

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** AWE1959

## Peters, Nonja

(1944 - )

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**Born** 27 February, 1944, Netherlands

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**Occupation** Academic, Anthropologist, Curator, Historian, Migrant community advocate

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### Summary

Nonja Peters is an historian, anthropologist, museum curator and social researcher whose expertise is transnational migration (forced and voluntary) and resettlement in Australia: ethnicity, sense of place, identity and belonging; immigrant entrepreneurship, racism and the sustainable digital preservation of immigrants' cultural heritage. She also has a special interest in Dutch maritime, military, migration and mercantile connections with Australia and the South East Asian Region since 1606. She is currently involved in academic, community-based, visual and bilateral research, publications and events in all these areas in Australia and internationally. Nonja is initiator/innovator, researcher and curator of numerous permanent and travelling museums that have been displayed variously in Australia, South Africa, Indonesia and the Netherlands.

### Details

Nonja Peters was born in the Netherlands 27 February 1944, following her parents' frantic escape from a munitions factory in Alsace Lorraine, where they were forced to work for the Nazi war machine. Her mother was then nearly seven months pregnant of her. The months after her birth were also fraught with her mother's fear of the Nazi V1 and V2 bombs launched in the Netherlands on their way to bomb UK cities. In December 1948, her father Jan (John) set sail for Australia on the SS Volendam (Holland America Line) as part of the mass post-war migration movement out of Europe across the globe. It would take a few more years before the economy of the Netherlands picked up, which also slowed down exit to a trickle. Nonja's mother Jo (Johanna Peters nee Verhoeven) and her children (then Nonja and Eddie) made the voyage to join Jan (John) on the Italian part freighter, part passenger ship Ugolino Vivaldi from Genoa in July 1949. Nonja was then 5 and her brother 9 months. They had travelled by train from Tilburg, a city in the Dutch province of North Brabant to Milan, accompanied by Jo's Aunt Cor (Corinne Berens nee Hutten) and her three children, Jan (John 9), Tony (5) and Jenny (Sjannie 6). They were going to join Corinne's husband Toon Berens who had migrated together with Jan, Nonja's father. Mistakes made by the Dutch bank meant their ship had already left and so with the Dutch Consul's help they travelled onto Genoa to catch the ship he had managed to organise.

The Peters family settled, first in Subiaco a suburb of Perth the main, and then only, city of Western Australia, followed by Toodyay, a wheat-belt town two hours drive from Perth, where the family opened a café with another couple – she a Displaced Person (DP) from Belarus and he a Dutchman who had met in a forced labour camp in Germany.

Eighteen months later the Peters family moved to Northam, another town in the rural Avon Valley, 30 kilometres from Toodyay where non-English speaking migrants were accommodated in military camps. Here Nonja befriended other migrant children. Non-English speaking migrants were then accommodated in the migrant camps in Northam until allocated employment and found alternative accommodation. This was the time when assisted passage entailed signing a two-year contract to work where it suited the government. Many DP's were set to work on road and rail projects in these towns. Northam became a multicultural environment with shops employing German speakers to deal with the incoming migrants. It would take some years before English, as a second language, programs were the norm in schools and the workplace. At that time there was little help provided to migrants of any age to deal with settlement issues. Moreover, the government, which fostered an assimilation policy, believed the children would automatically become Australians without assistance.

In 1955, Nonja's mother gave birth to twins, Nancy and Eric. Nonja, then eleven, became the live-in baby-sitter to the twins and Eddie and often the children of her parent's migrant friends. In this her experience replicated that of so many eldest migrant children, as few migrant families had extended kin in Australia and could not afford to pay for babysitting. Nonja's mother liked to join her musician father, who apart from his day job in insurance, had a jazz band that played music for weddings, country dances and balls and in hotels.

Apart from kindergarten, Nonja's education has been exclusively in Western Australia. At the age of seven she spoke

English well enough to staff the counter of the family's fish and chip shop. Although she speaks and reads Dutch, she does not write or spell it very well. She is in any case also a latecomer to academia. Like so many women at that time, it was expected that she leave school at 15 to help with family finances and her brothers' education. At thirteen she had won the school prize for public speaking and at 15 the first prize in an essay competition that afforded her a five-pound win. This she used to pay for a year of upper high school schooling. However, lack of parental enthusiasm for this choice had her give it away and look for work a few weeks later. Just before turning 17 she accompanied her maternal grandmother, who was visiting Australia back to Tilburg, her hometown in the Netherlands. She was the token person used to fulfil her grandmother's dream to bring back the whole family. While in Tilburg she was employed in 'Admissions' at the St. Elisabeth teaching hospital. At the behest of her father, she also completed a diploma in chiropody. However, on her return to Australia in 1962, her chiropody diploma was rejected. Knowing this her father had organised for her to be employed as a ledger (accounts) machinist for a private Firm in the country town of Northam, from a few days after her arrival back to Australia, to enable her to pay back the bank loan he had procured to pay her fare home. A year later she went to the city of Perth, where she was employed as Ledger Machinist by the Public Works Department, a State Government Utility and later the Main Roads Department and Crown Law Department. Having to earn her living and pay back the bank saw her in this job (which she loathed) until she married Robert Francis Peters, a migrant from Wales and the UK in January 1968. State and Federal governments did not yet employ married women. September that year she gave birth to Bradley Alexander and in October 1970, Richard Gerald John.

