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## ALETTA JACOBS AND THE DUTCH CAP: THE TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE MAKING OF A REPUTATION IN THE CHANGING NETWORKS OF BIRTH CONTROL ACTIVISTS

Mineke Bosch

In March 1879, an extraordinary career of transnational knowledge exchange and activism took off when 25-year-old Aletta Jacobs went from the Netherlands to Great Britain to enhance her medical skills in a foreign environment.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen as her first step into a life dedicated to “forging bonds across borders.” But just how extraordinary was it to go abroad for an upwardly mobile, Jewish, middle-class girl, who was to become the first Dutch woman to be university-educated and a feminist in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? How extraordinary was it for a young woman like her to transcend national borders in order to exchange knowledge and ideas, and, at the same time, enhance her reputation?

Recently, Icelandic historian Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir argued in the *Women's Historical Review* that even a life wholly lived in the countryside of Iceland in the nineteenth century could be considered an international life due to the constant flux of information and goods going in and out of Iceland.<sup>2</sup> That clearly relativizes the exceptionality of Jacobs as an international feminist.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, what do we mean by nation and internationalism in an era when many images of the nation — including the idea of nation itself — were invented?<sup>4</sup>



**Aletta Jacobs. Photograph by Julius Oppenheim, The Hague, Netherlands, 1924. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.**

1 This article is based on my biography of Aletta Jacobs: *Een onwrikbaar geloof in rechtvaardigheid* (A staunch belief in justice). *Aletta Jacobs, 1854-1929* (Amsterdam, 2005).

2 Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Beyond the Centre: Women in Nineteenth Century Iceland and the

Grand Narratives of European Women’s and Gender History,” *Women’s History Review* 27, no. 1 (2017): 1-22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1303888>.

3 See, for instance, the (remarkable) invented subtitle for the American translation of her

autobiography: *My Life as an International Leader in Health, Suffrage and Peace*.

4 See Joep Leerssen, *National thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam, 2006), and many others who published on nations and nationalisms in the last thirty years.

What distinguishes internationalism from transnationalism in this context, except for the fact that internationalism deals with a system of (nation/state) representation while transnationalism is more about exchange across borders, regardless of how the nations might be represented, as a form of entangled history or *histoire croisée*? Will the focus on the “feminist inter/national” — as Susan Zimmermann called it — enable historians to transcend the national boundaries that are still so firmly in place?<sup>5</sup>

This essay will address these questions by focusing on a special area of Jacobs’s medical, social, and political intervention on behalf of women — her focus on “voluntary motherhood” through the use of contraceptives. I also want to draw attention to the various ways the exchange and transfer or transmission of knowledge took place, often so that it is hardly possible to see what was actually transferred by whom, when, and how. When we follow the transmission of ideas and practices, it becomes clear that there was not just one-way movement from the Anglo-Saxon world to continental Europe, as is often implicitly suggested in knowledge about progress and “civilization.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly, Jacobs transferred Anglo-American ideas on feminism to the Netherlands, for instance, in the form of her Dutch translations of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1899) and Olive Schreiner’s *Woman and Labour* (1910). But when we look at Malthusian ideas and practices, it is evident that the transmission and transfer were even much more blurred, proceeding repeatedly in both directions in a circular process. In fact, it is not clear how the process of transfer took place exactly, who played an active role in it and was later remembered as a pioneer or inventor, or rather a follower, in a chain of historical encounters and in the stories about the events. In the end, it seems as important to understand how activities and developments elsewhere are perceived and narrated across borders, and how they are used “at home” as it is to know “what actually happened.” This seems to also be true for the development and transmission of historical knowledge, or, at least, historical knowledge is often entangled with the pasts it aims to analyze. For us, the enduring task is to disentangle the many stories of and about the past, in this case about Aletta Jacobs’s role and reputation as an “international leader” in birth control.

### **Aletta Jacobs’s Stay in London, March — September 1879**

Days after the completion of her Ph.D. in medicine at the University of Groningen, which rendered her the first female doctor of medicine

5 For interesting reflections based on research into feminist inter/trans/nationalism, see Julie Carlier, “Forgotten Transnational Connections and National Contexts: An ‘Entangled History’ of the Political Transfers That Shaped Belgian Feminism, 1890–1914,” *Women’s History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 503–23; and Susan Zimmermann, “The Challenge of Multinational Empire for the International Women’s Movement: The Habsburg Monarchy and the Development of Feminist Inter/National Politics,” *Journal of Women’s History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 87–117.

6 Among others, see Mineke Bosch, “‘The Woman Question in Europe,’ in European History,” contribution to the web-feature “European History — Gender History,” in *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* (2009), <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2009/Article=418>.

in the Netherlands, Jacobs went to London. Before she left, a politically progressive young man, Carel Victor Gerritsen, without having met her, provided Jacobs with letters of introduction into circles of freethinkers and Malthusians, suffragists, women doctors, and female students. Gerritsen had been following her career and admiring her from a distance ever since she had applied for admission to the University of Groningen.

