

The Topicality of Wopke Eekhoff (1809-1880): an Interpretation of the Tasks of the First Salaried Town Archivist of the Netherlands

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In the archivists' field, looking back has not been considered sexy for years. Archivists want to be associated with anything but dust. Our predecessors may well have performed good and useful work, but today we face very different challenges. This is why archivists need to look ahead, "indeed, now more than ever", as the host of the anniversary congress of the KVAN, Lieuwe Zoodma, told us in a preview that was published in the *Archievenblad* (Archives Magazine).¹ Information professionals no longer have any use for predecessors who tried their best to manage (and preserve) their paper archives as pieces of evidence, as memorials, and as sources for future historical research. No, we have got our hands full with changes in the information society caused by digitalisation. Although it is important to discuss 'new, professional core values', 'digital durability', 'software sustainability' and 'persistent identifiers', it is also good to occasionally reflect on predecessors from a time before our celebratory association was founded. Wopke Eekhoff (1809-1880) was one of those nineteenth century archivists already looking for durable solutions for the disorder in which their organisations' archives often found themselves. He was the very first salaried town archivist in the Netherlands, holding this post from 1838 to 1880, thus for over forty years.

Self-Made Archivist

Wopke Eekhoff grew up in a silversmith family from Groningen, his father established himself in Leeuwarden in 1799. He became a booksellers assistant to Lambertus Schierbeek, who, apart from being a printer, also worked as a bookbinder and bookseller. Eekhoff had been interested in history early in life. At an extremely young age he resolved to make a 'Historical and Geographical Description of Friesland' and also one of his hometown, Leeuwarden. Talk about ambition! However Wopke, being unschooled, was not simply granted access to the attic of Leeuwarden's town hall in order to consult original manuscripts. He needed a way in. At the age of nineteen, he won the second prize in the Leeuwarden Department of the Society for Public Welfare for a series of descriptions of the 'Lives of Famous Frisians'. That prize would be important to his future career. It brought him into contact with, as Eekhoff said himself, "skilled and significant persons", such as the former Governor of Friesland, esquire Idsert Aebinga van Humalda, and Arent van Halmael, who worked for the Military Court. They ensured that, from 1883, Eekhoff had free access to the Leeuwarden Town Archives to research the town's history.² He was also allowed to use an office at the town hall.

When he first entered the 'book room' and the other rooms on the second floor of the town hall, Eekhoff found the town archives and the library in an extremely neglected state. From the very outset, he tried to restore order to the archives. At the request of the town council, Eekhoff organised "all sorts of Municipal Rights, Permits, Contracts, etcetera". He continued the work of his predecessor Gerard Voorda and started updating the latter's 1805 inventory. From 1803 until his death in 1805, Voorda had also been allowed to officially carry the title 'archivist (archivarius) of this town'. This made Leeuwarden, over two hundred years ago and before Eekhoff, the first town to appoint someone to work on the archives in a more or less professional, albeit unsalaried, manner.³ Back then, however, the post did not amount to much. The appointment was primarily aimed "to bring the proposed order to the town archives and to rewrite the register and if possible augment it". Voorda finished his task within a year, as attested by the date 9th of June 1803, under the foreword of his printed inventory, and the *douceur* of six golden ducats awarded him on the 2nd of May 1804 for services rendered to the town. After this there were no more activities tied to Voorda's

¹ René Spork, "'We moeten onze blik en aandacht op de toekomst richten, juist nu meer dan ooit'". Voorbeschuwing Jubileumcongres KVAN', *Archievenblad* (2016-4), p. 22.

² See for Eekhoff's life: C.P. Hoekema, Peter Karstkarel and Ph.H. Breuker, *Eekhoff en zijn werk. Leven en werken van Wopke Eekhoff (1809-1880), stadsarchivaris en boekhandelaar te Leeuwarden* (Leeuwarden, 1980). Also: Philippus Breuker, 'Eekhoff, verspreider van Frieslands roem', in: Philippus Breuker, *Opkomst en bloei van het Friese nationalisme, 1740-1875* (Leeuwarden, 2014) pp. 355-366.

