CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WAR

Director Willem Kieft

By 1644, when the classis decided yet again to postpone a verdict in the Dinclagen case until Bogardus came to Holland, a new conflict had arisen that made it desirable for the minister to report in person. He now had serious problems with the director himself. After the dismissal of Wouter van Twiller in 1637, Willem Kieft had been appointed director of New Netherland. Few men in history have made such a bad name for themselves as Kieft, the “William the Testy” of Washington Irving’s History of New York (1809), stigmatized as the author of “Kieft’s War.”

Born in Amsterdam in August 1602, Willem Kieft was the youngest son of Gerrit Willemsz, merchant in the Baltic area who lived on the Oudeschans (Old Sconce), and Machteld Huydecoper, daughter of the councilor and alderman Jan Jacobsz Bal, alias Huydecoper. Machteld’s younger half-brother Joan Huydecoper (1599–1661) would later become one of the richest and most prominent burgomasters of Amsterdam’s Golden Age. On his father’s side Willem was closely related to the Pauw family, another powerful clan of merchants, councilors, and burgomasters of old Amsterdam. Adriaen Pauw (1585–1653), an ambitious and versatile politician who served as grand pensionary of Holland in 1631–1636 and again in 1651–1653, was his second cousin.

1 All the archival sources on Kieft’s origin and background have been processed, and current errors have been corrected in Willem Frijhoff, ‘Neglected networks: Director Willem Kieft (1602–1647) and his Dutch relatives’, in: Joyce D. Goodfriend (ed.), Revisiting New Netherland: Perspectives on early Dutch America [The Atlantic World: Europe, Africa and the Americas, 1500–1830] (Leiden & Boston 2005), 147–204. It should be observed that he was much younger than is often thought. Cf. Dictionary of American Biography, X (New York 1933; 2d ed. 1961), 370–371 (by A. Hyma); Johan E. Elias, De vroedschap van Amsterdam, 1578–1795 (2 vols., Haarlem 1903), I, 187–188; American National Biography, XII (1999), 657–658 (by Samuel Willard Crompton).

2 On the Pauw family and their wealth: Kees Zandvliet, De 250 rijksten van de Gouden eeuw: Kapitaal, macht, familie en levensstijl (Amsterdam 2006), 117–119, n° 57 (Adriaen); 190, n° 105 (Michiel); Elias, De Vroedschap, I, 185–186, 192–193.
And Adriaen’s younger brother Michiel Pauw (1590–1640), merchant and ambassador, was a director of the WIC until 1636 and founder of the patroonship Pavonia in New Netherland, which he sold to the WIC in 1637, the year of Kieft’s appointment. Willem clearly did not lack social status and could enjoy protection in high places.

In 1649 the anonymous author of the pamphlet Breeden-Raedt, a declared enemy of Kieft, simply summed up the gossip about him in order to discredit his directorship. The accusations were especially devastating because they touched his honor—and without honor it was impossible to hold a position of authority in public life. After finishing school Kieft had apprenticed himself to a merchant in La Rochelle, then struck out on his own in the wine trade. Like so many other Dutchmen in those years, however, he went bankrupt there—“for which, in keeping with the local custom, his portrait was nailed to the gallows,” according to a rumor in the Breeden-Raedt that was already circulating in 1644. It was also whispered that Kieft had dipped his fingers into the funds collected to free Christian slaves in the Mediterranean area. The cheapest prisoners he ransomed immediately in order to give his activities a semblance of selflessness, but when it came to the more expensive ones, he allegedly asked their parents and friends for extra money, which he pocketed himself. Biographical dictionaries of the Netherlands have not deemed Kieft worthy of an article, but the Dutch writer Ewald Vanvugt has given him a place of honor in his gallery of colonial arch villains. That black legend is actually based solely on the testimony of his enemies: captain David Pietersz de Vries, jonker Adriaen van der Donck, the colonists Jochem Kuyter and Cornelis

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4 NIHM, II, 233–234 (July 7, 1644). There is no trace of such a sentence concerning Kieft in La Rochelle, Archives départementales de la Charente-Maritime, série B, but there are some gaps in these sources.