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Biography, Volume 43, Number 1, 2020, pp. 43-47 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2020.0007>



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# A Critical Biography of Former Prime Minister Miguel Pourier

## The Year in Curaçao

Rose Mary Allen and Jeroen Heuvel

The historian Alejandro Paula asserts that on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao people who have played an important role in society do not often write about their lives and memories to leave a legacy (Da Costa Gomez-Mattheeuws and de Lannoy-Berg 126). In general, political leaders are more represented among the biographical publications of Curaçao, according to Peter Jordens's study titled *Outo/biografia kurasoleño: un bista general di 1921–2018*. Besides works about politicians written by individual authors, biographical publications have also appeared in the form of *liber amicorum*, in which several authors write articles or commentary about the person in question (Jordens 14). The biography of the political leader Miguel Archangel Pourier (1938–2013) came into being through the active participation of his family and his former political party members who thought it necessary and important that a book be written about him. To create it, they contracted Bernadette Heiligers, who has written several books about Curaçao, including a biography of the local writer Pierre Lauffer in 2012.

Heiligers's *Miguel Pourier: Leven om te dienen* (2016) is one of the most recent Curaçaoan biographies on political leaders. Though Pourier was born in Bonaire, a neighboring Dutch Caribbean island, he lived most of his life in Curaçao, making his life narrative more Curaçaoan than Bonairian. The subtitle, which translates as "living to serve," already gives a glimpse of Pourier's personality and his personal life motive. The biography is a full-length book, consisting of twelve chapters spread over more than 223 pages. It is written in Dutch, as most Curaçaoan political biographies are. Dutch is one of the three official languages of the island and competes with the creole language Papiamentu, which also became official in 2007.

Heiligers opts for a chronological portrayal of Pourier's life instead of a thematic approach, as this approach offers certain advantages for the presentation of

the biographical subject. The book starts with a description of Pourier's humble beginnings in the Bonairian village of Rincon where his parents had to struggle to get by. The narrative describes what it meant to grow up with a father who, in order to take care of his family, had to leave the island to work on an oil tanker operated by the multinational firm Shell. As the oil refineries in both Curaçao and Aruba administered about 80 percent of the fuel for the Allied Forces during World War II, working on an oil tanker was not without danger in those days. For example, thirty Bonairian men were killed by German torpedoes in 1942. Their names are engraved in a commemorative monument on the "Francisco Mercelina" Quay in Bonaire.

Miguel's birth on September 29<sup>th</sup> was no coincidence. Twice a year Bonairian seamen would return home and buy rounds of liquor in the *botekin* (pub) with the money they had earned abroad. Especially in December, when the village was in festive holiday mood, the men were brought in as heroes. In this way, a lot of Rincon's children were born in the month of September, a fact to which Heiligers alludes in the opening sentence of the first chapter as she mentions Pourier's date of birth.

Another significant circumstance in Pourier's life was that he had to leave his family and his island of birth in 1951, at the tender age of twelve, to attend secondary school on the larger island of Curaçao, which at the time was the center of Dutch colonial rule in the Caribbean. Pourier himself described this and other experiences of his youth in a personal notebook, and as Heiligers was able to use this notebook, the first part of the biography is to a significant extent autobiographical (Jordens 12). In later chapters, Heiligers further delves into Pourier's life, examining his ideals, the most significant events during his time as a politician, political relations within the Dutch Kingdom, his successes and failures, and the sustainability of his ideas, all issues not covered in Pourier's notes.

Pourier was known and appreciated for his belief in the federation of the Netherlands Antilles and his determination to keep the Dutch Caribbean islands together. The Netherlands Antilles had come into existence in 1954 as a federation of six islands, but was already reduced to five in 1986 when the island of Aruba departed.