The very first morning in London, Jacobs was welcomed by “two young ladies” who were both students at the London School of Medicine for Women on Henrietta Street.<sup>7</sup> They had been informed of her stay by Gerritsen. One of them must have been Ann Vickery, who invited Jacobs to meet her “common law spouse,” Charles Drysdale, a feminist and medical doctor.<sup>8</sup> Gerritsen must have known Drysdale very well. Drysdale was a promotor of women’s medical education, an opponent of the regulation of prostitution, and a “Malthusian,” a proponent of facultative sterility and voluntary motherhood, or family limitation. The term “birth control” came into use much later.<sup>9</sup> Drysdale also served as the chair of the revitalized Malthusian League in 1877. Other new acquaintances of Jacobs were the secularists and Malthusianists Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, who in 1877 had provoked a media storm when they were convicted for their publication of the well-known Malthusian treatise *Fruits of Philosophy* by the American doctor Charles Knowlton.<sup>10</sup>

Important for her professional career as a doctor was Jacobs’s introduction to the network of (aspiring) women doctors of the London Medical School for Women associated with Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and the Women’s Hospital in Marylebone Street.<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, she became acquainted with the British suffrage movement and with suffragists such as Garrett Anderson’s sister Millicent Garrett

7 Aletta H. Jacobs, *Memoirs: My Life as an International Leader in Health, Suffrage and Peace* (Orig. 1924; Herinneringen), ed. Harriet Feinberg, translation Annie Wright (New York, 1996), 33.

8 Miriam J. Benn, *The Predicaments of Love* (London, 1992).

9 Birth control is term that was invented only later

by Margaret Sanger, according to British historian Lucy Bland in her *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism & Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (Harmondsworth, 1995), 190-91. Other terms that were used for contraceptives include preventive checks, artificial checks, and Malthusian appliances. For artificial sterilization, Jacobs herself used the term “willekeurig moederschap” in her *Me-*

*mories*, which now would be translated literally as “arbitrary motherhood,” but which then meant “voluntary motherhood.” See “willekeurig” in *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal (Dictionary of Dutch Language)*, ed. M. de Vries and L.A. te Winkel, *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal (s’-Gravenhage and Leiden, 1864-1998)*. <http://gtb.inl.nl/?owner=WNT>.

10 For the birth control movement in the UK, see Bland, *Banishing*; Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-century England: A Social and Intellectual History* (London, 1978); Richard Allen Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877-1930* (Chapel Hill/London, 1982). For the Netherlands, see Gé Nabrink, *Seksuele hervorming in Nederland. Achtergronden en geschiedenis van de Nieuw-Malthusiaansche Bond (NMB) en de Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervorming (NVSH), 1881-1971* (Nijmegen, 1978); for the US: James Reed, *From Private to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830* (New York, 1978).

11 Catriona Blake, *The Charge of the Parasols: Women’s Entry in the Medical Profession* (London, 1990).

Fawcett, who would become the long-time leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and Lydia Becker, the founder and editor of *The Women's Suffrage Journal*.

Besides being important for Jacobs's medical career, this inspiring period in London laid the foundation for many actions and activities she would later be involved in: the practice of birth control, the abolition of prostitution, thinking about the women's question or feminist philosophy, the suffrage movement, and women in higher education and in the medical profession. Moreover, the Vickery-Drysdale couple she encountered there seems to have provided an example for her personal life, as well. After Jacobs returned to Amsterdam and had set up practice, Gerritsen called upon her to meet in person, and they fell in love in 1884. At first, they joined in a free love marriage but later formally married on behalf of the children they wanted and the public careers they were pursuing. Like Ann Vickery, Aletta Jacobs always kept her own name as a married woman instead of taking on Gerritsen's.

### **Aletta Jacobs's Involvement in Promoting "Voluntary Motherhood"**

Aletta Jacobs ended her stay in London earlier than she had originally planned in order to attend the 6<sup>th</sup> International Congress of the Medical Sciences in Amsterdam, 7 — 13 September 1879. It is not entirely clear why she did so, but evidence suggests that Frances Hoggan, the only woman to play an active role at the congress, or Charles Drysdale, may have given her the impetus. Hoggan (1843-1927) is not mentioned in Jacobs's *Memories*, nor does Jacobs mention her exceptional participation at the congress, but Jacobs may have met her when frequenting the New Hospital for Women during her stay in London. Hoggan was the first British woman to earn a medical doctorate at a European university, and the second to do so in Zürich, in front of the entire medical faculty and an audience of 400 people. She set up practice in London as a qualified, though unregistered, doctor, together with her husband. She had closely cooperated with Elizabeth Garrett Anderson at St. Mary's Dispensary, and later at the New Hospital for Women where she might have met Jacobs. However, Hoggan eventually resigned her position as an assistant physician to protest the major abdominal surgery that Anderson was increasingly practicing. Charles Drysdale, for his part, played a rather prominent role at the congress with contributions on

prostitution and the mortality rates among the rich and the poor that, as he stressed, could all be decreased by restricting family size.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, what Jacobs focused on in her *Memories* from the congress was the *tableau vivant* entitled “The Future” that was set up during one of the conference festivities; it depicted Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp” with only women in the role of the anatomists. The main figure in the painting, the Amsterdam-based Dr. Tulp, was impersonated by a woman who looked like Aletta Jacobs.<sup>13</sup> Another participant was H.A. Albutt, a medical doctor from Leeds who in 1887 would be struck off the General Medical Register for including the chapter “How to Prevent Conception When Advised by the Doctor” in his book *The Wife’s Handbook*. I will return to this below.<sup>14</sup>

Though it is not clear whether Albutt knew Carel Gerritsen or Aletta Jacobs, it is certain that both Gerritsen and Jacobs had been in touch with Charles Drysdale before.<sup>15</sup> Following the congress, Drysdale held a speech on “facultative or voluntary sterility” in a public meeting of the General Dutch Working Men’s Association (ANWV), which was founded in 1874 and chaired by the cabinet maker B. H. Heldt. Heldt’s association and its publication, *The Working Men’s Messenger*, became a mouthpiece for New Malthusianism, which was growing in popularity.<sup>16</sup> When the Dutch New-Malthusian League (NMB) was founded in November 1881, Gerritsen and Heldt took seats on the board, and Drysdale became an honorary member. This underlines the close connections between Gerritsen and Drysdale as well as with Jacobs, as she probably also attended this founding meeting of the NMB.<sup>17</sup>

