

The Search for a Family Legend:  
The Frisian Background of Marten Annes Ypma, the Founder of Vriesland

Albert Ypma

"Did a group gather on last Sunday afternoon at three o'clock in your house?"

"Yes, Your Honour."

"Was there a speech, a prayer or something like that?"

"There was a prayer, we sang a psalm, and there was a speech."

"Who delivered that prayer and the speech?"

"I did."

"Did you get permission from the civilian authorities to have such a religious gathering?"

"No."

"Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes. I don't know that we need to ask the authorities for permission. Because all religions are free."

Thus in 1836 Marten - or Martin as he was called later in the United States - Annes Ypma was interrogated by a Dutch burgomaster. A year earlier Marten, a barge skipper and trader in potatoes and vegetables, had become a deacon of the Christian 'Afgescheiden' congregation of the Frisian village of Minnertsga, his birthplace. In 1845 he became a minister in nearby Hallum. The next year he was asked to become the reverend and leader of a group of emigrants, formed in the provincial capital Leeuwarden. In 1847 Marten and his group of fifty small farmers and agricultural labourers and thirty children emigrated to Michigan. He served the Reformed Churches in Vriesland (Michigan) (1847-1852), Graafschap (Michigan) (1852-1855), South Holland, Roseland (Illinois) (1855-1861) and Alto (Wisconsin) (1861-1863). There he died in 1863, but he was buried in his beloved Vriesland, where his grave and that of his wife Jetske van der Tol are still preserved in the old cemetery.

This article considers Marten's Frisian background, the search for a family legend, Marten's personality and his ideas.<sup>1</sup>

#### Marten's Frisian Background

The village of Minnertsga in the Northern clay region of the Dutch province Friesland is situated in a flat landscape with ancient dykes and artificial mounds, which are convincing signs of the determination of the people to create its own land out of the sea.

In 1810, Marten's year of birth, the place had 800 inhabitants. In Roman Catholic times the sturdy building of the Reformed Church was dedicated to St. Martin. The saint had offered his only coat to a naked man, he was the remarkable patron of the geese and other migratory birds, and the namegiver for ages to the village boys. The well-known public schoolmaster Wetterau taught language, arithmetic and history in overcrowded but disciplined classrooms. Another leading person in Marten's youth was the orthodox reverend and poet Outhuys. The burgomaster Baron Collot d'Escury, who had interrogated Marten, was the richest man of the North. The Huguenot nobleman and deputy in The Hague appointed the musician Van Bree, the future founder of the world famous Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, to be his

children's governor. Thus the small village was nevertheless a centre of cultural and political interest.

Marten's father Anne was a gardener, assisted by his sons. He owned a modest piece of land. He grew up in the 18th century turmoils between republicans and monarchists. After the French invasion in 1795 the 'Tricolore' flew from the church spire and democrats danced around the 'Freedom Tree.' In 1835, when the Netherlands were liberated, the deceased orthodox minister was to be replaced by a modernist. But fourteen people, the Ypma's among them, rejected his religious ideas and started a separatist or 'Afgescheiden' congregation.

According to Mulder's sociological tripartite classification of separatist movements, the first phase of informal breaking down in discontented local groups, such as the 18th century inward-looking pious 'conventicles', ended and the second phase of the well organized protest against the state church began. The third reformulation phase will be referred to later in this article.

The separatists were booked, houses were billeted by government troops and some people were fined. The Ypma's shared the criticism of the national leader rev. De Cock against the theology of the Age of Reason, the centralized church organization and the words of the evangelical hymns. (A pity for the beautiful melodies their schoolmaster played on the marvellous Hinsch organ in the village church).

The movement strongly called upon studious young men like Marten to fill in the vacant positions in the growing organization. The potato disease in the forties was an economical factor, contributing considerably to the growth of the 'Afscheiding' and to the comparatively large dimensions of the Northern Frisian emigration.

Aboard the British sailing vessel 'The Vesta' Marten's group left the port of Rotterdam on the 7th of April 1847. In that year 4.000 Dutch Protestants and many other Europeans emigrated to the United States. In New York harbour Marten broke into Psalm 66 on the subject of the save path God made through the Red Sea and he held a Whit Sunday sermon. "The ship served him as a pulpit and the whole world as his church" (record of colony member Elisma). Marten was aware of his vocation to be one of the 'founding fathers' of the Dutch immigration. In August they arrived in the place which they gave the name of their forsaken fatherland.

The carpenter Klaas de Vree, his wife Jeltje Ypma, Marten's sister, and their seven children, all of them separatists, joined them in 1848. The next year Marten's 73-year-old widowed mother, his parents in law and their children emigrated to the colony as well. It is difficult to underestimate the positive influence that Marten's mother, wife and sister exerted on him. The presence of family and friends almost turned Vriesland into a miniature Minnertsga<sup>2</sup>.

### The Search for the Family Legend

Within legends one may trace history; within history one may meet a person in a former time; and - if this person is an American relative who emigrated 150 years ago - Dutch stay-behinds may also recognize something of themselves.

