



In almost every Dutch family there have been people who migrated to another country. Over the years many have moved across the big oceans or even traveled all the way to Australia. Everyone will have had their own reasons for taking this big step. So how are they doing? What are they doing? Which dreams are they chasing. What plans did they have for their lives. By way of example, this article provides a look at the life of immigrant John van Tiggelen, editor of the Australian '[The Monthly](#)'. The interview was conducted and the article was written by retired Town Planner Peter Reynders. He is also from Dutch origin. He is a volunteer contributor and Canberra Correspondent for the [Dutch Courier](#), a publication published monthly on behalf of the Associated Netherlands Societies in Victoria, Australia. A full digital copy of the whole Dutch Courier, July 2012, including the article's original Dutch text can be found [via this link](#).

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## Portrait of an Editor

Peter Reynders talked to the Editor of The Monthly, John van Tiggelen (a translation of an article that appeared in the Melbourne based Dutch Courier of July 2012)

There are about 320.000 people of Dutch origin in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics). They all contribute to the Australian community. Many do this quietly and unobtrusively and as a group we are therefore often referred to as the ''invisible migrants''. Some, including those who write for the media, have however more influence on society than others. They provide a choice to readers and listeners of news, ideas, knowledge and opinions. Even in the national press one regularly come across Dutch names. It makes you wonder where exactly these people originate from and how they achieved such an influential positions. I was lucky to have a conversation over a cup of coffee with such a former Dutchman, now Australian, John van Tiggelen, and so am able to tell you something about him. He is the Editor of The Monthly, which is published in Melbourne. In order to illustrate the demands of that job, I will firstly provide a few words about The Monthly.

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## The Monthly

The Monthly provides in-depth articles about politics, community and the arts ([www.themonthly.com.au](http://www.themonthly.com.au)). Essays of 7000 words are not unusual. It is clear that it is not a periodical that is displayed at the check-out in supermarkets, like those that dispense salacious humours, and contain articles about the clothes and antics of youth idols and movie stars.

The Editorship of The Monthly requires special literary experience, understanding and judgment, especially of the English language's cultural areas. Correcting, editing and presentation of such literary texts, so they become accessible for us the general readers, is a demanding task. So why is it that this immigrant, who spent much of his youth in the Netherlands, and who was still a Dutch citizen until earlier this year, was nevertheless found to be the most capable person to hold this position? I try to explain..

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## Finding John

My appointment with Mr van Tiggelen was in his home town, the picturesque heritage precinct of Castlemaine (pronounce: kesselmain), which is located about 110 km northwest of Melbourne.

I found John with some difficulty in a not very used-friendly former hospital building, that is now used as a ''business incubator''. He welcomed me in his office there in fluent Dutch, with a convivial soft 'g'. He proposed that we talk over coffee in the coffeeshop on the ground floor. This we did. The coffeeshop was managed by a couple originating from Austria and the German language was evidently still in active use between family members and staff, judging by notes on the message board. Excellent coffee and splendid cake.

We had agreed to conduct the whole conversation in Dutch, which was something of a hurdle for the both of us, as we both have been married to an Australian for many years and use that language rarely. Neither at our work, nor at home.

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## Immigrant

Van Tiggelen was born in Tilburg as Johannes Adrianus van Tiggelen, son of the late Cees van Tiggelen and Agnes Calon. Cees had studied medicine and had specialised in psycho-geriatrics. He was headhunted to Australia, because of a shortage of such skills here. The family emigrated to Australia in 1975. John, then 8, was still at primary school and had to learn English rather suddenly to be able to go to school here, a difficult but exciting undertaking that all migrant children experience. However, from 1980-83 the family moved back again to the Netherlands, where John enjoyed education in Dutch again at the Atheneum in Vught, a small town in Noord Brabant, which was known for its former concentration camp in the Second World War. Without much

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doubt John was the star of the class when it came to English and that he then developed a taste for writing prose in English. Van Tiggelen told me that he "wanted to become a journalist, way back" and that writing was an early hobby. Back in Australia, however, he first studied medicine for three and a half years at Monash University. After that he moved to North Queensland to become, amongst other things, a tourist guide in the Daintree Rainforest National Park and began to appreciate the wilderness, ecology and the landscape there. His attention was also drawn to the Great Barrier Reef which lies out at sea there. "I was then a bit of a hippy," said John. In the Netherlands he had already been interested in bird watching. Finally, he successfully completed a course in journalism receiving a Graduate Diploma in Journalism from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, thus launching his journalistic career.