After London, Jacobs was drawn further into neo-Malthusian circles by her growing friendship with Gerritsen. Two months after the NMB was founded, in January 1882, Jacobs opened a free clinic for women in the poorest quarters of Amsterdam, in the building of the Amsterdam Workers’ League that also housed Heldt’s ANWV. Heldt was in charge of the building and offered her an office free of rent, with only a small charge for fuel.<sup>18</sup> While this free clinic is often mentioned in

17 Aletta Jacobs wrote a letter to the other honorary member of the new NMB, Dr. Samuel van Houten, who was a longtime MP in the Netherlands, exactly one day after the foundation meeting, to ask him whether, in his opinion, women could claim the right to vote on the basis of the existing text on suffrage in the constitution. It suggests that she had already brought up the issue one day before, or that, after she had spoken to him at the meeting, she had the courage to write him. He assured her that she should give it a try, which she did. In the elections for the city council in Amsterdam, in 1883, she tried to register as a voter on the basis of having Dutch nationality, living in Amsterdam and paying enough taxes to have the right of suffrage. See Bosch, *Een omwrikbaar geloof in rechtvaardigheid*, 169-77.

12 A.A.G. Guye, A.E. de Perrot, B.J. Stokvis, J. Zeeman, eds., *Compte-Rendu: Congrès Périodique International des Sciences Médicales*. 6<sup>e</sup> session. Amsterdam, September 1879. etc. (Amsterdam, 1880-1881).

13 Jacobs, *Memories*, 35-37.

14 Ibid. On Albutt, see also Bland, *Banishing*, 194-95, 203-204.

15 In the famous Gerritsen Collection, there is a treatise by Charles Drysdale on the importance of a medical education for women from 1872, which

may have set Gerritsen on Jacobs’s trail.

16 In Dutch, Nieuw-Malthusiaansche Bond means New-Malthusian League; in Britain it was referred to as the Malthusian and later Neo-Malthusian League.

18 International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, Papers Amsterdamse Werkmansbond (Amsterdam Workman’s League), inv. nr. 4: Notulen AWB (Minutes), 12 June 1881-21 February 1883.

one and the same breath as Jacobs's efforts to campaign for "voluntary motherhood," it should certainly also be seen as in line with Garrett Anderson's women's dispensary on Marylebone Street, which later became the Women's Hospital, as well as with many general medical women's efforts to include women's issues in discussions of the "social question" — that is, debates relating to social legislation. The minutes of the Amsterdam Workers' League stated that the free clinic was for women and children, who were, in fact, the usual patients for women doctors at that time. The term birth control clinic is therefore not precise, given the fact that Jacobs offered a much more diverse spectrum of services there. Every Tuesday and Friday morning from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m., Jacobs treated patients and offered advice, for instance, on matters regarding personal hygiene, child care, and motherhood. Jacobs also wrote small contributions on these subjects in several periodicals, such as the ANVV yearbook, *Jaarboekje van het ANVV*, in the beginning of the 1880s, and in *De Vrouw*, a socialist monthly journal about women's issues, in the 1890s.<sup>19</sup> In line with these activities, Jacobs then also began to experiment with advice on "voluntary motherhood" by means of the prescription of a pessary, called the "pessarium occlusivum."

Underlying this practice was another act of transfer and translation from the German doctor W.P.J. Mensinga (1836-1910), who practiced in Flensburg. He had his roots in the Netherlands, more precisely in Mensingeweer, a small village in the province of Groningen, not far from where Jacobs grew up.<sup>20</sup> According to Jacobs's autobiography, she read a treatise by Mensinga in 1882. This must have been the monograph that he wrote under the pseudonym C. Hasse, *Über die facultative Sterilität vom prophylaktischen und hygienischen Standpunkt*,<sup>21</sup> which would be reprinted several times by 1906. The book was a truly medical treatise with a long list of cases from his practice as a gynecologist, categorized as "Sorrow Experiences," "Happy Results," and "Calamities," from which he drew indications for medical doctors concerning when or in what circumstances to assist women in preventing conception. The supplement to the treatise explained the medical device: *Das Pessarium occlusivum und dessen Application. Supplement zu "Über fakultative Sterilität etc."* In 1885, he revealed his true identity in the preface of a revised and expanded edition.

According to Jacobs, she entered into a long correspondence with Mensinga (nothing of which has been preserved) and started to experiment with the pessary in her own practice,

19 "Voor moeders," *Jaarboekje van het ANVV 1883*. Uitgave ANVV (Amsterdam: B.H. Heldt), 34-36; "Huidverpleging," *Jaarboekje van het ANVV 1884*. Uitgave ANVV, 36-38; "Beroepsziekten, I: A. Winkelbedienden," *Sociaal Weekblad* 8, no. 13 (31 March 1894): 101-103; "Brieven over de gezondheidsleer," I, *De Vrouw* 1, no. 15 (1 April 1894): 2-3; "Beroepsziekten, II: B. Naaisers," *SW* 8, no. 14 (7 April 1894): 109-111; "Brieven over de gezondheidsleer," II, *De Vrouw* 1, no. 18 (13 May 1894): 2; "Brieven over de gezondheidsleer," III, *De Vrouw* 2, no. 1 (22 July 1894): 3-4; "Brieven over de gezondheidsleer," IV, *De Vrouw* 2, no. 5 (16 September 1894), 33-34; "Brieven over de gezondheidsleer," V, *De Vrouw* 2, no. 10 (25 November 1894): 74-75.