³ See: Wim van Driel, 'Gerard Jacob Voorda 1735-1805, de eerste stadsarchivarius van Leeuwarden 1803-1805', *Nederlands Archievenblad* (1981), pp. 312-323 and René Kunst, *Inventaris van het Archief van de Stad Leeuwarden 1426-1811* (Leeuwarden, 2012) pp. 22, 23.

office, so one can correctly consider his title of archivist as honorary.⁴

Voorda's appointment took place during the time the Department Holland appointed Hendrik Wijn to organise its archives, honouring Wijn in 1802 with the new title of '*s Lands Archivarius* (the country's archivist).⁵ Although the title 'archivarius' had already been used by other colleagues and became fairly common later in the nineteenth century, Eekhoff was often teased by his contemporaries when, after his appointment in 1838, he consequently placed the title after his name. This appellation was considered a sign of some serious posturing by someone who had only been appointed 'town archivist'. Some people thought he did this to make himself seem grander than he actually was. After all, Eekhoff was an autodidact, a self-made man, and he should curb his pretensions. It was alleged to be proof of his great vanity. A provincial colleague of Eekhoff, Eelco Verwijs, mockingly called him 'the last of the *archivariussen*' (and also 'prophet Wopke', because it was suggested that not everything Eekhoff wrote was correct). However it was not that unusual for him to use the title; it was in general vogue with nineteenth century archivists.

After Voorda's appointment ended, the Leeuwarden Archives underwent some dramatic years. It had suffered greatly under the reorganisation activities done by the municipal secretary, L. Ypeij, in November 1824. One of the secretary's undertakings, after the transfer of around fifty metres of the state's former judicial archives, was the rash sale of 'waste paper and old books' for 528 guilders, a high sum for the time. The result was the loss of a large number of municipal and provincial tax assessment lists. The fact that someone had now come to the archives to put things into a sensible order, and where possible augment it, was therefore a good thing. Eekhoff's appointment as town archivist was for a period of six years, and initially he earned an annual salary of six hundred guilders. It was a part-time appointment; he was usually at the town hall between ten a.m. to one p.m. on weekdays, apart from Fridays.

In addition to completing his predecessor Voorda's work of registration and inventarisisation so as to make the archives more accessible for everyone, from the time of his appointment in 1838 Eekhoff considered his most important task to be the completion of the *Geschiedkundige Beschrijving van Leeuwarden* (Historical Description of Leeuwarden). It was a historiographical task that he himself had set but which the town council explicitly supported. An initial version of the *Geschiedkundige Beschrijving* was offered to the council. From the beginning, his historical research had made Eekhoff himself one of the most important users of the town archives. He had originally obtained access to the archives for this very thing: research and the historiography of the town. That he was able to simultaneously build up a vast knowledge of the Leeuwarden Archives was not only an important bonus, but extremely important for the future of the old town archives.⁶

It was not long before Eekhoff was called upon for very different matters as well. In this way he increasingly acquired an advisory and informative role within the municipal system. Like a kind of information specialist *avant la lettre*, he kept the town council apprised and showed, for instance, that the archives could serve an important evidentiary function. Important for municipal finances (and certainly for his own reputation), was the result of his research into Leeuwarden's share of the cost of deepening part of the Dokkumer Ee (a waterway north of Leeuwarden). Eekhoff found proof in old archival records that the provincial executive of Friesland was wrong in its sudden attempt to make Leeuwarden pay considerably more for the deepening of the Ee. Eekhoff's work saved the Municipality of Leeuwarden a significant sum of money: over eight thousand guilders. Another example of useful work on the municipality's behalf was his research into the former St. Anna-Leen, a fief near the Oldehove tower, which had been a subject of strife and discord for years. Those who believed to have a claim to it demanded a refund of nearly two million guilders from the town council. Eekhoff was commissioned to investigate this once and for all, and did this so thoroughly that the provincial administration of Friesland ruled in favour of the municipality and dismissed the claim as unfounded. This research conducted by Eekhoff saved the town a hefty sum as well.⁷

⁴ Van Driel, 'Gerard Jacob Voorda'.