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## Van Tiggelen and Netherlands

John asked for and was granted Australian citizenship only this year! He must have still felt strongly about the Netherlands, although his wife is Australian and his children do not speak Dutch. He told me, in faster Dutch than mine, that his grandmother, Oma, was very important to him. Oma from a centuries' old Zeeland family, lived on a farm near Breskens, which John loved to visit when he came back from Australia. True to their roots, his parents used to have a "hobby farm" in South Gippsland, which ran 60 heads of beef cattle. John's mother now leases out the grazing rights. The van Tiggelen family in the Netherlands is quite extensive, indeed there are thousands with this, or a very similar, name. He told me that he has seventeen uncles and also a number of aunts, but has little contact with them. After Oma passed away he hasn't been on any family visits to the Netherlands. The tie with the motherland is usually family contact. When that stops it seems, as I noted elsewhere, contact with the home country declines and so does the need to visit.

A new webpage on the van Tiggelen family, which includes its genealogy, showed me that the name goes back to the property Tichelt near Breda, with documentation reaching back to medieval times. It also told me that "the Van Tiggelen family are pious folk", with the family's coat of arms showing three stars representing the Holy Trinity. I therefore speculated that perhaps John would be a practicing Catholic. That was not the case. When I said that I am an atheist, he simply said: "Me too".

Discussing the Australian landscape brought up the phenomenon here of the very large edifices representing a local product, such as a giant sheep, an enormous banana, a three story high prawn, a great avocado. They seem to detract from the landscape, just like the large advertising hoardings you see on country roads. John was tolerant of

this phenomenon. He explained that some rural communities feel overlooked and that this is a way to draw the world's attention to them and these gigantic images help provide a local identity. He did not agree with my suggestion that the incredibly large flagpole on top of Canberra's Parliament House falls in the same category.

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## Journalist and writer

Now that I knew that I was dealing with an academically trained journalist with broad experience, I asked what journalism actually is. I gave a list of options: Is it writing to sell a newspaper, recording some very recent history without reporting the sources? Is it entertainment etc? John kept it simply to: "Providing people with what they want to read, what they ought to know, and yes entertainment is part of it also". He pointed to his lighthearted and humoristic article in the Good Weekend that I had cut out, about his experiences as a father of five, the last two born being twins, after which he with encouragement of his wife, underwent a vasectomy. "That was entertainment" he explained.

It appeared from that article that he is not shy in revealing some of his private life. But he is motivated purely by writing so it will touch the reader, be it with a smile or via the creation of doubt, rather than self-promotion. He stressed, for example, that as far as he is concerned there would not be a Wikipedia entry created about him. But that does not depend on him and there are several such entries about the regular writers for his monthly.

John has, as he said, never really considered in-depth the commercial side of the publications he worked for. The royalties from books "do not justify the writing, unless the book is a bestseller." He knew from experience, "You write for other reasons."

He wrote a book with the title Mango Country - a Journey Beyond the Brochures of Tropical Queensland, which was short-listed for the Colin Roderick Award, and some of his work was also short-listed for for other literary awards, like the Graham Perkins Journalist of the Year Award. He was also published in 2001 in Best Australian Essays and won the Commonwealth Media Award. The prize for this was a semester of study at Cambridge University, which he eagerly took up.

In 2002 John sailed on the replica ship, the Duyfken, for part of the voyage from Indonesia to Australia re-enacting the first visit to Australia by a European vessel, by the original Duyfken in 1606. This brought us to the question of what current view is held by Indonesians of the Dutch. "I experienced that as a very positive one and many spoke still proudly Dutch" he said, "... the Americans are the ones who are very unpopular".

"Do you see a solution for how our Indigenous people would get a more pleasant existence?"

Perhaps because I used that formulation did he perceive that I

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presented them as a problem, "We must not call them a problem and I do not have those solutions" he said. He had had a series of rich experiences with the descendants of our original inhabitants, including the Aurukun community in Queensland . He agreed with many of the opinions of the intellectual leader there, Noel Pearson, who emphasized self-reliance rather than government handouts.

As a writer of lengthier articles, which required in-depth research, John wrote from 1998 for the left-out magazine Good Weekend in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age. That publication printed his article in November 2011 on the right-wing media player Andrew Bolt, also from Dutch background, whom he had interviewed at home prior to the Federal Court finding Bolt guilty of racial vilification. John's widely discussed, brilliant, article provided a picture of Bolt that the public had not yet known, the human Bolt, with echoes his Dutch background included. "Because," said John to me, "he is a very human being, except that we are in disagreement over a number of matters". Ben Naparstek, John's predecessor as Editor of The Monthly, started in February 2012 as Editor of Good Weekend, where John worked. I feel that the Bolt article brought van Tiggelen a great deal of attention, and the article showed again that he was a brilliant journalist, that it helped deliver him the job of editor. His experience with the Good Weekend, and his award winning writing as an independent thinker and intellectual, will have helped as well of course in him being given this position.

People such as John van Tiggelen, who combine talent with hard work, will always succeed. In which country they were born does not matter.

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## Sources

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