20 Christa Kolhorst, "Dr. Wilhelm Mensinga," *Kleine Reih der Gesellschaft für Flensburger Stadtgeschichte*, Vol. 12 (Flensburg, 1985).

21 *Über die facultative Sterilität vom prophylaktischen und hygienischen Standpunkt* (Pseudonym C. Hasse), (Neuwied/Berlin, 1882).

presumably with her private patients and with the women who visited her in her free clinic. It is also likely that she was involved in the making of the *Middelenboekje* (Book of Means), which would be reprinted repeatedly and had sold 300,000 copies by 1935.<sup>22</sup> In a review of this booklet in the Dutch journal of medicine (*Nederlandsch Tijdschrift voor de Geneeskunde*) in 1886, Jacobs was mentioned as someone prepared to give advice on means of contraception at specific hours.<sup>23</sup> In 1886, Jacobs also participated in a semi-public discussion among Amsterdam doctors to which Gerritsen as the chair of the NMB had also been invited. In 1893, Jacobs was listed as one of the advisers women could go to right alongside the Amsterdam-based professor of gynecology, Hector Treub.<sup>24</sup> But not all doctors were in favor of her campaign. Among her opponents, for example, was the second woman doctor in the Netherlands, Catharine van Tussenbroek (1852-1925), who was one of the founders of an anti-neo-Malthusian league. Unlike Jacobs, she was convinced that contraception could be used to force women into sexual acts even more than was already the case in light of unjust marriage legislation.<sup>25</sup> In 1898, Jacobs was involved in a polemical exchange on the subject in the Dutch journal of medicine, and in 1899 she published her first and last systematic defense of family limitation as a means to liberate women to be able to participate in the work force.<sup>26</sup>

Around this time, Jacobs's open support of "voluntary motherhood" began perhaps to collide with her ever more prominent role in the women's suffrage movement. In 1894, she had already closed down the free clinic, and she never played a leading role in the Nieuw-Malthusiaansche Bond (NMB). In her 1924 autobiography, she would declare that the league had never had her full sympathy. Perhaps she also felt torn between the different sides in a fight that would divide the movement in all countries: a fight between the doctors, who claimed full authority in matters of contraception, and the activists, who wanted contraception to be a private issue. In the Netherlands, a compromise was reached around 1900, when the NMB started to train "lay women" and midwives to give advice to women all over the country under the supervision of Dr. Jan Rutgers. Jacobs never backed these policies; however, as we shall see later in her contact with Margaret Sanger, it is not clear whether this stance was a matter of professional principle or a strategic choice on behalf of suffrage.

22 A first print edition has not been found.

23 *Nederlandsche Tijdschrift voor de Geneeskunde*, 1886, II, 256.

24 University Library Amsterdam, Papers Geneeskundige Kring (Medical Society): inv. nr. 2: Verslagen der Vergaderingen, 1848-1918: 27 September 1886.

25 For an analysis of the different physiological views on the differences between men and women that were held by Aletta Jacobs and Catharine van Tussenbroek and the consequences for their feminist theories and practices, see Mineke Bosch, "Vrouwelijke vruchtbaarheid en mannelijke melkproductie (Female fertility and male lactation)," in *Het lichaam (m/v)*, ed. Kaat Wils, 141-64 (Leuven, 2001).

26 Among others in *Nederlandsche Tijdschrift voor de Geneeskunde* (NTvG): H. Pinkhof, "De geneeskunst en de willekeurige onvruchtbaarheid," *NTvG (Dutch Journal of Medicine)* 1 (1898): 523-31; Aletta Jacobs, "De strijd tegen de facultatieve steriliteit," *NTvG* 1 (1898): 656-63; Hector Treub, "De geneesheer tegenover de facultatieve steriliteit," *NTvG* 1 (1898): 745-55. Jacobs presented the state of the art on the subject in Aletta H. Jacobs, "Willekeurige beperking van het kindertal," in *Vrouwenbelangen* (Amsterdam, 1899), 63-81.



Regardless of the reasons for her withdrawal from the public sphere on contraceptive issues, in 1904, after Jacobs had celebrated her twenty-fifth anniversary as a doctor, and one year after she became president of the Dutch Women's Suffrage Association, she stopped practicing as a doctor completely. From then until suffrage was won in the Netherlands in 1919, there are only scarce indications in the sources that she gave advice on contraception to women doctors in private meetings, often in relation to an international tour or congress. For example, in preparation for a propaganda tour of the Habsburg Empire with the American president of the IWSA, Carrie Chapman Catt, Jacobs asked her Hungarian friend Rosika Schwimmer in 1906 what women there would want to know about population control:

Can you tell me exactly what the women doctors want to know about Malthusianism? Surely, they don't want a lecture? If they do, it will have to be in private without the press or any propaganda. It's not that I fear the publicity, but it certainly would harm our cause. People are so stupid, they get the wrong end of the stick, and nothing concerning sex may be mentioned; it may only be done. I do not know Catt's views on the subject. Oddly enough, I never discussed this with her.<sup>27</sup>

Jacobs's focus on the damage publicity could do certainly suggests that her outward silence on contraception was prompted by her concern for the cause of women's suffrage.

27 Mineke Bosch, with Annemarie Kloosterman, *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902-1943* (Columbus, 1990), 69. (This letter is from the Schwimmer-Lloyd Collection, NYPL, and was translated by a Dutch woman into German. The English translation is by the author.)

28 In chronological order: Marie Stopes, *Contraception* (London, 1923), 297-98, 378; Margaret Sanger, *My Life for Birth Control* (New York, 1931), 112-14; Norman E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (Baltimore, 1936), 309; Richard Allen Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877-1930* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 189; Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1990), 182. Part of this list is based on a personal communication from Cathy Moran Hajo (Margaret Sanger Papers Project), May 9, 1995.