⁵ See: F.C.J. Ketelaar, 'Archieven: munimenta en monumenta', in: Frans Grijzenhout ed., *Erfgoed: de geschiedenis van een begrip* (Amsterdam, 2007), pp. 85-107, p. 100.

⁶ See also: Hoekema, *Eekhoff en zijn werk*, pp. 36-37. In the introduction to his *Inventaris*, Kunst called Eekhoff's appointment in 1838 a "blessing for the ravaged town archives" (Kunst, *Inventaris*, p. 23).

⁷ C. Sepp, 'Levensschets van Wopke Eekhoff', in: *Levensberichten der afgestorvene medeleden van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde. Bijlage tot de Handelingen van 1881* (Leiden, 1881), pp. 3-22.

With activities like these, Eekhoff made his function indispensable and was able to secure his own place in the municipal system. It was a very modern approach: it would be foolish to get rid of him when deciding on cutbacks. Eekhoff made sure that he could not be ignored. Six years after his appointment, the council sent a proposal to reappoint him until further notice. A special oversight of the archives committee was set up “to lead the administrative direction of the work”. There was great praise for Eekhoff’s historical research, but despite their appreciation for all his hard work, the committee could not avoid noting that he was weak in inventorial and arranging tasks, “(...) that the activities cover too great a number of matters all at the same time, and that they consider it more important to first finish one major work, for example the great archives cabinet, before searching the insides of another”. So there was criticism of the fact that the inventory was not forthcoming (because Eekhoff’s priority was with historiography), and the criticism continued in later years, when his appointment was more or less permanent.⁸ Now and then there were struggles with the town council about remuneration. There are bitter and fascinating letters from the archivist to his employer, who clearly did not have enough appreciation for all the useful work Eekhoff did and in addition the employer paid too little for it. Eekhoff even threatened to leave once, but later withdrew his threat. In 1849, cutbacks led to his salary being reduced by two hundred guilders, leaving him four hundred guilders. However, the function of archivist was never completely cut in Leeuwarden, and more money was always allocated than anywhere else in the Netherlands.

The situation was very different during the same years in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, for example: in 1841 (three years after Eekhoff’s appointment in Leeuwarden) the rector of the Latin school, C.R. Hermans, was appointed archivist “for the accomodation of the town government and for the benefit of classical historiography and literature”. Hermans earned one hundred guilders, which was considerably less than Eekhoff. Also, in 1849 the function was completely cut in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, and Hermans (also the son of a silversmith) was allowed by the council to continue his work as ‘archivist honoris causa’.⁹ Work had to be done without pay for a long time in other places as well during the nineteenth century. In 1844 Eekhoff’s colleague in Amsterdam, Pieter Scheltema (whom he had contacted about Rembrandt’s wife Saskia Uylenburg, daughter of a mayor of Leeuwarden), received access to the archives and initially received a kind of annual gratuity for his temporary appointment. It was not until 1848 that the capital started to structurally pay its archivist, who, like Eekhoff, also managed the municipal library and the town hall’s museum collections (and was also the provincial archivist since 1848).¹⁰

Civil Servant and Entrepreneur

Eekhoff fulfilled the function of town archivist in effect until a few months before his death on the 12th of February 1880. Although his archives inventory was not published during his lifetime, he did succeed in publishing extensive catalogues of the *Stedelijke Bibliotheek* (Municipal Library) and of the *Stedelijke Kunstverzameling* (Municipal Art Collection), in 1870 and 1875 respectively.¹¹ One must remember that Eekhoff had to do all his archival work as a part-time job; there was no other staff. He could be found down at the town hall every day, but he could not live off archives work. His main income was from his bookshop and publishing house. From the 11th of October 1839 he had a successful business in *De Keizerskroon*, a former public house on the corner of the Peperstraat and the Wirdumerdijk. One could say that Eekhoff was very modern in this respect as well: the combination of his role as civil servant and entrepreneur made him a practitioner of the ‘public private partnership’. Writers and book buyers – the Frisian intellectual elite – got together at the Keizerskroon on Friday afternoons, enabling Eekhoff to build up a good network. His publishing house was small, but it had important publications, like the *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Friesland* (History of the Anabaptists in Friesland) by minister Blaupot ten Cate.