Many members of the Ypma family emigrated to the U.S.A. due to the hardships of Frisian agricultural life, and a number of family members of my mother's - the Post - even went as far as Argentina. Till the recent eighties we hardly knew any facts on the early emigration. A postwar historical novel described a role of a certain Ypma in the 'howling wilderness',

where dreams easily turned into nightmares. Then the scientific works of Van Hinte and Lucas were studied. My father Jelle Ypma, an insurance mathematician and named after Marten's elder brother in the stately rhythm of generations, found the first proof of the truth of a vague family legend.

In 1981 my parents went to the United States for the first time. As a good presage they attended the service of the same New York Congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church, which had been a somewhat unexpected refuge for the early separatist immigrants. In the telephone book of Holland (Michigan) one Ypma was found, called John. A widow told them that her late husband was indeed one of Marten's grand grand children. Ruth Muilenberg was another grand grand child, living in far away Missouri. She was very much interested in the family roots. The voice of my English speaking father turned out to be much like the voice of Marten's eldest son Job, her grandfather. In this and a later visit the invaluable archives of Hope College, Western Theological Seminary and Calvin College were explored. All the churches that Marten had served sent the requested information. Janet Ypma-Evans, a 'gold rush' descendant living in San Diego, delivered the written reports regarding Marten, which included the original materials of the memoirs of rev. John Karsten, grown up in Vriesland. These were the letters of Anne de Vree (Marten's nephew and a son of Klaas de Vree) and of Jan Elsma, baptized as an adult by Marten and his greatest admirer in the New World. Now my father was able to publish a comprehensive brochure on the family member, of which I gratefully make use.

### Marten's Personality

Anne de Vree described his uncle's personality in his memoirs which he wrote toward the end of the 19th century: "Simplicity characterized his life, goodness was his nature, not without a certain stiffness which sometimes stood in the way. But hour after hour, often until long after midnight, he could entertain his friends, relating his experiences without wearying them." Aspects of Marten's personality are still tracable: the practical leadership, his stable faith and his stimulating conversational style.

### *Practical leadership*

John Karsten characterizes Marten as a man "well equipped by nature and experience to pass successfully through the hardships of the pioneer's life" and as "a practical leader of the people and for the people."

An example of practical leadership was the selection of the future position of the colony in the woodland. It took more time than usual. Some Dutch immigrants abused, with their inherited unhindered eye on the horizon, that even the already existing settlement of Holland would be only a city of trees. Marten, however, observed that the overwhelming vegetation in a certain area of 10 square kilometres on the rather long distance of 20 kilometres from Holland meant fertile clay. Van Raalte later declared that "with this choice the Frisians demonstrated their skill to determine which land was good".

Marten's practical attitude originated in his Minnertsga experiences in farming, skipping and trading, and in the military career in his formative years. In 1831 he had distinguished himself in the Dutch Ten Days Campaign as a cavalierist with a helmet and a heavy suit of armour. The neighbouring Belgians revolted against the common Orange king. At Marten's side a half-brother of Jan Elsma died as one of the hundred Dutch soldiers killed in action. In 1861

during the Civil War Marten held a sermon, inspired by the Book of Judges and his own soldier's life. He addressed an emotional appeal to the young men to volunteer for military service against the Southern states.

### *Stability in faith*

Karsten tells that Marten's preaching was thoroughly Biblical. Marten emphasized the human responsibility in the acceptance of the Gospel. A conservative and wealthy member of the parish once said after a public debate on the predestination question whether or not at the beginning of the world God had already decided who was saved and who was rejected: "You are proclaiming unorthodox Arminianism. If you preach as we want it, we will give you more salary." To which Marten answered: "If you withhold my bread, God will prevent my hunger" (record of Elsmā).

Marten had studied theology in the Frisian village of Hallum under the guidance of rev. Tamme de Haan. This former Reformed minister, now member of the 'Afgescheidenen', was in fact less appreciated as a minister or pastor. His competencies were elsewhere and consisted of a profound theological knowledge, great language skills in Greek, Hebrew and also in Babylonian languages (whatever the practical use of the last ones may be), and general didactic abilities. Therefore he was given the post of 'headmaster' of their churches, aiming at the necessary recruitment of new leaders. Both De Haan and Outhuys in Minnertsga may have strongly influenced Marten in his stable religious opinions and in his formation as a minister. In Michigan he was also a supporter of higher theological education, following his 'headmaster' and the competent teacher Wetterau.

### *Stimulating conversational style*

A record of colonist Tede Ulberg, also from Minnertsga, gives an example of Marten's speaking habits:

"A foreigner arrived who didn't expect a reverend to live in a simple wooden house like mine. My only wealth is a pony, a gift from Grand Rapids, to ride to that place to preach there."

"Is there a good reverend in the village?", the stranger asked me.

"Some think he is good, but others say he is bad," I answered honestly.

