

Breda

If one looks from a distance across the low horizon to Breda, there is an openness about it that is palpably different from the bigger cities to the west. The skies are expansive in a palette of hues ranging anywhere between a heavenly blue and a mournful gray that might, at any time, give way to a muddle of clouds. This blissful opulence seems to rest atop an uninterrupted low-lying earthly landscape of farms, roofs, and treetops, dotted with the occasional steeple. In town, the moist air presses down, blanketing everything in insular intimacy, as if while walking down the street one could make out a barely audible whisper coming from the opposite side. It somehow feels provincial.

This description of Adriaen van der Donck's hometown would have also fit Breda when he lived in the seventeenth century, when countless artists were famously inspired by those same skies. Once part of the heart of the Low Countries commercial region that included Antwerp and Brussels, Breda was situated in the predominantly Catholic territory below the two great rivers, the Rijn and the Maas, which divided the region from the mainly Protestant northern Dutch Republic. While the town remained a welcome respite and active hub on the road between the Southern and Northern Low Country provinces, Breda's central location, though strategic in many ways, had also made it a liability. As the boom of the Dutch Golden Age was generating unprecedented growth in the western cities of the Dutch Republic, Breda was continuously exposed to conflict as part of the Dutch-administered province of North Brabant that bordered the Spanish-controlled territories. A century earlier, Breda had been turned into a battleground when the relentless push

for control by the Spanish from the south, and resistance by the Dutch from the north, left it caught in the middle in a tug-of-war. The fighting that ensued eventually ignited the Dutch Revolt in 1568 and the Eighty Years' War that followed. The ongoing hostilities exposed the area to so much trauma and violence that a cleric would later write, "Almost every hand's breadth of ground in Brabant is stained with blood."¹ Even after the formation of the Dutch Republic, North Brabant and Breda remained unsecured in the turbulent strife between the two forces. While the northern Dutch provinces prospered, North Brabant and Breda continued to be pulled apart, held hostage by the volatility between the Catholic Spanish Low Countries and the Protestant Dutch Republic. The road to peace would be long for Breda.

Breda, named for the wide (*breed*) river Aa just to the south, was a city with a fifteen-bastioned fortification, four gates, and a castle surrounded by a moat. It was one of the oldest fortresses in the province of North Brabant and one of the original cities belonging to the Nassau aristocracy. Willem of Orange, a descendant of the Nassau family, fought for Dutch independence from Spain during the Eighty Years' War. In spring of 1590, in one of the most famous battles that is still a source of pride for Breda today, Willem's son Maurits, who had succeeded him as Prince of Orange, called on the owner of a *tufschip*, or peat boat, to aid in a daring military tactic.² In a ruse reminiscent of the Greek legend of the Trojan Horse, the peat boat operator who was contracted to deliver the dried, boggy vegetation commonly used for fuel secretly stowed seventy-two Dutch soldiers in the boat's cargo hold. Packed tight in the fake compartment, the soldiers waited for the opportune moment to enter the fort, stifling their coughs in the damp and leaking boat for fear of giving themselves away.³ In the dark of night on an ice-cold Shrove Tuesday that March, the boat operator smuggled the soldiers past the Spanish guards and through the fortress of the Castle of Breda. The dauntless Dutch company battled the Spanish soldiers, who were caught unprepared in the surprise attack, and won control of the city back for the House of Orange. In his gratitude, Maurits rewarded the peat boat owner generously, deeding him a house and an honorable official city function in Breda as harbormaster. The peat boat owner, from the nearby village of Leur, was Adriaen van Bergen, Adriaen van der Donck's maternal grandfather, and his namesake.

Breda prospered under Prince Maurits who, like his father Willem, ruled with a tolerance for both Protestants and Catholics. This approach not only benefited the community socially, it also aided commercial expansion as a by-product of the cooperative climate. By the early 1600s, Breda, which had also recovered from a devastating fire in the previous century, was growing into a provincial city. The river Marck meandered idyllically through the city