In 1978, she entered the upper secondary education sector as a mature-age student, which gained her entry to the University of Western Australia. By then she was mother to two primary school aged children and an increasingly severely disabled husband with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). She combined education/career/carer responsibilities for the next 32 years 1977-2009. She began research first on Anorexia Nervosa for her Honour's thesis, passed in 1987 and then into migration.

In 1992, produced her first museum exhibition, on post-war migration to Western Australia (WA). It was on display for a year at the WA Maritime Museum in Finnerty Street, Fremantle and in the WA Museum Perth. Its opening attracted the largest visitation numbers the museum had ever seen to date. It was awarded a 'special commendation by the inaugural WA Premier's History Award committee. It had hit a 'nerve' as migrants wanted their experiences and contribution to Australia acknowledged.

In 1994, she was invited to research and produce the exhibition: Working it Out: Cultural diversity and the WA Economy for the State Library and Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI). It was on display in the State Library for six months. In 1995, she was employed as curator by the WA Museum to produce the exhibition A New Australia: Postwar Migration to Western Australia. The success of her earlier exhibitions had enabled the WA Museum to secure \$100,000 in funds for it. It was on display for 16 years. In 1997, she left the museum and returned to the University of Western Australia (UWA), to concentrate on finishing her PhD.

In 1998, she produced the exhibition A Sense of Place: Postwar Migration to Northam. Based on archival material, artefacts, photographs, and over 100 oral histories, it is still on display in the Northam Visitor Centre. She enticed, Tourism WA (Northam) to work with her to hold three multicultural festivals (1999, 2000, 2006) that brought and estimated 8,000-10,000 people from Perth to Northam – for the day – each year.

Nonja was a co-founding member of the Dutch Australian Community Services (DACs) WA Inc. – now Dutchcare. Vice President of the Northam Army Camp Heritage Association, and Chairperson for the Associated Netherlands Societies of WA Culture and Heritage working group. She was also a member of the Ethnic Communities Council Women's Sub-Committee; the Golden Pipeline Interpretation Committee; the LISWA Migrant Archives Advisory Committee; and continues on the advisory committee to the National Archives of Australia (WA).

In 2000, the University of Western Australia awarded her a PhD cum laude on Dutch, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese immigrant entrepreneurs. In July 2000, she entered Curtin University as a Visiting Fellow. Her first book Milk and Honey But No Gold: Postwar Migration to WA 1945-1964, based on the research that had produced the museum exhibitions, was launched in November 2001. Published by the University of Western Australia (UWA) Press, it was launched in the Passenger Terminal Fremantle by the Premier, Geoff Gallop to an audience of over 500 people. It was short-listed in 2001 for Premier's Literary Awards in NSW, QLD and WA. The QLD awards had attracted 809 entries. She is a contributor to two other books that were shortlisted for Premier's Literary Awards. Her book the Dutch Down Under, 1606-2006, UWA Press 2006, is lauded in The Hansard, which reports the proceedings of the Australian parliament and its committees. In 2016, the Geography Year 8 Curriculum book she contributed to won the Geography Teacher's NSW Middle School book prize.

In 2002, she was made inaugural Director of the Migration, Ethnicity, Refugees and Citizenship Research Unit. This attracted keynote and leadership speeches at conferences and in panels from other universities and women groups. She has also given numerous invited and conference addresses. The following years, 2003, she conceptualised a 2/3rd year BA course on forced and voluntary migration, and a Masters course on Refugees. The same year she was awarded a Centenary Medal, for her leadership in preserving the cultural heritage of all post-war European migrant groups. In 2011, the MERC changed its name to The History of Migration Experiences (HOME) Research Unit.

In 2004, she was shortlisted as a Living National Treasure – along with famous Australians: Fiona Stanley, Harry Butler, Haydn Bunton, Fiona Wood, Tony Cooke, Graham Edwards and Raymond Omodei. December 2004, Nonja also won a five year Curtin University Research Fellowship from a highly competitive field, to research: 'Footsteps of the Dutch in Australia: Maritime, Military, Migration and Mercantile connections with Australia 1606-2006?'. A year later, 2006, she produced the

book: *The Dutch Down Under 1606-2006*: Its first edition was published by Wolters Kluwer, its second edition by UWA Press. The same year she was awarded a knighthood (Ridder in de Orde van Oranje Nassau by Dutch Queen Beatrix, for the preservation of Dutch Australians' cultural heritage and for fostering bilateral relations between Australia/Netherlands.