### **The Making of a Reputation: Aletta Jacobs as a Pioneer in Birth Control**

This evidence on Jacobs's historical role in birth control activities between roughly 1882 and 1900 begs the question of whether many contemporary and later histories of "birth control" have not exaggerated her involvement. Many texts suggest that she opened the first birth control or contraceptive clinic in the world, which would make her a true pioneer.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the designation "Dutch cap" for (Mensinga's) pessary is sometimes unreflectively connected to her activities. For example, Lucy Bland, in her discussion of H.A. Albutt's *A Wife's Handbook* with its chapter on preventing conception, claims that he was the first in the British realm to recommend the diaphragm, "or Dutch cap,

so named because of its promotion in Holland by feminist Dr. Aletta Jacobs,” though she provides no reference.<sup>29</sup> Closer inspection of Albutt’s book, however, reveals that he does not refer to the device as a “Dutch cap” but as the “pessarium

occlusivum of Mensinga.”<sup>30</sup> For a balanced assessment of Jacobs’s role, it is necessary to know when, where, by whom, and for what reason the adjective Dutch was used for the first time, and, generally, how various actors assessed Jacobs’s contribution.

An early retrospective assessment came in the Midwinter issue of the American *Pictorial Review* of 1919, in which American journalist Eleanor Kinsella McDonnell published an extensive article on Dutch birth control under the title *Keeping the Stork in His Place*. She presented Jacobs as the common sense heroine who had braved wide and irrational opposition to practice what she held to be right: helping women limit their family size. Jacobs’s “crusade” had started when she entered university in 1871. After she had won the confidence of poor women in Amsterdam, she had understood that the call for population growth had nationalist undertones and was therefore problematic. That was when she had started “the first public birth-control clinic the world has ever known,” which as a result of the gossip among Dutch domestic women grew into a “very big one indeed,” although McDonnell got the date wrong and gave its founding as 1884 instead of 1882.<sup>31</sup> A lengthy quotation gives a sense of McDonnell’s hagiographic tone:

Mevrouw van Vliet, in her stiff lace cap and eight or nine petticoats, passed the good word along to Mevrouw de Wit as they sat together knitting the interminable grey woollen socks which to this day seem inseparable from the Dutch housewife’s leisure hours. The young doctor knew a thing or two! Of that they were convinced. Moreover, by that time the young doctor had a husband of her own and she had a baby, too, so that she was in an even better position than



**Picture of the pessary by Mensinga from Anna Fischer-Dückelmann, *Die Frau als Hausärztin*. Süd-deutsches Verlagsinstitut, Stuttgart 1911. Internet Archive identifier: diefraualshaus00fiscuoft.**

29 Bland, *Banishing*, 194.

30 Interestingly, Albutt’s book was translated into German, as can be deduced from many advertisements on covers of the *Frauen Reich: Deutsche Hausfrauenzeitung*, as *Handbuch für Frauen (Belehrung über Geburt und Säuglingspflege)* (see Gerritsen Collection, search H.A. Albutt).

31 Eleanor Kinsella McDonnell, “Keeping the Stork in His Place,” *Pictorial Review* (December 1919): 49-55. Among the Aletta Jacobs Papers are about seventy letters from American women and a few men who wrote in reaction to this article to ask for information on contraception: Atria, Amsterdam, Aletta H. Jacobs Papers, inv. nr. 451. Both quotes are from McDonnell, “Keeping the Stork in His Place,” 21 and 49, respectively.

before to obtain the trust and confidence of the vrouws of Holland.<sup>32</sup>

McDonnell also used many of the positive stereotypes of Dutchness that were circulating at that time, framing the article with pictures of windmills and tulips, a woman in traditional (Volendamish) costume, a portrait of Aletta Jacobs, and old-fashioned “shadow cuttings” suggestive of gossiping women. The main impression of the Netherlands was that it was a small but solid and traditional agrarian nation that had to be smart to exist at all as it had no natural resources. The country was inhabited by a people who had reclaimed land to form their nation by stubborn perseverance, creating a fine network of dikes and developing artificial fertilizing techniques to the benefit of all. McDonnell’s characterization of Holland as a peaceful country that did not need to stimulate population growth to wage war is also interesting. The Netherlands had earned this reputation from the role it played in the international Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907, and also from the Peace Palace, funded by American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, which was opened in The Hague in 1913. Jacobs had profited from this reputation when she had convened the International Women’s Congress in The Hague in 1915, which was chaired by Jane Addams.<sup>33</sup>

In this peaceful country, then, in McDonnell’s idyllic perspective, the stork came to drop its bundles in a regulated way so as to ensure that babies were welcome. The results were glorious: the birth rate had dropped, but most of the children stayed alive, and the maternal mortality rate dropped even more, which “in a nutshell is the alpha and omega of Holland’s birth politics.”<sup>34</sup> Or, as a caption said: “In Holland Practically Every Child Born Is Wanted, Planned for Ahead of Its Coming, and Tenderly Cared for after Its Advent.”<sup>35</sup>

In her 1924 autobiography, Jacobs did mention this article in reference to her international standing in the field of contraception, but she did not name the two women who should have been given credit for the transfer of knowledge about Dutch birth control practices to the U.S. The first of these was Margaret Sanger. Perhaps Jacobs, when writing her autobiography, still felt awkward towards Margaret Sanger, who had tried to visit her in 1914. Sanger had been sent to the Netherlands by her long-time friends in the Drysdale family, Alice Vickery and her son, Charles Vickery Drysdale, when she was staying in London to escape prosecution. At that time, Jacobs had “bluntly” turned away

32 McDonnell, “Keeping the Stork in His Place,” 49.

33 In 1931, Jane Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize, not least for her role in this congress. Aletta Jacobs was mentioned in her award ceremony speech.

