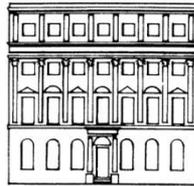


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All At Sea: The Prize Papers as a Source for a Global Microhistory
Conference Report

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All At Sea: The Prize Papers as a Source for a Global Microhistory. Conference organized by Dagmar Freist (Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg), Caroline Kimbell (National Archives, Kew), Lex Heerma van Voss (Huygens Institute, The Hague), the German Historical Institute London, and the Friends of the National Archives, Kew, and held at the National Archives, Kew, 6–8 Oct. 2014.

In maritime law a ‘prize’ is an enemy ship captured in war. Until the later nineteenth century and even, in some countries, the early twentieth, officers and crews who participated in a prize ship’s capture collected a share of the proceeds of its sale or the sale of its cargo, but only if it could be demonstrated that the ship truly was an enemy ship and not the ship of a neutral power. In England that all-important judgement fell to the Admiralty Prize Courts. The archival materials that ensued from these sometimes very long-drawn out struggles in court are familiarly known as the ‘Prize Papers’, and they have of late been generating considerable interest among historians. When a ship was captured it was customary to confiscate all the documents on board. If the ship was an enemy navy ship, there was some hope of intercepting useful intelligence by this means. But more often, and especially in the case of merchant ships, the overriding purpose was to provide evidence of the nationality of the ship’s owners, officers, and crew, or the ownership of its cargo, to make it easier to prove in court that the ship really was a legitimate prize. Because early modern ships were, in effect, floating post-offices, seizing all the documents on a ship frequently yielded an astonishing range of materials, and that is what has got historians and others quite excited about them.

The Prize Papers are now kept by the British National Archives in Kew and catalogued among the HCA (High Court of Admiralty) records, chiefly in HCA 30, 32, and 65. The papers were never technically lost, but few people knew about them until quite recently and they have been woefully underutilized, in good part because the majority of the papers are in languages other than English. This situation is now changing and this conference is a testimony to the buzz the Prize Papers have created, the new research they have begun to

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

generate, and the theoretical developments they have helped to encourage.

The opening session began with a description by Caroline Kimbell from the National Archives (NA) of the peripatetic life of the Prize Papers since they began to be fairly systematically collected in the sixteenth century (one of their earliest resting places was in an allegedly rat-infested chamber in the Tower of London). Catt Baum, also from the NA, discussed the challenges of conserving the papers, and Amanda Bevan and Randolph Cock spoke about cataloguing—past, present, and future. Dutch researchers were among the first to see the potential of the papers and this has borne fruit in some important print and online projects which were described in the last presentation in this session. Els van Eijck van Heslinga, director of the Royal Library of the Netherlands, described and demonstrated an online index of seven hundred of the boxes.¹ One of the digital projects inspired by the Prize Papers is an open access project sponsored by the Meerkens Institute, which has digitized approximately 3,500 of the letters, focusing primarily on Dutch business correspondence.² Another open-access collection, sponsored by the Schatkamer van de Nederlandse Taal, has digitized about a thousand of the Dutch letters, focusing especially on personal correspondence.³ A series co-edited by Perry Moree and called *Sailing Letters Journaal* has come out with Walburg Press. It is based on Dutch materials from the Prize Papers, including, among others *De smeekbede van een oude slavijn en andere verhalen uit de West* (The plea of an old slave-woman and other tales out of the West), a powerful example of the unexpected sources that can be found among the Prize Papers. Moree, who has recently moved to Brill, concluded his presentation by describing an ongoing Brill project to digitize many more of the papers.⁴

The Prize Papers are, above all, a product of wartime, and they testify powerfully to the challenges and opportunities that war and political uncertainty presented to states, to shipping, and to individ-

¹ See <<http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00424>>, accessed 23 Jan. 2015.

² This can be found at <www.gekaaptebrieven.nl>, accessed 23 Jan. 2015.

³ This can be found at <www.brievenalsbuit.inl.nl>, accessed 23 Jan. 2015.

⁴ For information on this proprietary database see <<http://www.brill.com/products/online-resources/prize-papers-online>>, accessed 23 Jan. 2015.

