

Obituary Erwin Karel (1956-2019)

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Erwin Karel, an engaged historian of the rural world

April 28, 2019 after a year-long illness Erwin Karel calmly passed away at home. He always was a tremendously friendly and helpful colleague with many organisational skills and also a highly committed and socially involved historian as well as a critical academic. An enormous fascination with the social, economic and environmental problems of the countryside in past and present that were so apparent in the rural parts of the North of the Netherlands characterized his life and work.

Born in Kerkrade (Limburg) in 1956 Erwin H. Karel studied history in Groningen. Even before his graduation in 1982, he stood at the origin of the *Geschiedeniswinkel* – a kind of “History Workshop” at the university on behalf of (social) organisations that lacked financial backing. He left this institute in 1987 for a twelve-year career as a freelance researcher, writing the histories of companies and educational institutions, and working for unions and others. In this period, he published six books and numerous articles on social and regional history.

During these years as a young professional historian, Erwin became interested in twentieth century developments in peat regions, in particular those in the Dutch province of Drenthe. As early as 1988, he edited the memories of peat labourer Douwe Veen, and later he wrote the history of a peat company (1991) and extensive chapters on the peat-processing industry in Drenthe (1997). With his 1995 bibliography of historical research on Drenthe 1984-1993, he established himself as an expert in the history of this province. That same year, Erwin Karel proved to be a real agrarian historian with his contributions to the history of the Agricultural Society of the province of Guiderland.

With such achievements, a return to the University of Groningen in 1999 to start a PhD-project – with prof. Pim Kooij as main supervisor – at the Netherlands Agronomic Historical Institute (NAHI) was an obvious next step. Soon he also became the co-ordinator of this national institute. Erwin Karel intervened – partly together with his colleague Vincent Tassenaar – in the public debate on the extent of the poverty of peat labourers in Drenthe around 1900, with a characteristically –nuanced approach, not always quite appreciated by his opponents. In addition to preparing his thesis on post WW2 Dutch rural agrarian development policy and to his involvement in the organisation of NAHI, he managed to remain very active in the field of regional history as editor-in-chief of the Drenthe historical journal *Waardeel* (2000-2004), also contributing several articles himself.

In the meantime, Erwin Karel finished his dissertation *De maakbare boer. Streekverbetering als instrument in de Nederlandse landbouwpolitiek 1953-1970* [Modelling the farm-family. The Rural Area Development Program as an instrument of the Dutch Agricultural policy 1953-1970], that appeared as no 37 in the NAHI publication series *Historia Agriculturae* (2005). In this thorough and scientifically important book, he analysed the sociological-theoretical background of this development program, tracing its roots to the modernisation paradigm. He also evaluated the actual implementation of the programme and the effect on the daily life of farmers.

Subsequently, Erwin became lecturer in Economic and Social History at the University of Groningen and a fellow of the Dutch-Flemish N.W. Posthumus Institute, while continuing his important co-ordinating role within the NAHI. This involved co-writing of research proposals with its director Pim Kooij, and later with his successor Maarten Duijvendak, and with others. After a few years if successful, the results of these projects had to be prepared for publication as books in the series *Historia Agriculturae* - all in all a dozen until Erwin's premature death.

Erwin focused his research on the connection of the Northern Netherlands with global developments, and particularly on the connection between the modernisation of rural society and agriculture in the Netherlands and social opportunities (glocalisation). It brought him international recognition, as shown in his contributions for two books in the CORN series *Rural economy and society in North-western Europe 500-2000* (2011 and 2015) on family and labour, and on agricultural productivity and the environment.

The first of these CORN-contributions was part of his project (with Richard Paping) on the parish of Oosterhesselen in Drenthe between 1740 and 1900. From 2004 onward, Erwin worked enthusiastically with an active group of volunteers to assemble information on all inhabitants of the parish of Oosterhesselen in Drenthe between 1740 and 1900. This small society was chosen as a case study of a fairly traditional rural Dutch sand community of small and large peasants. Erwin put a lot of effort in the construction of a huge digital dataset based on a comprehensive family reconstitution.

The project was inspired by Erwin's fascination with the ordinary lives of common people, their daily troubles, and the choices they faced. It was history from 'below'. Erwin was able to provide insight into major developments through small histories. Alone or in collaboration with Paping or Tassenaar, Erwin published several articles based on these data in international, national and regional journals and volumes, covering topics like marriage patterns (2004), local migration (2011), local farmer elites (2013), and standard-of-living (height) and life expectancy (2016). For instance, his "rural succession myth" article (2011) showed that in the period 1740-1860 – contrary to suggestions in some literature – family continuity on farms was quite low and mobility was high in apparently traditional Drenthe. Not surprisingly, Erwin Karel became the daily supervisor of Floor Groefsema's PhD-project on family succession on farms in Western Europe since WW2.

Building on his experience with huge datasets, Erwin analysed the 19th and early 20th century personal Civil Registration data of the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe. This resulted in his most recently published article on German-Dutch migration (April 2019). His knowledge of Dutch rural and regional history also led him to prepare major contributions to the latest *History of Groningen* (2009) and the accompanying provincial TV-broadcast series. Even during his last months, Erwin Karel remained active as the editor of the *Historisch Jaarboek Groningen* [Historical Yearbook Groningen].

Over the years, agricultural and rural history led him more and more into environmental history and the ecological heritage. His interest in the relation between the human and the environment in historical development is clearly visible in his *Boeren tussen markt en maatschappij. Essays over effecten van de modernisering van het boerenbestaan in Nederland 1945-2012* [Farmers between market and society. Essays on the effects of modernisation on peasant life in the Netherlands 1945-2012] (2013). In this highly acclaimed book, he shows how farmers had to negotiate between government, the market and nature. Over the years Erwin Karel became a recognised specialist in this field, testified by his appearances as discussant on several occasions within the NW Posthumus community and abroad. With Yves Segers he edited an issue of the *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* [Yearbook of Environmental History] (2014) and was very much involved in its transformation into the international *Journal for the History of Environment & Society* (2016) of which he joined the editorial board.

Erwin Karel was not only a dedicated researcher but also was a devoted teacher. Students appreciated his approach, as was shown in several reactions to his death. "He treated students as self-responsible individuals and he was easy going and relaxed when lecturing and in his tutorials" and "His teaching style made courses that most students experience as difficult, manageable for almost all students". Some students gave him a nickname because of this attitude: they called him the scientific version of Elton John, because of his hairstyle,

eighties clothing and accessibility. For Erwin it was not only the student's own development that was important. He stressed the significance of historical research for the present. 'Being a responsible historian', he did not only apply this maxim to his own work, but also expected students to reflect on the social role of the historian. For Erwin, being a responsible historian meant for instance the promotion of environmental history courses at the University of Groningen, which he organised for many years together with NAHI associate Henk van Zon.

In his last months, Erwin continued his work on a book on the conflicts connected to the gas extraction in Groningen since 1959. When he found that he would not physically be able to finish the book, he made sure that three of the chapters could appear as articles. It would have been his twelfth book – a very respectable number.

With his death, we have lost an empathic colleague, a dedicated researcher and an engaged historian. Some of his inspiration will live on in us for many more years to come.

Maarten Duijvendak & Richard Paping