In retrospect, it is a mystery how Eekhoff was able to carry out all these activities at the town hall and in *De Keizerskroon* in one lifetime; he was a member on a considerable number of boards and also maintained an extensive network. He said he spent triple the amount of time working on the archives than

⁸ Hoekema, *Eekhoff en zijn werk*, pp. 40-41.

⁹ See: Jozef Hoekx, ‘Het stadsarchief en zijn eerste ‘archivarius’’, *Bosche Bladen* 1 (1993), pp. 12-15.

¹⁰ H. Brugmans, ‘Scheltema, Dr. Pieter’, in: P.C. Molhuysen and P.J. Blok eds., *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1912), pp. 1278-1279.

¹¹ W. Eekhoff, *De Stedelijke Bibliotheek van Leeuwarden. Catalogus en Geschiedkundige bibliographie* (Leeuwarden, 1870) and W. Eekhoff, *De Stedelijke Kunstverzameling van Leeuwarden* (Leeuwarden, 1875).

what he was actually paid for by the municipality. Eekhoff did have employees in his bookshop. One of them later became the first town archivist of The Hague (1884). From July 1858 until September 1860, Abraham Servaas van Rooijen (1839-1925) was the assistant and roommate of Wopke Eekhoff. It was in Leeuwarden that Van Rooijen acquired his knowledge of the archives and the book trade. In 1860 he left for Utrecht, where he became an independent bookseller, publishing many belletrist works. Thus another bookseller (and publisher) who became an archivist and later also director of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. Incidentally, Van Rooijen was never given a permanent appointment in The Hague, and in 1905 he was not reappointed.¹²

In the daily practice of his public-private partnership, Eekhoff procured numerous hitherto missing archival and collection items for the Leeuwarden town archives, that he picked up from all sorts of places. Directly after his appointment, he added charters and other documents from his own collection, and he enriched 'his' archives with plates, portraits and images. For Eekhoff, activities often tended to intermingle: on his annual trips home and abroad he acquired not only numerous (copies of) Leeuwarden (and Frisian) documents, but by using his commercial insights as an antiquarian he also built up a sizeable *Stedelijke Bibliotheek* (Municipal Library) and a valuable *Stedelijke Kunstverzameling* (Municipal Art Collection), in a time when the market for older material was still in full swing.¹³

Under Eekhoff, the Leeuwarden Archives also had a kind of public function. This consisted of receiving visitors and giving tours of the archives and also the town. Eekhoff received people like pastor (and hiking pioneer) Jacobus Craandijk and writer John Kneppelhout and, for example, the French journalist Henry Havard, who also visited 'the sanctuary of the respectable mister Eekhoff' during his stay in Leeuwarden. Havard was suitably impressed and on that occasion called Eekhoff not only a model archivist but a modern historian as well.¹⁴ Eekhoff, once again ahead of his time, published a *Handboekje voor reizigers door Friesland* (Handbook for Travellers through Friesland) for tourists in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Eekhoff was a man with many, many contacts. He knew many people at home and abroad: a networker *par excellence*, as we would say today. All these relationships were not only beneficial for himself and his business, but were in turn good for the archives. For forty years Eekhoff was a member of the *Nederlandse Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Dutch Society for Dutch Literature). He corresponded with a large number of collectors, librarians and historians. He regularly went to visit his correspondents. He also attended conferences at home and abroad, for example in Lübeck and Kiel, and investigated local archives in order to find historical information about his own town and province. As the former Leeuwarden archivist Jan Folkerts already noted, when looking at Eekhoff's main correspondents, it is remarkable that of the twenty people he wrote to the most, not one of them was an archivist.¹⁶ Nevertheless, he also maintained relationships with his direct peers (of whom there were only a few indeed) and in 1851, forty years before the establishment of the Association of Archivists (VAN), he advocated an annual gathering of Dutch archivists.¹⁷

Eekhoff was in regular contact with, for example, a colleague in Arnhem, Isaak Anne Nijhoff (1795-1863), who was also someone who had combined a bookshop and a publishing house with the office of archivist. Nijhoff was the first (salaried) provincial archivist of the Netherlands. Like Eekhof, he was an autodidact and a tireless historian (in addition, he had lived in Leeuwarden for a number of years during his youth).¹⁸ Another valuable contact was Frederik Muller, a bookseller and owner of an auction house in

¹² Hoekema, *Eekhoff en zijn werk*, p. 27.