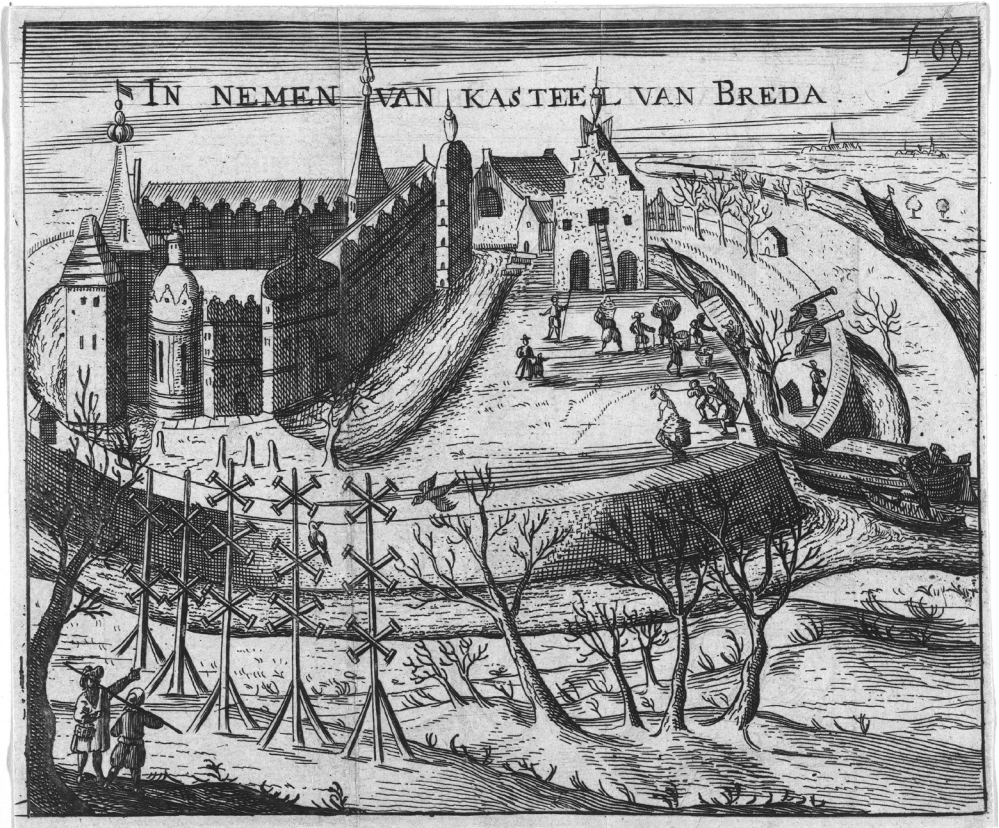


FIGURE 1.1. Capture of the Castle of Breda, 1590. Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

from the north, facilitating transportation from outside areas into the center of town. Though still much more of a pastoral setting than a big city like Amsterdam, Breda nevertheless bustled with local merchants in lively public markets like the Vismarkt, Veemarkt, Houtmarkt, and Havermarkt, selling fish, livestock, wood, and grains.⁴

From all indications, the decorated military history of the peat boat victory had propelled the Van Bergen family into the class of the socially privileged. The family had a coat of arms, which, itself, was a sign of wealth or status, featuring three lions rampant, or forelegs raised in profile, over a peat boat on the water.⁵ However, when Adriaen van der Donck's mother, Agatha Adriaens(dr) van Bergen, from Breda, married his father, Cornelis Ghysbrechts(z) van der Donck, from Dordrecht, she married into a family

that had some social standing of its own.⁶ Originally from the central province of Gelderland where an estate named Donkersgoed in Putten was likely named for them, the family were landowners and also had a coat of arms, featuring three castles in red against a gold background.⁷ The Van der Donck family names were recorded with titles, a sign of status at the time. *Sr.*, short for *Sieur*, was used for the men in the family and *Jo^e*, for *Joffrouwe*, or *Jonckvrouwe*, addressed the women. After the death of Cornelis van der Donck's own father, his mother remarried another man of high social ranking, Artus Pels. This marriage made Pels, a steward in the House of Orange, stepfather to Cornelis. Records show that Cornelis later sold two houses, with their lots, in Breda, which may have come from Pels.⁸

Adriaen van der Donck was born into his Protestant family between 1618 and 1620 during the Twelve Years' Truce with Spain that had begun in 1609, after forty years of war.⁹ This was a time of welcome and hopeful respite from years of conflict when the people of Breda could finally go about their lives, living peacefully together in a community that was roughly two-thirds Catholic and one-third Protestant. Agatha and Cornelis van der Donck had settled there, in a posh area in the northeast part of town, and had at least three children, Agatha, Adriaen, and Balthasar, and possibly a fourth, Ghysbrecht.¹⁰ The family home stood on the north side of the Gasthuyseinde (now the Boschstraat) at the corner of an alleyway called Duivelshoek. These residences just inside the Gasthuyseinde Poort, one of the four gates on the edge of the city, made a welcome presentation of Breda's prosperity to visitors entering from the north.¹¹ There would have been plenty to do and see in the Van der Doncks' little corner of the city, which was close to the center of activities and apparently quite diverse. Just down the street stood the Gasthuis, or Guest House, a care center for foreigners and anyone of lesser means, with its own church on the property. A couple of hundred yards to the north lay the serene twelfth-century brick Begijnhof, a walled complex where the Beguine order of Catholic laywomen lived quietly and independently, insulated from the religious conflicts because of their long-standing relationship with the Nassau family. In their enclosed courtyard, the Beguines' gardens flourished with the color and aroma of hundreds of varieties of plants and herbs, grown for medicinal purposes in their calling as caregivers. From the Begijnhof, the Castle of Breda was an imposing sight as a noble and monumental brick structure, with its main building forming a quadrangle around an inner square. Home to family members of the House of Orange, the castle, as well as all of its ancillary buildings, was contained within the surrounding moat. The entire formation held a gracious but formidable presence in the city.

