The *NWIG*@100

A century ago the political future of the Caribbean was uncertain. Autonomy or independence was not yet on the horizon for the remaining colonies, but a shift of colonial power relations seemed possible. After all, in 1917 Denmark had sold St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. Jan/John to the new world power, the United States.¹ This transaction had reverberations throughout the region. In an editorial in *The Independent*, a New York weekly magazine, Edwin E. Slosson put possible changes in sovereignty in the region squarely in a global perspective. In the aftermath of World War I, the maps of the world were being rearranged and in his view the Caribbean was part of this reshuffling. “The war has shown plainly what was beginning to be realized before, that the tropical American colonies of the European powers are in an unfortunate and untenable position and the question of what is to become of them has been much discussed.”²

Slosson argued that the British West Indies would either be annexed to Canada or ceded to the United States. He listed a number of arguments in favor of such constitutional changes. First, it would contribute to the aim of the Monroe Doctrine to eliminate European power in the New World. The “freeing” of Puerto Rico and Cuba in 1898 was seen as the first step in this process. Moreover, in relation to World War I, there apparently were suggestions that Britain would cede its Caribbean islands to the United States as repayment for its war debt.

Second, he believed it was in the interest of the islands themselves: “tropical islands can only prosper when connected with a temperate country, but the closer the two are consistent with the difference in latitude the better for both.” More specifically, England would never be able to do for the islands what

- 1 In 1916 in a nonbinding referendum in Denmark 283,670 people voted in favor of the sale, and 158,157 against. The inhabitants of the islands did not have a vote, but an unofficial poll on St. Croix organized by labor leader David Hamilton Jackson revealed that 4,027 voted for selling the island and 7 against. In his own newspaper *The Herald* (August 12, 1916), Hamilton Jackson threatened rebellion if the sale of the colony to the USA was not implemented (<https://www.virgin-islands-history.org/en/history/david-hamilton-jackson/david-hamilton-jackson-born-1884-died-1946/>, accessed April 27, 2019).
- 2 Edwin E. Slosson, “The Question of the Caribbean,” *The Independent*, September 20, 1919 <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433115511457;view=1up;seq=406> (accessed April 27, 2019).

the United States could. Slosson claimed that the “unprecedented” prosperity of Puerto Rico and Cuba “was one of the reasons why the Danish Islands were anxious to come to us.”

After discussing this presumed geopolitical and economic logic, at the very end of his opinion piece he mentioned the sale of Dutch Guiana to the United States, as it “is openly advocated both in Holland and in Paramaribo.” This essay reached Suriname by way of newspapers in Paramaribo and echoed the rumors that had been going around for some time.

It was in this period of uncertainty, with discussion of a possible sale of Suriname as well as the islands of Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius, and Saba, that the *West Indian Guide* was founded. A number of educated men in the colonies deemed it necessary to stimulate interest in the Netherlands itself in its Caribbean possessions.³ “How does one want to do a good job in the interest of the colonies, when one barely knows where the colonies are and the population and conditions are totally unknown?”⁴ The editors’ goal was to generate knowledge and enthusiasm among Dutch politicians and officials for its colonies in “the West.” The lack of interest in the Caribbean certainly was not a new phenomenon, but the growing U.S. influence created urgency.⁵ The possible transfer of sovereignty to the United States caused a certain amount of unrest in the Dutch parliament and in newspapers in Suriname and Curaçao.

The sale of the Virgin Islands and the growing influence of the United States were primarily seen from a military and geopolitical perspective, but as an anonymous author in the *Amigoe di Curaçao* warned: “this americanism” could be a worry for Europe in the near future. The author underscored U.S. economic power. He argued that the Dutch should not consider a transfer of sovereignty but instead interest themselves more in the welfare of their Caribbean colonies.⁶ This theme of neglect and ignorance returned in different Dutch Caribbean newspaper articles and reached its (modest) apex in the spring of 1918 when rumors about a possible sale of financially strapped Suriname reached parliament. The Dutch government officially declared that it was “unthinkable” to cede such an “important part” of its kingdom. This involved

3 The driving force in the early years of the journal was Herman Benjamins, a Suriname-born educational inspector, who propagated Dutch as the medium of instruction in Suriname.

4 <https://brill.com/view/journals/nwig/1/1/nwig.1.issue-1.xml> (accessed April 27, 2019).

5 See for example, *Neerlandia* 23 (1919) and 24 (1920) (https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_neeo03191901_01_0152.php and https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_neeo03192001_01_01_0312.php, accessed April 5, 2019).