2006 was a busy year for Nonja re events related to the 400-year celebration of mutual heritage between Australia the Netherlands via the landing of the *Duyfken* in 1606. She was Western Australian Chair of the prestigious Australia on the Map 1606-2006 committee made up of big business, former Premier and educationists from 2004-2007. It organised numerous educational and festive, events in Australia and the Netherlands. The same year Ambassador of Australia to the Netherlands Stephen Brady asked Nonja to mediate the panel discussion 'Embracing Diversity' for International Women's Day Panel. Panellists included: Dr Fiona Wood '2005 Australian of the Year', Maria van der Hoeve Dutch Minister for Education NL, Fatima Eletak, a Muslim Woman who was also Alderman of the City of Amsterdam. The event was held in the Schouwberg (Concert Hall) The Hague with invited Guests only. Hosted by the Australian Embassy. Diane Lemieux reviewer of the event for *TheHagueOnline.com* noted: 'Inspirational' the word bounced through the crowd as we filed out of the stately Theatrezaal of the Koninklijke Schouwberg. The positive energy exuded by the panel speakers made the crowd jubilant as they lined up for the buffet lunch. Introducing the speakers and leading the discussion was Nonja Peters, Director of MERC Research Unit, Curtin University of Technology in Perth Western Australia. "Who was just right for the job."

2006: Nonja was invited, by the Dutch Embassy Canberra, to escort the Dutch Prime Minister Professor Jan Balkenende, the Dutch Ambassador, his entourage and the Dutch press around the Melbourne Immigration Museum.

2006: Facilitator of a panel discussion of migrants relating their experiences of war, internment and the Indonesian Revolution in the Netherlands East Indies 1942-1946, and their subsequent migration to the Netherlands and then onto Australia to the Dutch Prime Minister Professor Balkenende and his entourage on 29 March 2006.

She was adviser to the National Archief and States General (Dutch Staten-General), the bicameral legislature of the Netherlands consisting of the Senate (Eerste Kamer) and the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer) for their Dutch migration to Australia exhibit *Inpakken and Wegwezen* (pack up and go), which went on display in Parliament, The Hague, March 2006. She was invited to open the exhibit with the Speaker of the House Frans Weisglas. Earlier the same day she gave a keynote address on Dutch migration to Australia in the Oude Zaal – Old Hall of Parliament, in a conference organised by the Tweede Kamer (House of representatives) in collaboration with the National Archief, The Hague on Dutch connections to Australia 1606-2006. She has also sat on many selection committees for public arts works related to migration issues.

Nonja continues as advisor to the Australian Ambassador in The Hague and Dutch Ambassador in Canberra since 2004. She has organised for a number of Official visits to Curtin by Dutch Royalty, Dutch and Australian Ambassadors and Consul Generals and Consuls – to discuss 'mutual heritage projects, student and academic exchanges, scholarships, trade and hockey exchanges. Some of her keynote speeches have initiated changes to the Dutch Australian 'mutual heritage' policy.

Nonja's vision is to strive to produce 'high quality' research, grounded in best practice theoretical and methodological perspectives, to produce outcomes that also fuel her mission: 'To transform high quality research into 'high impact' publications – books, book chapters, exhibitions, documentary films, one-on-one public interviews with prominent migrants, discussion panels and festivals – that are readily accessible by the people whose lives they narrate. She works in collaboration with community groups, universities, galleries, (National and State) libraries, archives and museums in Australia, the Netherlands, around Europe, the UK and USA to achieve this aim.

She has organised a number of workshops and conferences including the international conference at Curtin: 'Mediating Human Rights and Democracy: Indonesia, Australia and the Netherlands' that attracted 600 delegates. She has been a CI on two successful ARC grants. She is the recipient of many other competitive granting bodies that include: Lotterywest, Healthway, the Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI), National Trust Estate Grants, Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIMEA), Dutch Embassy Canberra, South Africa and Indonesia, Australian Embassy The Hague, Dutch Consul General's Office Sydney; Department of the Arts, Dutch and Australian Embassies, Department Culture and the Arts, Dutch and Australian Academy of Humanities visiting academics grants, Rabo and ING Banks, Wolters Kluwer publishers, Museums in WA, The Netherlands, South Africa and Indonesia, the WA State Library, Dutch East India Company Foundation, Dutch Migration Foundation, Erasmus Foundation, WA History Foundation and the Wheatbelt Development Commission, Liveable Communities Grants, Curtin Humanities Visiting academics grants and many more small granting bodies.