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uals. The panel on 'Politics and Economy' showed very effectively how peculiarities and arcane features of the theory and practice of neutral shipping, ancient practices of credit, and sheer opportunism came together to permit merchants to survive the long stretches of time during which the major European states were at war. Leos Müller (Centre for Maritime Studies, Stockholm) and Steve Murdoch (St Andrews) used a series of Admiralty cases relating to Swedish ships to illustrate how prize law worked in both England and Scotland. Neutrality, of nations and of ships, turns out to have been a contested status that depended, among other things, on the proportion of the ship's owners hailing from an enemy nation, whether there were enough crew members from an enemy nation to make it conceivable that they could overpower the ship, and whether a ship carried 'warlike' cargo. Xabier Lamikiz (University of the Basque Country) focused on social networks, information flow, and credit in the colonial trade between Spain and its American colonies. Lamikiz sees the cultural relations of credit—with their focus on trust, reciprocity, and real or fictive kinship—as holding special promise for understanding business culture in the early modern period. In the past the complex social arrangements surrounding merchant credit have usually eluded us. However, they come to life in the large body of business correspondence to be found in the Prize Papers. Renaud Morieux (Cambridge) examined the world of prisoners of war in the Caribbean. As he pointed out, the story of eighteenth-century prisoners of war was one both of circulation and incarceration. Prisoners moved about (or found themselves being moved about) a great deal, often as a result of bilateral agreements between islands that wished to continue to trade with each other, even though they were at war. This had more to do with opportunism than humanitarianism, however. Ships voyaging to exchange prisoners were temporarily neutral, and so could engage in trade with islands with whom they were, in fact, at war. In effect then, prisoners of war were used as 'passports', with some colonials even going so far as to rent out prisoners to ships' captains along with blank flags of truce. This paper represents a striking new departure in the study of coerced labour in the Caribbean.

The first keynote lecture, delivered by Dagmar Freist (Oldenburg), focused on how the Prize Papers can be used to develop a more nuanced sense of the relationship between local social practices

and global historical change. Freist argued that as long as microhistory is misunderstood to mean single case studies, a friction will remain between micro- and macro-analysis, and old questions about the degree of generalization and representativeness will persist. The problem of size, however, is not the question at stake. Instead, microhistorical analysis offers an analytical perspective on the contingencies of the past by reducing the scale of observation. The Prize Papers show us, in a so far unprecedented way, the entanglement of the early modern world within and across continents, and they do so from a bottom up perspective. First, we come face to face with the connectedness and contingencies of the past. Second, we are confronted with many instances of clashing difference as well as improvisatory adjustments. And third, we gain access to sources in which individual micro-strategies, sometimes the strategies of quite humble people, are on display. All are valuable for obtaining a better understanding of processes of change. Furthermore, Freist showed that a microhistorical analysis of global phenomena asks for a critical reappraisal of macrohistorical concepts such as 'national identities'. The Prize Papers, including the interrogations, bring to the fore the tension between official attempts at constructing 'national' identities and people's display of 'multiple belongings' to places and identities, depending on the specific situation and social site they were relating to. In the second part of her paper Freist proposed a way to make these observations and macrohistorical patterns of change intersect by drawing on practice theory and the concept of 'social site' (Theodor Schatzki). The question posed and partly answered by this keynote is one that recurred at several points in the conference, that is, how do we understand and model the links between small changes made by individuals and small groups in local settings – the sorts of changes we glimpse fleetingly in the Prize Papers – and larger 'global' shifts and trends?

The third session, on 'Seafaring', developed some similar themes to the second session, among them neutrality and ways of keeping trade flowing even in wartime. All the papers were powerful demonstrations of the fine-grained detail that the Prize Papers are able to give of processes we have known about in the past only in broad outline. This panel also focused usefully on change and (in the case of the papers by Starkey and Brand) on the relatively understudied fourth Anglo-Dutch War. Lucas Haasis's (Oldenburg) paper looked

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at the case of a merchant named Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, based in Bordeaux and Brest, who tricked the British Admiralty Court officials into thinking that a French ship called *L'Esperance* was actually a German-owned ship called the *Hoffnung*, and persuaded them that the eighty barrels of sugar from French Martinique sitting in her cargo hold were not French-owned but the property of his relatives in Hamburg. He also managed to transfer ownership of five of his ships to his 20-year-old brother, a Hamburg apprentice, who was, handily enough (and unlike Nicolaus Luetkens himself), in possession of Hamburg citizenship. This fascinating case shows clearly how neutrality (here combined with a certain lack of scruples), family ties, and written correspondence helped to grease the wheels of trade. David J. Starkey (Hull) offered a fascinating discussion of prize-taking during the fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–4). Based on a count of letters of marque issued by the Admiralty just before and during the war, Starkey was able to show a truly extraordinary increase in the number of privateers, up to a total of 8,831 ships in 1781, with 19,000 men shipped aboard them in January of 1781 alone. Starkey argued that this was a triumph of predatory entrepreneurialism, and he used the Prize Papers to show the kinds of ships that rushed into this enterprise, their gun and manning complements, and some of their methods, especially for dealing with neutrals. This elegant essay showed that the history of privateering responds well to being seen in the context of markets and shipping entrepreneurship more generally. Hanno Brand's (Fryske Akademy Leeuwarden) paper examined what the Prize Papers contribute to the study of Frisian shipping through the Sound. Because of the famed Sound Toll Registers we know a good deal about the movements of individual ships and what commodities they carried. However, little is known about the organization of shipping and trade or, for that matter, what ships did once they passed out of the Sound. At the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War hundreds of Dutch and Frisian ships were seized and their papers, including journals, logbooks, and accounts, eventually ended up in the Prize Papers. These papers, coupled with interrogations of crew-members of captured ships allow us to glimpse the social networks that kept both people and businesses afloat.