34 McDonnell, “Keeping the Stork in His Place,” 21.

35 *Ibid.*

the American visitor because she deemed birth control an issue for doctors and not for unprofessional nurses (as Sanger was). Jacobs could not know that Sanger would refer to that painful event in both editions of her autobiography, not hiding her feelings: "I was also hurt as much as I could be hurt during that period when I seemed to be one mass of aches, physically and mentally."<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, shortly after her visit to the Netherlands, Sanger was willing to overlook this slight and credited Jacobs in a brochure titled *Dutch Methods of Birth Control* for her pioneering role in the successful birth control practices in the Netherlands. She also highlighted that Dr. Jan Rutgers and his multifaceted feminist wife Marie Rutgers-Hoitsema were behind this success, having ensured that a network of "nurses" was generated, all of whom worked under his supervision in fifty "centers" or "clinics."<sup>37</sup> This can also be seen as a somewhat exaggerated and rather flattering picture of the Dutch practice as a purely medical one — an image Sanger propagated for a reason. After her return to the U.S., Sanger changed her mass-oriented political activist strategies of informing women about methods of family limitation into a more "genteel" focus on the opening of birth control clinics under the direction of academically trained doctors.<sup>38</sup>

This shift brought Sanger into conflict with her former ally in the birth control movement and the other woman responsible for transferring Jacobs's Dutch knowledge of birth control to the U.S., Mary Ware Dennett. Dennett was a suffrage feminist, long-time secretary of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Greenwich Village radical, and member of the feminist debating club Heterodoxy, which was a platform for issues that could not be discussed within the suffrage movement. Dennett kept campaigning for birth control as a "free speech" issue, which meant that she sought the abolition of all laws preventing the spread of knowledge and means to practice birth control.<sup>39</sup> As part of this campaign, she founded the National Birth Control League in 1915, which was changed into the Voluntary Parenthood League (VPL) in 1919.

36 Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1938), 148. Cf. Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York, 1931), 113.

37 The chronology may have been different as Sanger had published information on

the Netherlands already in May 1914 in her recently founded monthly journal *The Woman Rebel* on the basis of a book by Charles Vickery Drysdale, the son of Charles Drysdale: *The Small Family System: Is It Injurious or Immoral?* (New York, 1914) <https://archive.org/>

[stream/01610155R.nlm.nih.gov/01610155R\\_djvu.txt](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/01610155R.nlm.stream/01610155R_djvu.txt). In this book, he reported the opinions of many medical authorities, among them Prof. Dr. Hector Treub and Dr. Johannes Rutgers and Dr. Aletta H. Jacobs from the Netherlands:»

»"Dr. Aletta H. Jacobs, the first lady doctor in Holland, has for more than twelve years given a gratuitous gynaecological and neo-Malthusian consultation twice a week for poor women. Between 1880 and 1898 she instructed more than 2,200 women in the use of mechanical preventives, and testifies that she never observed any injury to health arising from it." For information on the Rutgers-Hoitsema couple's involvement in neo-Malthusianism, see H.Q. Röling, *"De tragedie van het geslachtsleven": Dr. Johannes Rutgers (1850-1924) en de Nieuw-Malthusiaanse Bond* (Amsterdam, 1987).

38 The Comstock Law, especially, held the postal services responsible when obscene objects or texts were transported.

39 Judith Schwarz, *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy: Greenwich Village, 1912-1940*, rev. ed. (Lebanon, NH, 1986), 81-82. For Mary Ware Dennett, see the introduction by Marilyn Dunn to her papers: Mary Ware Dennett Papers, 1874-1947, MV 392, Arthur and Elisabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University (MWDP): <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/inside-the-collections/mary-ware-dennett>.

It is not clear which of the two women, Margaret Sanger or Mary Ware Dennett, was actually responsible for Jacobs's fame as a birth control pioneer in the U.S.; probably both, as they could both profit from her story in their good cause. Jacobs must have known about the Sanger and Dennett's differences of opinion and strategy in the birth control campaign. To a certain extent, their divisions paralleled those in the British suffrage movement between "militant suffragettes" and "law-abiding or parliamentary suffragists." Jacobs did not let herself be provoked into making a choice for or against one of the standpoints, though the course Sanger took after and due to her European experiences, namely, to found birth control clinics operated under medical supervision, was perhaps closest to her own position. Dennett, however, had always been active in the suffrage movement, and her strategy to fight for legal change certainly would have been inspired by that experience. She would have met or at least heard of Jacobs in the international suffrage network.

In any case, both Sanger and Dennett were well aware of Jacobs's birth control activities, and either one of them might have brought her work to the attention of the New York-based radical journalist and Heterodoxy member Crystal Eastman because Sanger, too, was certainly well known among the Greenwich Village radicals. Eastman interviewed Jacobs on the women and peace campaign in 1915 for *The Survey*, when Jacobs was in the U.S. to offer President Wilson the resolutions of the Women's Congress in The Hague.<sup>40</sup> It is probably not a coincidence that, in addition to her interview in *The Survey*, Jacobs herself published an article on "Voluntary Maternity" in that same journal.<sup>41</sup>

40 Crystal Eastman Benedict, "Now I Dare to Do It": An interview with Dr. Aletta Jacobs, Who Called the Woman's Peace Congress at The Hague," *The Survey*, October 9, 1915. Also in Blanche Wiesen Cook, ed., *Crystal Eastman on Women and Revolution* (Oxford/ London/ New York, 1978).