In 2007, she published *Netherlands Youth Blooms Again at Fairbridge, 1945-1946*, via the Centre for Advanced Studies in Australia, Asia and the Pacific, Curtin University, Perth, WA. In December, 2008, she published *From Tyranny to Freedom Dutch Children from the Netherlands East Indies to Fairbridge Farm School 1945-1946*, Black Swan Press, Curtin University.

In 2009, after the death of her husband, she spent 5 months in the Netherlands on study leave. Two and half months at KITLV (Institute South East Asian and Caribbean Studies, researching the Indonesian revolution for Independence and Australia's role in it. The other two and half months were spent at the University of Amsterdam, in the archival studies centre to acquire a greater understanding of digitisation as it pertains to preserving cultural heritage.

She is curator of the Welcome Walls, at Maritime Museum in Fremantle that were launched in December 2010, attended by an audience of 8,000. The book *We Came By Sea*, WA Museum Press (2010), which she wrote to accompany the launch,

sold over 7000 copies then, and continues to sell. In 2011, it won the Curtin University Humanities book of the year award. In 2016, she published *A Touch of Dutch: Maritime, Military, Migration and Mercantile connections with the Western Third, 1616-2016*, Carina Hoang Communications, Perth, Western Australia 2016. 2018, she will launch *The Graylands Migrant Camps*, Nedlands Library, Perth, Western Australia.

In 2011, the Stichting International Cultureel Erfgoed (SICA now DutchCulture, Amsterdam) invited her to visit the Netherlands under their International Visiting Academics Program to meet with cultural heritage agencies and give papers on 'Dutch Culture Days' in The Hague, Canberra and Fremantle. Her contribution – along with others – resulted in Australia becoming a 'priority country' under the Dutch Department of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture, Science and the Arts 'mutual heritage' program. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in NL adopted her 4 M's – maritime, military, migration and mercantile – as the themes most germane to Dutch-Australian connections since 1606. In 2012, she produced the exhibition *The Bombing of Broome*, one with John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML), another with Dutch Embassy (Canberra) funds. It was on display in both embassies, an international press conference in Broome and the National Library of Australia.

She is working collaboratively to conceptualise a sustainable model for the digital preservation of Dutch Australians cultural heritage with Dutch GLAMS and cultural heritage agencies; academics at the University of Amsterdam, Free University Amsterdam, Leiden, Delft, Erasmus (Rotterdam) universities, the Institute of Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES); the International Institute for Social History (IISH), the Huygens and Meertens Institutes in Amsterdam; Centre for Global Heritage and Development; and KITLV (S.E. Asian and Caribbean Studies at Leiden University. Nonja was an Adjunct attached to the Digital Humanities Group at the University of Sydney and a Visiting Fellow at the ANU Centre European Studies 2014-2017.

She supervises PhD and MAs, has examined both for various universities, has completed numerous consultancies for local, state, national and international government departments; has appeared on numerous radio shows in Australia and the Netherlands, and has also launched books and exhibitions in both countries.

The Governor General appointed her to sit on the National Library of Australia (NLA) Council for two terms (6 years) 2010-2016. She was a member of the Board, Royal Western Australian Historical Society (RWAHS), 2015-2017, on the Dutch Ambassador's advisory Board for the Dirk Hartog anniversary (Canberra).

She continues as Vice-Chair of both the WA Maritime Museum Advisory committee and the Associated Netherlands Societies of WA (ANSWA).

Nonja's research activities have generated over one million from ARC, Lotterywest, Healthways, Dutch Embassy, Cultural heritage funds, Estate Grants, DCA, OMI, State Library, WA Museum, overseas organisations often she was unable to bring this into Curtin as it required her to utilise not for profit organisations.

Nonja works extensively on her areas of expertise outlined above forging collaborative relationships with academics in NL, UK, EU, Canada and USA. This is not only for herself but also to forge international relationships with other Curtin academics and to fund the publication of books.

Currently (2017-2020) she is Visiting Professor at the Institute Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) University of Amsterdam where she will produce a book on immigrant entrepreneurs. She continues her work on digital humanities following the team's success at obtaining a prestigious NIAS Lorenz workshop (Leiden University) on this topic in August 2016 and is working on a project on enslavement – *The Dream of Cornelis Chastelein*, which is funded by DutchCulture (Amsterdam) with the team that produced *Verlander: Forgotten Children of the VOC 2016* (see [vimeo.com/202206059](https://vimeo.com/202206059)), which will open at the West Frisian Museum, Hoorn the Netherlands on 9 February 2019, and Grachtenhuis Museum in 2020.

## Published resources

### Book

*Milk and Honey but no Gold: Postwar Migration to WA 1945-1964*, Peters, Nonja, 2001

### Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

## Author Details

Barbara Lemon and Nonja Peters

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