant	77

	<i>Semarang</i>	77
	<i>Governor of Macassar</i>	82
	<i>Batavia</i>	91
	<i>Assigned to Bantam</i>	93
	<i>Governor of Ceylon</i>	97
4	Shocking atrocities in Celebes	103
	<i>George Beens' early career</i>	103
	<i>Beens in Boelecomba</i>	105
	<i>Loten and the invasion of the Southern provinces of Celebes</i>	108
	<i>Governor Jan Dirk Van Clootwijk</i>	111
	<i>Beens in Patria</i>	116
5	Conflicts with Servants in Ceylon	118
	<i>Anthony Mooijaert</i>	118
	<i>Noël Anthony Lebeck</i>	122
6	Life in the Dutch East Indies	125
	<i>Semarang</i>	125
	<i>Death of Deliana Blesius</i>	127
	<i>Field trips near Semarang</i>	130
	<i>Books in the East Indies</i>	133
	<i>Batavia</i>	135
	<i>Macassar</i>	136
	<i>Batavia</i>	139
	<i>Ceylon</i>	140
	<i>Death Anna Henrietta Van Beaumont</i>	141
	<i>Van Der Bruggen family</i>	144
7	Return to Patria	150
	<i>Preparations</i>	151
	<i>Voyage to Patria</i>	155
8	Astronomy	160
	<i>Astronomical instruments and books</i>	160
	<i>Astronomical observations</i>	163
9	Loten's Financial Position	166
	<i>Inheritance Nathanael Steinmetz</i>	167
	<i>Loten's East Indian Capital</i>	168
	<i>Reconstruction of the East Indian capital</i>	171
	<i>Shares in the Opium Society</i>	173
	Chapter 3 First Years in England 1759-1763	176
1	Utrecht and London 1758-1759	176
	<i>Return to Utrecht</i>	176
	<i>Departure to England</i>	181
	<i>London and Hammersmith</i>	184
	<i>Deference and preference for female friends</i>	187
	<i>Loten family in England</i>	191

	<i>Health complaints</i>	193
2	Loten's Investments	194
	<i>Investments in England</i>	194
	<i>Loten's silver plate and silver instruments</i>	195
3	Polite and Learned Society	198
	<i>Loten and the British Museum</i>	198
	<i>Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS)</i>	200
	<i>Fellow Society of Antiquaries of London (FSA)</i>	202
4	England 1760-1762	203
	<i>Winter and Spring 1760</i>	203
	<i>Marriage 'a jump over the ditch'</i>	206
	<i>Inflammation of the bladder</i>	210
	<i>Loten's maid Sitie from Celebes</i>	211
	<i>Winter in London 1761-1762</i>	213
	<i>Cousin van Kinschot</i>	217
	<i>Return to Utrecht</i>	219
5	Utrecht and London 1762-1763	221
	<i>Gijsbert Jan van Hardenbroek</i>	221
	<i>François Doublet</i>	222
	<i>Christina Clara Strick van Linschoten</i>	224
	<i>Unexpected 'bad usage' in Utrecht</i>	257
	<i>London 1762-1763</i>	259
	<i>End Seven Years War</i>	263
	<i>Indian affairs</i>	267
	Chapter 4 Loten's Tour on the Continent 1763-1764	271
1	Tour on the Continent	271
	<i>Preparations</i>	271
	<i>Journal of my Tour in 1763 & 1764</i>	273
2	Paris	276
	<i>Journey to Paris</i>	276
	<i>Parisian Journal</i>	277
3	Travelling in France	287
	<i>From Paris to Dijon</i>	287
	<i>From Dijon to Montpellier</i>	289
	<i>Montpellier</i>	292
	<i>Winter in Hyères</i>	294
	<i>From Hyères to Geneva</i>	296
4	Switzerland and Austrian Flanders	297
	<i>Geneva</i>	297
	<i>Travelling in Switzerland</i>	298
	<i>Basel</i>	299
	<i>Alsace & Lorraine</i>	301
	<i>Austrian Flanders & Brabant</i>	302

Chapter 5 Marriage and Travel 1764-1770	305
1 London 1764-1765	305
<i>Return in London</i>	306
<i>New Burlington Street London</i>	307
<i>Living in England 1764-1765</i>	310
2 Marriage	311
<i>Lettrice Cotes' Family</i>	311
<i>Marriage</i>	313
<i>Health problems</i>	316
3 Utrecht and London 1765-1770	317
<i>Friends in Utrecht</i>	317
<i>François Doublet's financial affairs</i>	319
<i>Strained relations</i>	321
<i>Dr James Hallifax</i>	322
<i>Alexander Dalrymple</i>	324
<i>Travelling to Holland 1769</i>	329
<i>Utrecht 1769-1770</i>	330
Chapter 6 Declining health 1770-1776	333
1 London 1770-1772	333
<i>Journey to London 1770</i>	333
<i>London 1770-1772</i>	335
<i>Journey to Utrecht</i>	339
2 Exploration of the South Sea	341
<i>Dr Daniel Solander</i>	341
<i>Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771</i>	342
<i>Voyage of the Resolution 1772-1775</i>	345
<i>Books about Captain Cook's voyages</i>	346
3 Family affairs	347
<i>Dirk Willem Van Der Bruggen's death</i>	347
<i>Joan Carel Gideon Van Der Bruggen</i>	349
<i>Anna Henrietta Van Der Bruggen</i>	351
4 Utrecht and London 1772-1775	357
<i>Loten in Utrecht 1772-1773</i>	357
<i>Return to London 1773</i>	360
<i>Opium registers</i>	361
<i>The effects of London's atmosphere</i>	364
<i>Unpleasant visitors</i>	367
<i>Agreeable distractions</i>	372
<i>Health problems</i>	374
<i>Dislike of England</i>	380
5 Utrecht 1775-1776	383
<i>Return to Utrecht 1775</i>	383
<i>Arnoudina Maria Aerssen Van Juichen's death</i>	387