6 “De Verenigde Staten en de West-Indische eilanden” by “H.,” *Amigoe de Curaçao*, June 30, 1917 (for all newspaper references from Suriname and Curaçao see <https://www.delpher.nl/nl/kranten/> accessed April 26, 2019).

prestige and precedent and the two were clearly intertwined. In contrast to Denmark, the Netherlands considered itself a “true colonial power” and selling Suriname was not only seen as a failure of colonial policy, the notion that Suriname might be sold was seen by Dutch politicians as potentially opening the door to the sale of the remaining colonies to other powers.⁷ In the Dutch parliament, social-democrat Henri van Kol was one of the main protagonists in debates on Suriname and Curaçao’s budget and policy and considered a “friend of Suriname and the Dutch Antillean islands.” Not coincidentally, he is the author of the opening article in the *West Indian Guide* that starts with a translated epigraph by John Locke, “The sooner you treat him as a man, the sooner he will begin to be one.”⁸ The *West Indian Guide*’s aims were to reverse the marginalization of the Dutch Caribbean in the empire, increase knowledge about the colonies, and promote Dutch values.

A century later the (geo)political realities have of course changed. The United States didn’t buy any more Caribbean territories, Puerto Rico is still an unincorporated territory of the United States, while Cuba moved out of the U.S. orbit after its Revolution. Most of the British-held colonies as well as Suriname became independent in the postwar wave of decolonization. The French territories are now overseas departments or collectivities of France and the six Dutch Antillean islands are autonomous countries or special municipalities within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Yet, the U.S. cultural, political, military, and economic influence has been such that the past 100 years are widely recognized as the American century.

Despite this American influence and centuries of colonial oppression, the Caribbean peoples continue to search for their autonomous identities, by acknowledging, albeit sometimes reluctantly, that almost everybody has come from somewhere else. These histories of migration, forced or not, have brought people from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas whose cultural traces and memories are intermingled with one another. The complicated processes of negotiation and inclusion characterize Caribbean culture.

What has happened to the *West Indian Guide* in the 100 years of its existence? My predecessors, including P. Wagenaar Hummelick, have written short histories to celebrate milestones and to reflect on changing times. Gert Oost-indie authored the most recent special edition on the occasion of the *Guide*’s 75th anniversary in 1994. He sketched the journal’s history within a Caribbean

7 See, for example, *De West*, April 23, 1918; *De Surinamer*, April 28, 1918; *De West*, October 1, 1918; *De Surinamer*, October 3, 1918; *De West*, September 30, 1919; and *De Surinamer*, October 5, 1919.

8 H. van Kol, “De Koloniale Staten,” *WTG* 1 (1919), pp. 5–23 (https://brill.com/view/journals/nwig/1/1/article-p5_4.xml, accessed April 27, 2019).

context and its development from its rather parochial and paternalistic beginnings to an English-language, pan-Caribbean, peer-reviewed journal featuring authors from the region, the United States, South America, and Europe.⁹ I should hasten to add that this expansion was not prompted because the journal had reached its goal of promoting a growing Dutch interest in the region. As a matter of fact, in the Netherlands, the knowledge and notice of the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom has unfortunately remained negligible.

Previous anniversary editions included an index on articles, review articles, and books reviewed. This tradition has become obsolete. Digitization of the journal has been a major development in the twenty-first century and enables quick searches for publications by author's names, topics, countries, et cetera. The first step in this process was the decision of the *NWIG*'s publisher, the KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian Studies to digitize all issues of both its journals, the *NWIG* and the *BKI* (*Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*), and make them freely available on dedicated journal platforms on the Internet.¹⁰ With the financial support of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), KITLV made both journals Open Access in 2010; continued financial support of KITLV's Learned Society enables the journals to waive author's fees. In 2019 all articles (more than 1300 so far), research notes and discussions (plus 15), review articles (more than 130), and reviews (more than 2500) published in the *NWIG* are accessible throughout the world without restrictions. In 2018, the journal counted 79,836 full text downloads. In short, the (*N*)*WIG* has evolved from a Dutch-Caribbean journal with a limited scope to an English-language, pan-Caribbean, fully Open Access journal, ensuring worldwide dissemination of content.

The continued production of the *NWIG* is only possible with the steadfast support of literally hundreds of people: *NWIG*'s longtime book review editors Richard and Sally Price,¹¹ authors, book reviewers, anonymous reviewers of submissions, copy-editors, technical support staff, the Editorial Board, the International Advisory Board, and since 2013 Brill Academic Publishers. I want to thank you all for keeping this centenarian alive and kicking!

Rosemarijn Hoefte

Editor-in-Chief

9 See for example: "Index Register op de jaargangen XL–LV, 1960–1981," *NWIG* 56 (3/4) 1982 and "Index 1982–1993," published with *NWIG* 68 (1994). In 1959 the *West-Indische Gids* merged with *Vox Guyanae* (Suriname) and *Christoffel* (Curaçao) and continued as the *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*.

10 <https://brill.com/view/journals/nwig/nwig-overview.xml?lang=en>.

11 For an overview of the book review process, see their review article "Bookshelf" in this issue.