From Adriaen van der Donck's house he could look up and see the majestic steeple of the Grote Kerk, or Great Church, rising more than three hundred feet toward the heavens. Built in the 1400s from lightly colored local natural stone in the Brabant Gothic Style, the church's dramatic and elaborate architecture dominated the Grote Markt, the largest and most prominent marketplace in Breda. The affluence of the Orange-Nassau family was reflected in the church's ornately decorated structure, and the remains of some of the family members are still encrypted there under intricately carved monuments. In the volatile period of the Eighty Years' War with Spain, control of the church fluctuated between Catholic and Protestant authority, but it was in Protestant hands from the time of the peat boat victory of 1590 through the time of Van der Donck's birth. He would have had to walk past the church on the way to visit his grandfather, who lived just on the opposite side in a house on the Havermarkt named De Zwaan.

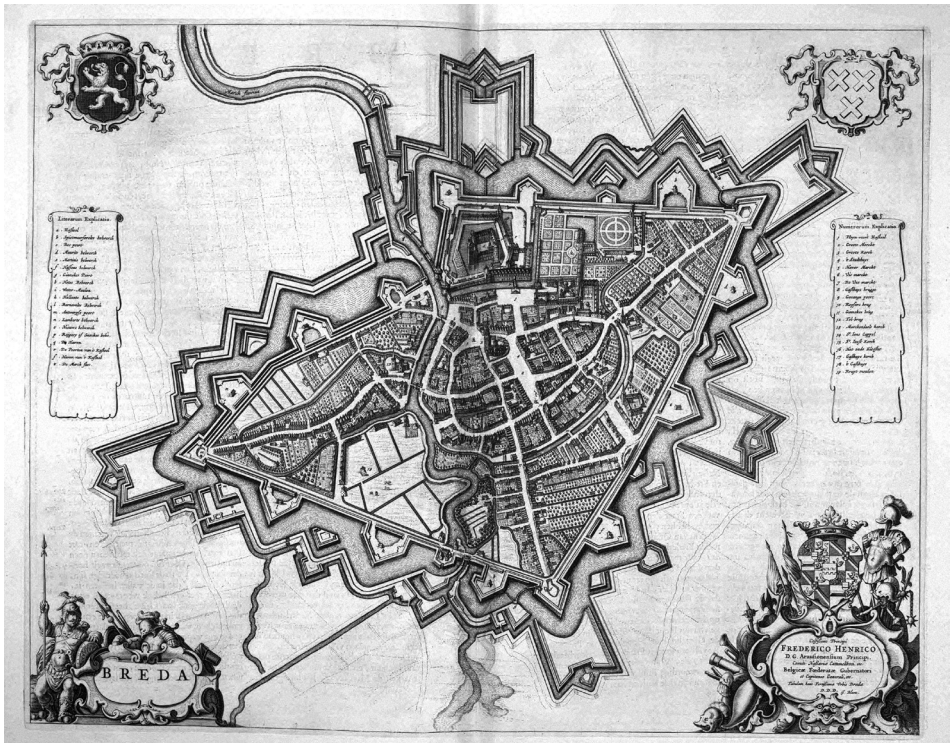


FIGURE 1.2. Map of the bastioned city of Breda. Courtesy of the British Library, London.