	<i>Life in Utrecht 1776</i>	389
	<i>Return to London</i>	393
6	Household Matters	396
	<i>Loten's household expenditures</i>	396
	<i>Loten's paintings and prints</i>	399
	<i>Loten's book collection</i>	402
	<i>Books on Natural History, Travel and Medicine</i>	404
	<i>Various titles</i>	407
7	Phenomena of Heaven and Earth	408
	<i>Mathematics and Astronomy</i>	408
	<i>Astronomical Quadrant by John Bird</i>	410
	<i>Have pity with my immortal soul</i>	414
Chapter 7 Portrait of a Lonely Man 1776-1781		418
1	London and Fulham 1776-1779	418
	<i>London and Fulham</i>	419
	<i>Sir Ashton Lever and the Honourable Daines Barrington</i>	422
	<i>Dr Alexander Johnson</i>	425
	<i>Michiel Van Millingen</i>	427
	<i>Loten's activities in London</i>	430
	<i>Aftermath Bantam commission</i>	433
	<i>Melancholy</i>	436
2	Final years in London 1780-1781	438
	<i>Anglo-Dutch conflict</i>	438
	<i>Loten in his study attic in London</i>	441
	<i>Gordon Riots</i>	444
	<i>Loten's health condition</i>	448
	<i>Fourth Anglo-Dutch War</i>	451
	<i>A Dutchman in hostile London</i>	453
	<i>Return to Utrecht</i>	456
Chapter 8 Last Years in Utrecht 1781-1789		461
1	Life in Utrecht	461
	<i>House in Utrecht</i>	461
	<i>Life in Utrecht</i>	462
	<i>Patriot Revolt in Utrecht</i>	466
	<i>Van Wilmsdorff family</i>	469
2	Final Years and Death	471
	<i>Loten's last year</i>	471
	<i>Loten's decease</i>	476
	<i>Loten monument in Westminster Abbey</i>	476
3	Loten's Legacy	478
	<i>Loten's Last Will</i>	478
	<i>Loten's possessions</i>	481

	<i>Loten's Library</i>	482
	<i>Loten's Manuscripts, East Indian Papers and Maps</i>	483
	<i>Last Will Lettice Cotes</i>	485
Chapter 9	The Loten Natural History Collection	487
1	Loten's Natural History Collection	487
	<i>Loten's 'Paper Museum'</i>	489
	<i>History Loten's Natural History Collection</i>	491
	<i>Dispersal Natural History Collection</i>	494
	<i>Reconstruction of the Loten collection</i>	496
2	Loten's Artists	508
	<i>Jean Michel Aubert</i>	508
	<i>Pieter Cornelis De Bevere</i>	509
3	Linnaeus and Loten	511
	<i>Loten and Houuttuyn's Natuurlyke Historie</i>	512
	<i>Loten's birds in the Systema Naturae (1766)</i>	515
4	Loten and George Edwards	516
	<i>Edward's natural history books</i>	517
	<i>Loten's birds in Edwards' Gleanings</i>	517
	<i>Palm cockatoo</i>	520
5	Pennant's <i>Indian Zoology</i>	523
	<i>Thomas Pennant</i>	523
	<i>Pennant's zoology of some distant country</i>	525
	<i>Peter Mazell</i>	527
	<i>Indian Zoology (1769)</i>	528
	<i>Forster's Indische Zoologie (1781)</i>	530
	<i>Birds of Paradise</i>	532
6	Pennant's <i>Synopsis of Quadrupeds and History of Quadrupeds</i>	536
	<i>Synopsis of Quadrupeds and History of Quadrupeds</i>	536
	<i>Loten's Memoirs to Pennant</i>	538
	<i>The Mouse-deer</i>	540
	<i>Deer</i>	541
	<i>The Purple faced Langur</i>	544
	<i>The Buru Babyrusa</i>	544
	<i>The Elephant</i>	546
	<i>The Anoa</i>	547
	<i>The Beaver</i>	548
	<i>The Bison</i>	549
	<i>The Rhinoceros bird</i>	549
7	Peter Brown's <i>New Illustrations of Zoology (1776)</i>	550
	<i>Peter Brown</i>	550
	<i>New Illustrations of Zoology</i>	551
	<i>Brown's Correspondence on New Illustrations of Zoology</i>	552

<i>Loten's watercolours and Peter Brown's New Illustrations of Zoology</i>	553
Epilogue	558
Annexe	566
Loten Genealogy	566
<i>Loten pedigree</i>	566
<i>Hoeyft pedigree</i>	571
<i>Deutz pedigree</i>	573
<i>Schade pedigree</i>	574
<i>Juchen pedigree</i>	575
<i>Van Beaumont pedigree</i>	577
<i>Van Der Bruggen pedigree</i>	578
Description of the plates	581
Samenvatting	589
Notes	595
Notes Preface	595
Notes Introduction	595
Notes Ancestors and Youth 1710-1731	599
Notes Loten's VOC-Career 1731-1757	610
Notes Loten's First Years in England 1759-1763	650
Notes Loten's Tour on the Continent 1763-1764	674
Notes Marriage and Travel 1764-1770	684
Notes Declining health 1770-1776	696
Notes Portrait of a Lonely Man 1776-1781	730
Notes Last Years in Utrecht 1781-1789	748
Notes Natural History Collection	762
Notes Epilogue	782
Notes Annexe	783
Bibliography	784
Abbreviations	784
Manuscript Sources	784
Printed sources	785
Biographical Sources	786
Printed natural history sources (until 1800)	788
General references	790
Register	801
Curriculum Vitae	830