The fourth session, on 'Language and Literacy', was opened by Stephan Elspaß (Salzburg) and Doris Stolberg (IDS Mannheim), who argued that the Prize Papers are especially valuable for linguists

because they are a rare window into the language of common people. The early modern period poses serious methodological problems because only about 5 per cent of the linguistic community created most of the records, and we have almost no sources that hint at the speech of the remaining 95 per cent. In contrast, the Prize Papers, because they include a great many letters and the like from more ordinary people, allow a kind of linguistic history from below and can therefore be of great importance for understanding the evolution of language. Gijsbert Rutten (Leiden) explored the question of what happens when people who do not write very much find themselves forced to express themselves in that form. Lower-class people, whose efforts are often on display in the Prize Papers, tended to inhabit the border between orality and literacy, so the techniques they utilized, such as formulaic language, clause chaining, and oral elements in written speech, are important clues to the evolution and decline of regional dialects. Esther-Miriam Wagner's (Cambridge) paper was one of only two at the conference explicitly based on a source other than the Prize Papers. The Cairo Genizah was a storeroom in a synagogue in Old Cairo where, for a thousand years, Jews deposited everything they wrote. What the Cairo Genizah collection has in common with the Prize Papers is the grab-bag character of the collection. It constitutes a vast reservoir of items that ordinarily would have been thrown away and that, in most cases, have no surviving equivalents anywhere else. Wagner's paper focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century business correspondence as a linguistic source. In a rich and fascinating paper she discussed such topics as occupational code words, the sharp differences between spoken and written languages, and the distinctive ways that merchants wrote when compared with scribes. She also examined whether or not social and occupational identities can be linked to particular mixtures of vernacular and non-normative speech. This paper provided much food for thought about the subtle ways non-official sources can be analysed and interpreted, and it is to be hoped that it will influence future work on the Prize Papers.

The exceptionally focused fifth panel, 'Family, Friends and Private Lives', dealt with the Prize Papers as a source for understanding the intimate lives of humbler people. The paper by Andrew Ross Little (a freelance researcher) was a discussion of Dutch manning issues in the seventeenth century that concentrated especially

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on the navy, though it touched on all branches of Dutch shipping. A significant proportion of the men in Dutch crews had been born in France, Britain, or the southern Netherlands, but the low survival rate of administrative records for four of the five Dutch admiralties (Zeeland is the notable exception) has made it difficult to say much about them. The Prize Papers provide materials that partially compensate for what is lost; they also include private correspondence that sheds light on the family lives of navy sailors, including some of the difficulties particular to women married to foreigners. Christina Beckers (Oldenburg) mined personal letters from the Prize Papers for what they show about divided families, or families where one member had gone to the colonies or some other distant place. This data often suggests a different view of family life from the normative one where families co-reside. A particularly interesting section of the presentation focused on what Beckers calls 'practices of belonging' within the letters, which included rhetorics of remembrance; 'imagined communion', which aimed to 'translate' the sights, practices, and material objects of a foreign place for the benefit of the letter's recipient; and attempts to integrate the memory of distant loved ones into one's daily routine (or at least to assert that one had done so). Beckers concluded that the family correspondence in the Prize Papers yields numerous insights into 'practices [designed] to negotiate hierarchy, possession, ideals and affection'. Judith Brouwer (Groningen) analysed the large number of Dutch letters captured during the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–4), most of them intended for Batavia and Curaçao. A very large proportion of these were written or dictated by lower-class women, and they therefore partially '[fill] the gap in our knowledge when it comes to the inner world of the functionally illiterate'. These letters illuminate issues to do with the upbringing and care of adolescent children, death, and financial survival, among others, and the overwhelming emotion is anxiety and uncertainty about the welfare of their relatives abroad or on board a ship. As Sünne Juterczenka (Berlin) remarked in her comment, these papers show that 'globalization did not happen exclusively on the level of the state, geopolitics, or economics, but in the private lives of ordinary people and in the web of their personal relationships too'. According to her, the paper also revealed some of the challenges of using the Prize Papers as a source for global microhistory, especially the problems posed by their disjointed and scatter-

shot character and the fact that they tend to be isolated snapshots in time. Juterczenka posed the question: are the Prize Paper materials dense enough to allow us to go beyond the case study and address larger issues and trends, including more 'global' ones? Can we connect the little and the big beneath the same conceptual rubric?

