Baron Aarnoud van Heemstra, Humanitarian Governor of Suriname and Grandfather of Audrey Hepburn

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Baron Aarnoud Jan Anne Aleid van Heemstra was born in 1871 into an aristocratic family of Frisian origin in the Netherlands. His great uncle, Schelto van Heemstra, had been Prime Minister of the Netherlands in the early 1860s. Aarnoud van Heemstra was born in Vreeland, a village in the province of Utrecht, and was the second son of Wilhelmina Cornelia de Beaufort (a minor noble) and Baron Hendrik Philip van Heemstra, a town mayor.

Van Heemstra earned his law degree from Utrecht University in 1896. For the next 14 years, he worked as a prosecutor and then as a judge in several Dutch cities. In 1910, he was elected mayor of the city of Arnhem, where he improved public housing, recruited several new businesses to the city, and served as a capable administrator through the turmoil of World War I. He resigned as mayor in 1920 after a budget dispute, complaining that his poor salary no longer allowed him to perform his duties adequately — although he was personally wealthy and lived on a large country estate called Zijpendaal, where he maintained a stable of fine horses and was known for throwing lavish parties.

Queen Wilhelmina appointed the newly unemployed Baron van Heemstra to be the governor of the colony of Suriname (Dutch Guiana), and he arrived in the colony’s capital city, Paramaribo, in 1921. Unlike most of his colonial gubernatorial predecessors, van Heemstra took his responsibilities to the colony seriously and advocated for economic development, infrastructure improvement, and gradual independence from the Netherlands. He traveled several times outside of Paramaribo to the dense rain forests in the interior of the country, where few Europeans dared venture, to observe conditions among the “Maroons” (descendants of runaway African slaves) and indigenous Amerindians living there.

Van Heemstra was the first leader of Suriname to recognize the economic potential of the massive bauxite mineral reserves in the country. In 1922, the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) started bauxite mining in Suriname, and bauxite remains Suriname’s most important export in the 21st century. Van Heemstra tried to attract German mining interests to counter American influence in Suriname, but this plan was overruled by the Dutch Parliament, who feared the American government might retaliate by placing tariffs or sanctions on the Royal Dutch Shell oil company. Eventually, frustrated by resistance from the Dutch Parliament to his proposed reforms and by general disinterest in the colony in the mother country, van Heemstra resigned as governor of Suriname and returned to the Netherlands in 1928. Suriname achieved independence in 1975.

The Netherlands and colonies had been early adopters of semi-postal stamps, issues in which a surcharge above the standard postal rate is added to raise money for a charity. (The United States only issued its first semi-postal stamp in 1998, Scott #B1, to promote breast cancer research.) The first semi-postal stamps in continental Europe were a 1906 Netherlands series supporting tuberculosis control, and Suriname issued the first semi-postal stamps in South America in 1927, supporting the Green Cross, a community health care organization. In 1928, the Suriname postal service issued a...
series of 4 semi-postal stamps (Scott #B4-B7) bearing an art deco-style image of the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan. This issue generated funds for the Governor van Heemstra Foundation (“Gouverneur van Heemstra Stichting”), which supported health programs among the non-European population in Suriname. The Foundation survived for about 10 years after van Heemstra left the colony.

After returning to his country estate in the Netherlands, van Heemstra edited a weekly magazine about politics and economics. Initially he was pro-German and pro-Japanese, but his political stance gradually evolved, and in 1938, he called for formation of a European bloc to counter the growing influence of Japan in the Pacific region, which threatened the Dutch East Indies. Because he refused to collaborate with German invaders in 1942, van Heemstra was forced from his residence outside Arnhem and most of his property was confiscated; his son-in-law Otto was executed in retaliation for a sabotage attack by the Dutch Resistance. Van Heemstra later lived in the towns of Velp and Osterbeek, and in The Hague, where he died in 1957 at the age of 86.

Van Heemstra had 6 children with his first wife Elbrig Willemine Henriette, Baroness van Asbeck (1883-1939). His third daughter Ella (1900-1984) courted controversy by being seen in the company of senior German army officers during the Second World War. In 1929, Ella gave birth to one of van Heemstra’s granddaughters, Audrey Hepburn. Audrey’s father, James Ruston, was a former British consul to the Dutch East Indies who had adopted the hyphenated name Hepburn-Ruston because of a mistaken belief that he was descended from James Hepburn, a husband of Mary Queen of Scots. Audrey Hepburn went on to fame as a film and fashion icon, winning an Academy Award for Roman Holiday in 1953.

Potential Competing Interests: Dr Steensma reports work as a consultant to Daiichi Sankyo, Onconova, and Takeda and owns stock in Arrowhead and Array. His institution has received grants from Celgene and Biosciences. Dr Kyle reports no competing interests.

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