"Is he really orthodox?"

"Some will say yes, others no. And sometimes the reverend himself has his doubts."

Marten's self-mockery is rare among Frisians, being men of principles. In difficult times it is a helpful means to put things into perspective. "His cheerful and buoyant spirit often served as a medicine to desponding souls" (Karsten). Maybe it would also prove useful to reconcile "sour relationships and personal rivalry" among the colonists leaders (Swieringa's conference topic).

But sometimes even a verbally gifted man, executing efficient forms of management-by-speech, gets his wires crossed. Quarrels start easily among Frisians in a stressful colony. And what topic more suitable for disagreement among immigrants than a piece of land. The fresh businessman-reverend had better avoid the dispute on the price of Mexican War warrants giving the right to government land in the colony, while the opponent's stubbornness and his own "certain stiffness" are negative but widespread qualities of the Frisian people's character.

## Marten's Ideas

Karsten reckons that Marten's vision may not have been as broad and far reaching as that of Van Raalte - creating a Christian colony, a God-centered community (Bruins) -, but that it was equally true, and went in the same direction.

Marten refused human passivity in the process of the soul's salvation. Once he said in a sermon: "Many people resemble journeyers on a river, who are sitting in a boat and let themselves drift with the stream, till across a waterfall they unthought hurtle down in the abyss and are lost for all eternity" (record of Elsma). This point of view was also applicable to more worldly affairs.

The future in Europe would have lead to a still more reduced existence. The motives of immigration were investigated in the customs office. Only eight families of Marten's group mentioned freedom of religion. Sixteen families, among which the Ypma's, mentioned economical improvement. The nephew Anne de Vree in his memoirs will be close to Marten's ideas: "Though in the forties the Dutch persecution was less severe than earlier, there was a great desire to be in a place with more freedom of worship. But this was not the only reason. I would like to tell the whole truth. They also wished a more generous living in this temporary life. So America became their shelter."

Marten's well-balanced opinions determined his stimulating role in the last phase of this and each separatist movement. Marten never conceived secession as a goal in itself. The movement's reformulation of values, aims and internal structuring meant in this case the integration into the U.S. Reformed Church.

## Conclusion

As the result of the search for a family legend, this article has introduced Marten Annes Ypma and the effects of the Frisian background on his practical and stimulating leadership as the founder of Vriesland (Michigan), his stability in faith and his active strife to both freedom of worship and economical improvement.

Jelle Ypma's final biographical characterization is: "On certain moments in his life Marten very consciously gave a certain drive to his life, in a profound faith of God. After a restricted education he maintained himself next to other born leaders. Especially among non-Frisians he would sometimes be an undiplomatic man, but among his equals he was a conversationalist. Among his innate capacities of leadership the dedication to his people was the most important aspect."

It was into the American colonies that all the suppressed dreams were projected, which in their darkest nights haunted the inhabitants of the Old Continent. Dreaming like the people of Israel of a 'Promised Land.' Dreaming of new ideals of freedom and equality, which made young citizens self-consciously answer to ancient noblemen, that all religions are free. Dreaming about blessed birds which in cold winters instinctively fly to a warmer South.

With the help of God and the people Marten actively shaped and reshaped his living conditions. Thus an immigrant leader was able to realize the possibilities, slumbering in his mind, heart and hands. And thus a typical Frisian turned into a typical American.

## Endnotes

1. Works of reference are Elton J. Bruins, 'An American Moses', Albertus C. Van Raalte as Immigrant Leader (Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-North American Exchange, 1846-1996, ed. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, 1996); Henry S. Lucas, Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings, 1955; L.H. Mulder, *Revolte der fijnen*, 1973; Robert P. Swierenga, 'Pioneers for Jesus Christ': Dutch Protestant Colonization in North America as an Act of Faith (Sharing the Reformed Tradition); and Jelle Ypma, *Ds. Marten Annes Ypma, 1810-1863, Van Minnertsga (Friesland) naar Vriesland (Michigan)*, 1985. All citations of Marten are documented in written records of eye-witnesses.

2. Rev. Ypma was the first of some early Frisian immigrant leaders. These lesser known persons were not related to the 'Afscheiding'. Worp van Peyma, a farmer (Ternaard 1795-Lancaster 1881), emigrated in 1849 with a group of Frisians to Lancaster, New York. He studied farming problems and mechanical engineering, and proposed a never realized plan for a dyke from the Frisian coast to the island of Ameland. The trader Oepke Haitzes Bonnema (1826-1895) was the leader of a group of ninety Frisian emigrants to Wisconsin. In 1853 their vessel 'William and Mary' was shipwrecked at the Bahama's, but all persons on board were saved. Bonnema founded the colony Frisia, which later was called New Amsterdam, in the neighbourhood of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Also in 1853 a group of conservative Mennonites from Balk, lead by the elderman Ruurd Johannes Smit (1814-1893) and the preacher Ruurd Symensma (1816-1854), emigrated to New Paris near Goshen, Indiana.