In the second keynote lecture, Lex Heerma van Voss (Huygens Institute) focused on the valuable new information the Prize Papers offer that cannot be found elsewhere, such as certain types of ships' logs and large caches of personal letters by ordinary people. The rest of the talk focused on two main themes, the question of nationality or allegiance, and what the Papers reveal about emotion. On the first issue the interrogations of crew members that accompany each case show extremely diverse principles of identification. Some people clearly identified themselves much more powerfully with a particular town than with a nation. Length of residence played a role, as did personal connections, such as having a wife and children in Flanders. This evidence demonstrates the still malleable and imprecise contours of nationality and the nation-state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and, indeed, both terms are of recent vintage). The second part of the talk was a meditation on the shifting character of emotion in the Prize Papers and in similar caches of personal letters. Here the main theme was the greater frequency of expression of deep emotion, especially love, in the letters in the later eighteenth century than had been true in the seventeenth. This keynote lecture therefore highlighted two of the ways in which the Prize Papers can be used to trace change over time, first with respect to identification with a particular place or country, and second with respect to deep emotions like love. Of the two, the issue of identification with place, which had already been addressed in the first keynote lecture, seems especially valuable, since there is not much written about it; conversely, claims about the rise of emotion similar to those Heerma van Voss mentioned here have an established, if not uncontested, place in the historiography of the early modern period. On the other hand, if these sort of shifts can be demonstrated in relation to letters by lower-class people, that would be a significant contribution.

The sixth session, on 'Colonial Cross-Overs and Confrontations', opened with Jessica Cronshagen's (Oldenburg) examination of the Surinam Moravian community's attitude to slavery as it was lived out in daily life. The Moravians sought to convert slaves, but had to

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ally with plantation owners in order to do so. They tried to secure better living conditions for slaves, but they themselves owned slaves from at least the mid eighteenth century on. In the past, most historians studied Moravians in the Caribbean primarily with reference to official correspondence sent directly to the Moravian leadership. This essay used private letters, seized from prize ships, and was therefore able to examine the local and household dimensions of the problem. Cronshagen found hints that ordinary Moravians believed that they treated slaves more humanely than non-Moravians did. However, there was also rhetorical confusion in relation to terms such as 'freedom': was the 'freedom of the Christian' merely spiritual and never bodily? What happened (as was the case in one of the letters Cronshagen cites) when a master refused to allow his slaves to attend church services and made it essentially impossible for one slave to mother her own children? Could one be spiritually free and yet be a slave? Erik van der Doe (The Hague) presented information about a joint project of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and the Nationaal Archief in The Hague, which aims to preserve and display records pertaining to the Dutch slave trade. Part of this project is based on records drawn from the Prize Papers in HCA, which include records confiscated from individual slave ships. One of these captures has yielded the only known journal of a Dutch private slave trader, one kept by a Flushing captain between 1794 and 1795. Also in the Prize Papers, amazingly, is the complete financial archive of the Dutch slave forts on the African Gold Coast from 1793 to 1803. These had been put on board a slave ship called the *Jacobina*, bound first for Surinam with a cargo of slaves and then for Amsterdam. The *Jacobina* was captured on the way, and the entire archive joined the Prize Papers. It includes muster rolls both of free and slave men, payrolls, inventories, and wills that cast light on daily life in Elmina, the main fort, and outlying forts. It is clear that the study of the Dutch slave trade and of slavery has much to gain from the Prize Papers.