The peaceful and undisturbed existence that Adriaen van der Donck enjoyed as a young boy in Breda was short-lived after the Twelve Years' Truce with Spain ended in 1621. It had become more and more likely that war would resume after the truce ended, and that Breda would be one of Spain's next targets, in part to make up for an earlier, failed attempt to take the neighboring village of Bergen op Zoom. Control of Breda and the province of North Brabant would give the Spanish command of the rivers that bordered the Dutch Republic, positioning them to disrupt the trade that had grown in these regions. In 1624, the Spanish, no longer bound by the armistice, made plans to assault the city from the south in a siege offensive. In May of that year, city leaders got wind of a plan to attack, and the people of Breda braced themselves for what was likely to come. The city stockpiled warehouses with grain and other provisions, while strengthening their defense levels by adding soldiers and munitions. The Spanish, knowing it would be difficult to penetrate Breda's stepped-up fortification, tactically determined that they would have a better chance of taking Breda by isolating the city than by a traditional weapons attack. Under decorated officer Ambrogio Spinola, the Spanish plan was to cut off supplies to Breda until its citizens would literally be hungry enough to surrender.¹²

By the end of July, a growing number of Spanish troops were assembling just two miles away from the city. A month later, the Spanish were successful in securing the first area, just south of Breda. Local leaders encouraged the farmers living outside of the city to move their families into town for safeguarding. To help fund their own defense, all citizens, especially those like the Van der Doncks who had the means, were ordered to declare under oath all the money, gold, and silver they had and then turn it in to the city on loan. The metals were melted down and made into coins to pay the additional soldiers that were there for their protection.¹³ The military in Breda cut through forests of trees and burned down houses in the southern part of town to get a clear view of Spinola's activities as he positioned his companies of soldiers into four quarters around the city. By September, Spinola's army had succeeded in erecting a fortification around the city, as troops moved closer into makeshift forts to cut off any channels by which food could reach the city from the countryside. The Spanish, whose patience was waning, began firing on the city with cannons and grenades, destroying some homes in the barrage. Food supplies that, until then, had been able to move throughout the city with some ease, were becoming more difficult to access. Bread, a staple for the Dutch, was being rationed. Little by little, shortages of food and especially medicines worsened. By February 1625, catastrophic diseases such as scurvy, dysentery, and the plague were spreading among the despondent

community.¹⁴ The soldiers were suffering from fatigue. After several attempts by the army of the Dutch Republic to come to Breda's aid failed to get through the Spanish defenses, the city began to concede that there would be no relief from the Spanish hold. Finally, in June 1625, a debilitated and depopulated Breda had no choice but to surrender.

While Spinola was praised for capturing Breda with a minimal amount of bloodshed, the conflict had taken a heavy toll on the citizens of Breda in turmoil and suffering. By the time the Spanish moved into the city, approximately five thousand residents, a third of the population of Breda, had lost their lives to starvation and disease. The people's attempt at defense from within Breda had been valiant, however. In a feat of clever Dutch water engineering, a system of defensive locks had been deployed, damming the rivers Aa and Marck to create a moat around the city. The resulting flooding not only affected areas along the rivers, but also inundated the western and northern parts of the city that would have included the area where the Van der Doncks had their home.¹⁵ The despair and flooding might not have been enough to drive the family away. But, though the Spanish had agreed to many of the city's conditions for surrender, there would be no concession on religious divergences. The Catholic Spanish denied the freedom of conscience for Protestants, the right to follow their own religious beliefs, even disallowing Protestant burials in the church in Breda. Occupation by the Spanish meant that most of the Protestants would be expelled from the town, regardless of their rung on the social ladder. After the devastating loss of their hometown, the Van der Donck family fled north to the smaller village of Oosterhout. Rather than growing up in Breda, basking in a privileged childhood playing marbles or leapfrog, spinning tops or jumping rope, and enjoying the innocence of his youth as has heretofore been assumed, Adriaen van der Donck witnessed firsthand the inescapable inequities of war, the death and suffering of friends and neighbors, and finally, the loss of his very community. While the family's affluence likely positioned him better than those in lower socioeconomic classes, he was forced to leave the only home he had ever known, as a boy of about seven years old. For a child who had not known the adult construct of war, the prospect of death, or another home for that matter, this flight must have been a terrible upheaval, wrought with uncertainties. He probably wondered, as children often contend when they have no voice in a matter, how this could possibly be fair.

While Oosterhout was not home, it was at least nearby, being less than a day's walk from Breda. And it was not a bad refuge, as towns go. Many of the bigger farmhouses in the area had been expanded into modest castles during the late Middle Ages. Belgian history professor Jean Baptiste Gramaye