¹³ Kunst, *Inventaris*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁴ Jan Folkerts, "'Een pedante kerel, overigens zeer geschikt'." Stadsarchivaris Wopke Eekhoff en het Fries Genootschap', *De Vrije Fries* 82 (2002), pp. 148-156, pp. 148-149.

¹⁵ Wopke Eekhoff, *Handboekje voor reizigers door Friesland* (Leeuwarden, 1840).

¹⁶ Jan Folkerts, "'Een pedante kerel'", p. 150. Interesting in this respect is also the *Catalogus der Bibliotheek van wijlen W. Eekhoff*, which can be found in the Historisch Centrum Leeuwarden. Apparently Eekhoff acquired considerably more historical books (naturally about Friesland, but also covering a wider scope (and in addition a large range of legal and theological studies and literary books) than publications connected to archives.

¹⁷ Hoekema, *Eekhoff en zijn werk*, 42.

¹⁸ See on Nijhoff: P.C. Molhuijsen, 'Levensberigt van Mr. Isaak Anne Nijhoff', *Levensberichten der afgestorvene*

Amsterdam and also the father of one of the VAN founders, Samuel Muller Fz.. Eekhoff often did business with Muller and in doing so showed himself a shrewd businessman. Among the things he bought from him were the now famous sixteenth century maps and town plans by Jacob van Deventer. Muller, in turn, praised Eekhoff's "unparalleled knowledge of the Frisian history, people and business".¹⁹

Certainly no Deficient Amateurs

Our nineteenth century predecessors have often been scorned by later professional colleagues as somewhat deficient amateurs. Samuel Muller did have praise for the historical legacy of people like Nijhoff and Eekhoff, but he dubbed them "parochial booksellers without scholarly education who had traipsed about in their playground like archival dilettantes".²⁰ Bernard Woelderink dismissed the nineteenth century archivist post in local government as "an honourable affair set about by clergymen and teachers on rainy afternoons".²¹ Rather derogatory and inappropriate remarks about predecessors who had done important pioneering work that can still be regarded with admiration today. For were the nineteenth century archivists indeed so much more unworldly in their time than their successors, than we are, or what we as information specialists now imagine ourselves to be?

On the contrary: people like Eekhoff tried, in a serious manner, to find their way in the archivist profession, and they performed their work with great passion for all those years. They stood at the heart of the intellectual life of their time. They were well-known, and certainly not just in their own town or region. The status of our nineteenth century predecessors, as few as there were, was certainly not insignificant. Along with his fellow archivists in Amsterdam, Groningen and Kampen, Wopke Eekhoff received a place in the Hall of Honour established by King Willem III in the *Kunstzaal* (Art Hall) of Het Loo palace in Apeldoorn in 1875. A total of 138 men who had distinguished themselves in the past and in the present in the field of arts and sciences were honoured by the King in this Dutch Pantheon, 63 of whom were contemporaries. Wopke Eekhoff's portrait (and name) was placed between the author Bilderdijk and the Dutch-language specialist Siegenbeek, partly because Eekhoff had guided the King on a tour of the cabinet of Frisian antiquities in Leeuwarden in 1873. On that occasion the King appointed him to the Order of the Golden Lion of Nassau, declaring that he "knew of two men in the Fatherland, namely Nijhoff in Arnhem and Eekhoff in Leeuwarden, who through faithful observation have shaped their business affairs and have produced many outstanding historical writings".²²