Heiligers's biography of Pourier reads like a classical drama as the biographer marches through the life of the biographical subject (Heuvel). In the beginning, the political leader seems unbeatable. He climbs from an almost impossible position to unprecedented success as a politician who seemed able to accomplish his ideals. Pourier became the leader of the Partido Antia Restrukturá [Party of a Restructured Antilles] in 1993 and pleaded the cause of a united Dutch Antilles. A majority followed this plea and voted for his party, and therefore against the federation's dissolution, which seemed impending at the time. Unfortunately, nothing came of the intended restructuring of the Netherlands Antilles, and Pourier ended up spending most of his time as prime minister reforming the finances of the federation. Both the tough austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund on the

government to improve the island's finances and the Dutch government's decision not to keep their end of the bargain weighed heavily on Pourier. The Antillean islands experienced a severe economic crisis with high rates of unemployment, and many Curaçaoans emigrated to the Netherlands. The wave of emigration started in 1998 and reached its peak in 2000; in total, 13,867 people left the island (Maduro 2). Pourier's dream of a united Antillean federation was further smashed when the people of the islands of Sint Maarten (2000), Bonaire (2004), Saba (2004), and Curaçao (2005) voted in a series of referendums to leave the federation.

Pourier's party nevertheless won the 2004 election and remained in power until 2010, but Pourier was no longer the party's leader, among other things because of his poor health (de Roo). In 2010, the Netherlands Antilles were dismantled. The two largest islands, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, each became an autonomous "country" (somewhat similar to Aruba) within the Dutch Kingdom, while the three smallest islands, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba, each became an overseas municipality and integral part of the Netherlands (in fact, they were henceforth referred to as "the Caribbean Netherlands"). All six Dutch Caribbean islands today remain part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in one form or another, but are administrated separately.

Heiligers describes Pourier's disillusionment during the later part of his life. Whereas the first chapter of the book relates the life of a hopeful boy, confident in support from the spiritual world, the later chapters describe the beginning of the end of the political career of an Antillean prime minister and his disappointment in the Dutch politicians in whom he had placed his trust. The biographer subtly indicates this shift in attitude at the end of the book when she reports on Pourier's funeral ceremony, where "I Dreamed a Dream" from the musical *Les Misérables* was sung. Heiligers explains that Victor Hugo's novel of the same name was about a dream lost because of betrayal, and she states that "Pourier loved the song." Pourier's coffin was covered with the five-starred Netherlands-Antillean flag, representing his ideal of five united islands. Pourier's life reminds us therefore that "there are dreams that cannot be fulfilled and there are storms we cannot control" (Heuvel).

The biography has been reviewed more than others. For example, Jeroen Heuvel reviews it under the title "Verrassende kijk op aangrijpend leven van ex-premier Pourier," and Jos de Roo highlights Pourier's political life and disappointments in "Nederland werd Pouriers noodlot." Ronald Donk has questioned whether the book complies with the criteria of a critically interpretive biography, concluding that in spite of the well-written text, the book is too descriptive and fails on some points to explain the complex historical and social factors that influenced Pourier's leadership.

Beside the fact that the book presents a good example of upward mobility through education, one can also gain insight into unequal power structures in small island states that remain non-sovereign, even though the Dutch Caribbean islands have some degree of political autonomy to determine their own affairs within the constellation of the Dutch Kingdom (Oostindie and Klinkers). The book provides

support for Yarimar Bonilla's argument that sovereignty has different meanings. She points to the complex challenges faced by non-sovereign states, principally in the Caribbean, to respond and adapt to other organizing principles of governance placed by the colonial motherland that make it difficult to negotiate and navigate the different forms of entanglement that "cannot or perhaps should not be easily broken" (Bonilla).

The biography of Miguel Pourier is a must-read for anyone seeking insight into the social and political situation of Bonaire at the beginning of the twentieth century and of Curaçao at the end of the twentieth century. It has now been ten years since the constitutional reforms of 2010 and the demise of the Netherlands Antilles. The socioeconomic conditions of the island of Curaçao have deteriorated, with public finances under severe pressure. This development seems to invalidate the general complaint, prevalent before 2010, that the other, smaller islands of the Netherlands Antilles placed a heavy burden on the finances of Curaçao, which, as the largest island, had to contribute proportionally more to the budget of the five-island federation. Economic decline since 2010 has been attributed to poor governance, which appears to underscore Pourier's belief that one must have one's economic matters in order so that no outside help is needed and no outside party can impose any demands (Drayer).

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