41 Aletta Jacobs, "Voluntary Maternity," *The Survey* 35, no. 6 (1915): 142.

42 Eleanor Kinsella McDonnell, *Keeping the Stork in His Place* (New York, 1920), 8. In MWDP, no. 275.

The 1919 article in the *Pictorial Review* may also have come about as a result of either woman's actions. Mary Ware Dennett may have set the *Pictorial Review* on Jacobs's trail. In any case, it was her VPL that reprinted the article as a brochure for the league; on the last page, the names of the board members and the VPL's address are printed, followed by the following remark and suggestion: "We are working to make the United States as wholesome as Holland. Shall we send you information about our bill in Congress?"<sup>42</sup>

An invitation Jacobs received from, as she called it, "The society of health and social morality" to attend the six-week International Conference of Women Physicians in New York in 1919 may also have

been generated by either Sanger or Dennett.<sup>43</sup> However, Jacobs was unable to attend because, even though her costs were paid for by her American hosts and a reservation for the boat had already been made, she could not get a visa “because during the war [she] had sent letters from Americans to their parents in Germany. That was a deed of enmity to the American Government,” she wrote to her American friend Lucy Anthony.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of whether Sanger or Dennett was most responsible for propagating Jacobs’s reputation as a birth control pioneer in the United States, it was certainly easier for Jacobs to speak out on the subject again once she had stepped down as the president of the Dutch Women’s Suffrage Association after women won suffrage in the Netherlands in 1919. She was ready to reap the benefits of her hard work but also to become more of the “all round feminist” that she had been before she fully embraced the single issue movement of women’s suffrage. She also continued to work with both Sanger and Dennett on the issue in the following years. In 1922/23, Dennett invited her to take a seat in the international advisory council of the VPL. Among the other members was the British birth control activist and psychologist Marie Stopes, who published the best-seller *Married Love* in 1918 and in 1922 opened the first birth control clinic in Great Britain. As she did not have a medical degree, her authority in this matter was severely contested by doctors such as Norman Haire, who claimed that the first *real* birth control clinic — that is, one run by medical doctors — in Great Britain was opened some time later that same year. Having accepted the invitation, Jacobs was then invited as a guest of honor in 1924 to the VPL annual conference in New York. While one paper reported Jacobs’s performance as having been somewhat disappointing due to a bout of flu, it nonetheless touted her as “Dr. Aletta Jacobs, who started the First Birth Control Clinic in the World, in Holland over Forty Years Ago,”<sup>45</sup> thus reinforcing her pioneering reputation in the United States.

In 1925, Jacobs’s connections to Sanger were on display when Sanger invited Jacobs to return to New York again to attend the 6<sup>th</sup> International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference.<sup>46</sup> Jacobs was not a newcomer in this crowd either, as she had attended many of the organization’s earlier conferences. It was therefore a reunion with old friends. Charles Vickery Drysdale acted as chair while his mother Alice Vickery was honorary president. Another old acquaintance was Helene Stöcker, the German sexual reformer and feminist. They were

43 Letter from Aletta Jacobs to Lucy E. Anthony, Sept. 26, 1919, in Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Anna Howard Shaw, 1847-1919, M-133, reel A18, 546. Aletta Jacobs does not mention the International Conference of Women’s Physicians in her letter, and she probably means the Committee on Social Morality of the YWCA.

44 Ibid.

45 Clipping from *The Birth Control Herald* 11, no. 2 (1924), in MWDP, no. 258.

46 Birth Control was later added to the old name “International Neo-Malthusian Conference.”

all honored with a pioneers' dinner at the opening of the congress. In her autobiography, Sanger wrote with unconcealed satisfaction that Jacobs felt the urge to explain to her once more why she had refused to receive her in 1914 and remarked: "Here, she said, with kindling eyes, was the system she had envisioned in the Netherlands but had never been able to make come true."<sup>47</sup> It was a wonderful way to pay respect to the pioneer and at the same time claim to have fulfilled her goals. That year, Jacobs wrote two articles on birth control in the Netherlands, one for a volume edited by Sanger with contributions to the conference on International Aspects of Birth Control.<sup>48</sup>

After 1925, Jacobs remained in touch with the international movement, interacting with many of the individuals she had encountered before, including Dennett and Sanger, right up to the end of her life in 1929. In 1927, she received Dennett's book on *Birth Control Laws* with a dedication from the author that reads: "To Dr. Aletta H. Jacobs, whose courage and wisdom have helped others immeasurably, from Mary Ware Dennett." A letter from Jacobs in the Mary Ware Dennett Papers testifies to Jacobs's appreciation of her "most charming" dedication.<sup>49</sup> At about that time, the British doctor Norman Haire, who, as we saw, had claimed to have opened the first real birth control clinic in Great Britain, invited Jacobs to contribute to his edited volume *More Medical Views on Birth Control*. Jacobs wrote an interesting reflection on her early work in Amsterdam, stating that she had always kept elaborate records of her interventions.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, she attended the World Conference on Population at Geneva, organized by Sanger in 1928. At the conference, the Danish doctor J.H. Leunbach approached her, later asking her to lend her name to the foundation of a Welt-Liga für Sexualreform (World League for Sexual Reform), in which the Vienna-based physician Magnus Hirschfeld also played a prominent role.<sup>51</sup> In some of the last letters she ever wrote, in July 1929, Jacobs was still corresponding with Sanger. She discussed the the pros and cons of a birth control conference to be held in Berlin in the following year and also indicated that she was a loyal subscriber to Sanger's *Birth Control Review*, having just sent off for her yearly subscription.<sup>52</sup> Jacobs died on August 9, 1929.