The papers on the seventh panel, 'Practices, Artefacts, Spaces and Body', were unified around the theme of sickness and the body, and all three could be said to be about early modern 'crises of the self', especially those derived in some way from a conflict between masculine ideals of strength and self-possession and the bodily weakness that often accompanies illness. All the papers also took up themes to do with humorally-based medical theory and practice as they

addressed the challenge of travel and new and terrifying tropical and subtropical diseases. Annika Raapke's (Oldenburg) paper was a fine example of how close analysis of a few letters can recreate a whole world. Raapke's paper was based on a series of descriptions by a young French military officer, one Lelong, of his near-fatal encounter with yellow fever while stationed in French Martinique. Raapke read these letters as being centrally about masculinity and identity, and she argued that they were part of a larger set of claims that yellow fever especially targeted young European men. This particular military officer was also clearly in touch with enlightened discourses of masculine rationality and used them to think through his own illness as well as to try out different ways of representing his ordeal to friends and relatives. Rebecca Earle (Warwick) examined a range of early modern writings about the physical and psychic dangers of straying far from one's native land, and especially the health risks of eating unfamiliar foods. As Earle showed, anxiety about the health effects of novel foods and drinks had all kinds of implications for social arrangements, economic planning and trade policy outside Europe, as colonists sought to ensure a supply of the commodities with which they had grown up back home. This nicely conceived paper is an excellent corrective to the tendency to overemphasize the ease of adoption of crops from the New World, like potatoes and maize. Peter van den Hooff (Utrecht) first discussed some of the methodological problems posed by online searches of the Prize Papers, then examined the single case of a Dutchman named Wernard Van Vloten, from a family of wine merchants, who circulated around several of the Dutch New World colonies in the 1780s. Van Vloten wrote a number of letters home that contained quite explicit descriptions of his medical ailments, from jaundice to an injured knee that later became badly infected. Van den Hooff argued that the Prize Papers permit a kind of patient-centred 'medical history from below' that is harder to achieve with other sorts of sources.

What do the Prize Papers offer to researchers that they did not have before? Four major areas emerged from this conference. First, the Prize Papers offer new sources related to trade and commerce, including large caches of business letters, account books, and the like. These do more than just supplement more quantitative sources; they offer a window into the culture, the social networks, and legal and political manipulations (especially of the laws of neutrality) that con-

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stituted trade. Second, the Prize Papers supply new information about slavery and the slave trade, especially in the Dutch colonies and in some of the Dutch slave forts on the west coast of Africa. Third, the Prize Papers give us a wide range of information specifically about seafaring, from ships' logs and information about ships' crews (such as the fascinating and largely unique information gleaned from the interrogations) to rare personal letters from seamen's wives. And fourth, the Papers often preserve correspondence to and from quite humble participants in the great diaspora that was European global trade and settlement in the early modern period. This sort of correspondence occasionally turns up in other kinds of sources, but only by chance and hardly ever in significant amounts before the mid to late nineteenth century. These sources promise new insights into a wide range of issues, from the history of emotions to the study of gender; from notions of identity to the evolution of language; from the study of coercive labour practices to the history of the body – and a good deal else.

In theoretical terms the impact of the Prize Papers remains uncertain, though it could be significant. Clearly some people see them, with their tantalizing but rich insights into the lives of the sorts of people who seldom left private papers, as a key source for rethinking notions of historical change and personal or collective agency. The challenge here is to figure out ways actually to demonstrate the relationship of micro-situations to middle-sized and large global trends, to figure out, as it were, the architecture and mechanics of 'global microhistory'. One of the great advantages of the Prize Papers is that, while they were confiscated in the context of legal cases (that is, in anticipation of having to prove in court that a given ship was an enemy ship) they are far more diverse than the usual exhibits in court cases. The custom of confiscating *all* the documents on a particular ship is different from submitting a few love letters in a betrothal dispute, or issuing a subpoena for a firm's account books in a conflict over a contract – two other instances that generate material of this kind. It is different primarily because there is a greater diversity in terms of types of documents saved (including many that would have had no discernible use in a standard court case) and because there is, typically, a good deal more of it. It remains to be seen whether this kind of source really will lead to enduring changes in our understanding of those internal mechanisms of change, and that will part-

ly depend upon what else turns up in the archive boxes. What is clear is that this conference illuminated the personal and networking dimensions of maritime life and global expansion in the early modern period in a really unprecedented way.

For various reasons, including some last-minute cancellations, there were some lacunae in the conference. There was, for example, relatively little coverage of French- or Spanish-language material (only one paper each) and far less on the Mediterranean or Indian Ocean trade and settlement than on Northern European powers and the Atlantic. The absence of any East India material, even in the Dutch papers, was especially striking. Though the Prize Papers clearly do illuminate the lives, and even, at times, the feelings of non-elites, including non-elite women and even a few slaves, it is not clear, at least not yet, how much they have to contribute in terms of our understanding of non-Europeans, though the sources on Dutch slave forts in African sound promising. There is obviously much more to do in the Prize Papers, which will be occupying researchers for years to come.

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