One could almost say: go ahead and make a *volte-face*. Archivists are no longer honoured like this by the king or the government. Perhaps it is also completely out-of-date, even though Dutch people are now in the unique situation in which they finally have a king who has spent time rooting around in archives himself. Aside from royal recognition, you might wonder what exactly is the place and the status of the present archivist? Where do we really stand, what is our current position? Are we indeed "stumbling around in the information fog"?²³ The place of today's archivist is certainly not always in the centre of the world. For instance, is there an archivist today who belongs to the *Koninklijke Akademie van Kunsten* (Royal Academy of the Arts), the prestigious company as part of the *Koninklijk Akademie van Wetenschappen* (Royal Academy of Science), which was founded a few years ago? Well, maybe we don't want to have anything remotely to do with that anyway, because, come on, do we really want to return to the role of 'person of

medeleden van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde te Leiden (Leiden, 1864), pp. 107-121.

¹⁹ Hoekema, *Eekhoff en zijn werk*, p. 77.

²⁰ Quoted from Hoekema, *Eekhoff en zijn werk*, p. 36. See also: Eric Ketelaar, 'Das Berufsbild des Archivars in den Niederlanden heute und in der Zukunft', in: Eric Ketelaar, *The Archival Image. Collected essays* (Hilversum, 1997) pp. 109-114.

²¹ B. Woelderink, *Hoofddlijnen van de geschiedenis en organisatie van het archiefwezen*. Syllabus Rijksarchiefschool ([The Hague], 1971), p. 12.

²² See: J.M.W. van Voorst tot Voorst, 'De kunstzaal in Paleis Het Loo', *Antiek. Tijdschrift voor liefhebbers en kenners van oude kunst en kunstnijverheid* 15 (1980), pp. 9-29, 67-102, 189-213, quote on p. 192. This Dutch Pantheon was not destined for a long life. After 1900 Queen Wilhelmina turned the Art Hall into an Armoury, and the names of the artists and littérateurs were replaced by the names of admirals and generals.

²³ Title of the valedictory symposium of Theo Thomassen, Professor of Archival Science at the University of Amsterdam, on 13 May 2016.

letters'? We have become information specialists, and the link with the arts is – thankfully, according to some – threatening to fade considerably. At the same time, however, does not that other role, that of heritage specialist, of guardian of the monuments as Ketelaar so beautifully described it, remain extremely important?²⁴ Does showing what you can do with archives, for example, using them for multiple purposes and in this way giving them a place as a vital part of the cultural heritage – for instance at the municipal and the town level – not remain just as important as the role of accountability and evidence?

If we return to the place and current status of archivists for a moment: what about their representation in contemporary pantheons, such as their place on Dutch television? It seems it is restricted to appearances on the (rightly acclaimed) programme *Verloren Verleden* (Lost Past). Forever more, you see those stereotypical rotating motions in extensive archival depots. You never see an archivist on a popular talk-show programme like *De Wereld Draait Door* (The World keeps turning). We hardly ever present ourselves in media outside of our field. People working in archives still regularly experience what I most recently had to hear from my municipal colleagues on my enthusiastic report of the 125th anniversary of our association: “Ha, a congress of archivists, that’ll be a stuffy affair”.

Conclusion

An archivist like Eekhoff stood at the centre of the municipal apparatus and, despite all the hassle he had to deal with, he managed to stay on pretty good terms with his executives and make himself indispensable. With his work for the administration, his role in ‘the first category of operation’ as we would now say, he was truly ahead of his time, especially in the use and dissemination of information from the archives treasury in the town hall, where everything of any value was stored. Eekhoff used it for educative purposes, but also, for example, for tourists: the heritage function, so to speak. To think that I have not even discussed his role as a historian in uniting those in the local urban community: he used his work to show what it is that connects people. All very topical and very modern.

One always needs to look forward, of course, but occasionally looking back shows us that our nineteenth century predecessors, people like Wopke Eekhoff (and Isaac Nijhoff c.s.), might not have done too bad of a job after all, and that there is certainly something to be learned from their interpretation of their tasks.

²⁴ Ketelaar, ‘Archieven: munimenta en monumenta’, pp. 105, 107.