## Conclusion

Having reviewed Aletta Jacobs's actions in the international birth control movement, we can confirm that they certainly have been exaggerated in some of the historiographical representations. Her

47 Margaret Sanger, *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography* (New York, 1971 [1938]), 374.

48 Aletta H. Jacobs, "Birth Control in Holland," *The Nation*, April 8, 1925; Aletta H. Jacobs, "A Generation of Birth Control in the Netherlands," in *International Aspects of Birth Control*, ed. Margaret Sanger (New York, 1925), 85-94.

49 Schlesinger Library, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, MC 629: AHJ aan MWD, October 4, 1927. CF. Atria, IAV-Collection, IIAV papers: Letter from Mathilde Cohen Tervaert-Israels to Ch. Matthes, 20 April 1941, in which she states that the book is from Aletta Jacobs's legacy and at the advice of Rosa Manus gives the book in her care now that the IAV is closed by the Nazis. It is now in the library collection of Atria in Amsterdam.

50 Aletta H. Jacobs, "Aletta Jacobs," VIII, in *Some More Medical Views on Birth Control*, ed. Norman Haire (London, 1928).

51 Atria, IAV Collection, AHJ Papers, inv. nr. 207: J.H. Leunbach to AHJ, September 17-October 10, 1927.

52 Margaret Sanger Papers at the Library of Congress, Microfilm, reel 17, frame 36: AHJ aan MS, 14 July 1929. A copy of this letter was sent to me by Cathy Moran Hajo, September 2004.

supposed role as the uncontested world pioneer in birth control has been overemphasized in the context of American birth control practices after World War I. Ironically, this international transfer hinges on Jacobs's reputation as an international leader in suffrage and peace, but also on stereotypical images of Dutch domesticity and common sense.

But what about the term "Dutch cap" that Lucy Bland unambiguously relates to Jacobs's pioneering role in birth control, which many sources confidently affirm? A transfer through H.A. Albutt does not seem likely, given the fact that he did not write about a "Dutch cap," but a "Mensinga pessary," as we saw. To my knowledge, the adjective "Dutch" was first connected to the pessary only much later, when the London-based sexologist Norman Haire referred to the "Dutch Mensinga pessary" in *The Lancet* of August 19, 1922. He did so in a reaction to an objection made by Marie Stopes to his earlier statement in his presidential address at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference in London that "the best contraceptive available was that which had been in use in Holland for 40 years and had recently been reintroduced by him into his country." Stopes had disagreed and opted for a differently shaped cap, upon which Haire had replied that "the Dutch Mensinga pessary" was almost universally applicable and therefore to be preferred. The author of the book *Safe Marriage*, Ettie A. Rout, supported his viewpoint, though she likewise observed that "doctors (and often nurses) fit too large sizes of the 'Dutch' pessary," causing them to be dislodged during intercourse. Stopes could not let that pass, and in a second rebuttal she systematically argued for the use of the small occlusive cap rather than "the Dutch cap," a designation she used five times in half a column. It seems likely that Stopes used the adjective "Dutch" for the first time in this exchange. Some time later, she began to mention Jacobs's pioneering role, probably via her membership in the advisory council of the American VPL.<sup>53</sup>

American birth control campaigners in the 1920s did not celebrate the German and Dutch doctors Wilhelm Mensinga or Jan Rutgers but rather Dr. Aletta Jacobs as the birth control pioneer. This can be seen partly as the happy outcome of a common memory strategy by the rivaling American feminist activists Sanger and Dennett. They seem to have been united in their wish to trace the origin of the international birth control movement to a prominent woman doctor and leading international feminist rather than to some obscure German

53 While Stopes referred only once and only in a very superficial way to "Holland" in her best-seller *Married Love* of 1919, in her 1923 book *Contraception* she wrote: "In Holland, the first birth control clinic in the world was founded and carried on by Dr. Aletta Jacobs and arising out of this grew a widely-extended service of clinics, staffed with specially trained nurses" (378).



or Dutch male doctors. Jacobs was definitely an asset when Sanger wanted to define birth control as a clinical practice aimed to help women limit their families. It also helped that Jacobs was known as a leader in the suffrage and peace movements and came from a “peace-loving” country with a solid and respectable but rather conservative image — the Netherlands — that nevertheless had a strong democratic tradition. For a German man to have played this role, even if it was true, would have been less acceptable or advantageous during or just after World War I; moreover, Mensinga had never been really connected to Malthusian practices and organizations that were important means of transfer in this case. Jan Rutgers, in addition, was too modest a man to claim recognition for his and his wife’s efforts in generating this success in Dutch Malthusianism.

Of course, Aletta Jacobs’s life was full of transnational and international connections and intersections, like many other prominent activists at that time, or perhaps like any other contemporary, as historian Erla Haldórsdóttir argues. According to her, the international and the national are always related and never unambiguous. For historians, the challenge is to assess what those transnational interactions consisted of in specific historical developments, what meaning they were given, often on the basis of arbitrary national reputations, and what this means for historical memory. Often, internationalism, which in progressive circles is valued highly, and nationalism, which is often seen as the more restricted perspective, went hand in hand and were used differently in different situations. Feminist history does not need one-dimensional heroines anymore, not least because such heroines cast long shadows over too many contemporaries. Putting Jacobs firmly into a historical perspective or relativizing her pioneering role in the international birth control movement, or relativizing her role as an international leader more generally, does not diminish her but makes for a more collective and more interesting history. This history should also have room for those that did not make it into the records because of their nationality or their (in this case: masculine) gender. It may be time to include the crucial roles of the Dutch/German doctor Wilhelm Mensinga, the inventor of the Dutch cap who likely also gave it this name, and Jan Rutgers, the long-time champion and organizer of Dutch birth control practices, in the transnational history of birth control.

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