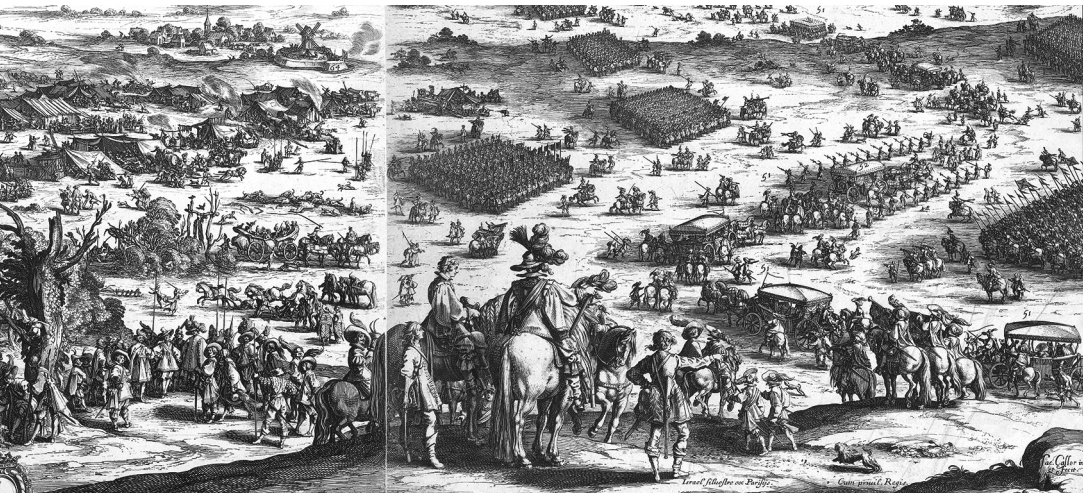


FIGURE 1.3. Spanish Siege of Breda (*detail below*). Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



praised Oosterhout in the seventeenth century as one of the most beautiful villages in the Barony of Breda. He was so taken by it that he wrote, “If the Barony would be a ring, then I would call Oosterhout the gemstone.”¹⁶ And, apparently, the family was not alone in seeking sanctuary in Oosterhout. By looking at the statistics, it seems that others from their Protestant community likely did the same. After the Spanish siege on Breda, the Protestant population in Oosterhout, which numbered only seventy to eighty in the years before the takeover, grew to two hundred by the following year. By 1637, ten years later, the Protestant community counted approximately five hundred people. It appears that the Van der Donck family weathered the Spanish hold on Breda by staying in Oosterhout for quite some time. In 1626, Van der Donck’s father received permission to transport a horse to his home in Oosterhout. The following year, probably realizing that their refuge was not as temporary as originally thought, he received additional approval for the transport of two mares and two cows. Five years later, records of a debt paid by Cornelis van der Donck and his wife, Agatha, still show an Oosterhout address.¹⁷

Fortunately for Adriaen van der Donck, his new community included access to schooling. The seventeenth-century Dutch Republic emphasized education. The growth in trade and the push for accessibility to the lessons of the bible had spurred the need for competency in arithmetic and reading, resulting in higher than average literacy rates compared to the rest of Europe. In the bigger cities, schools were often subsidized. In the smaller villages,



learning was prioritized through private lessons, if there was money, and through the trades, if not. The village of Oosterhout was an exception among smaller villages in that it had a Latin school, dating from 1594. The curriculum at the Latin school was taught in the classical language, as the name implies, and was among the highest level of elementary schooling available in the Dutch Republic. The Latin schools were specifically aimed at preparing students for entrance into one of the universities and often included not just Latin but Greek and Hebrew, along with a range of other general scholarship such as religious studies, mathematics, logic, and planetary sciences.¹⁸ This was exactly the kind of education that the Van der Doncks would have wanted for their son.

Eleven years after the dark days of the surrender to Spinola, the army of the Dutch Republic recaptured Breda in October 1637. The Protestants who had been displaced slowly began returning to their homes in Breda to reconstruct their city and their livelihoods. Though the Van der Donck family also eventually returned, documents place them in Oosterhout as late as 1638.¹⁹ They seem to have fared well enough to maintain an upper-class standing for the upcoming generation, however. Van der Donck's sister Agatha went on to marry an officer of the Dutch East India Company. His brother, Balthasar, later moved to the northern province of Friesland, possibly to attend the University of Franeker there, and became a regional administrator.²⁰ But Adriaen van der Donck never returned to his childhood home to stay. In May of 1638 he enrolled, at about age twenty, at Leiden University. His Latin school education had given him the foundation he needed to further his education. When he registered, however, he gave his place of origin as neither the city of Breda nor the village of Oosterhout, but as the region of Brabant.²¹ Through no fault of his own, a permanent home had been kept out of reach for most of his life, when he had been too young to do anything about it. He would more than make up for any feelings of helplessness in the future. Though his life would not be long, his path forward would be filled with resolve, determination, and the pursuit of justice. He was about to embark on a new opportunity at one of the foremost learning institutions in Europe, leave the uncertainties of the past behind him, and finally be in control of his own life.