

Jan Frans Gratiaen

Michael Ondaatje's Ancestor from Flanders

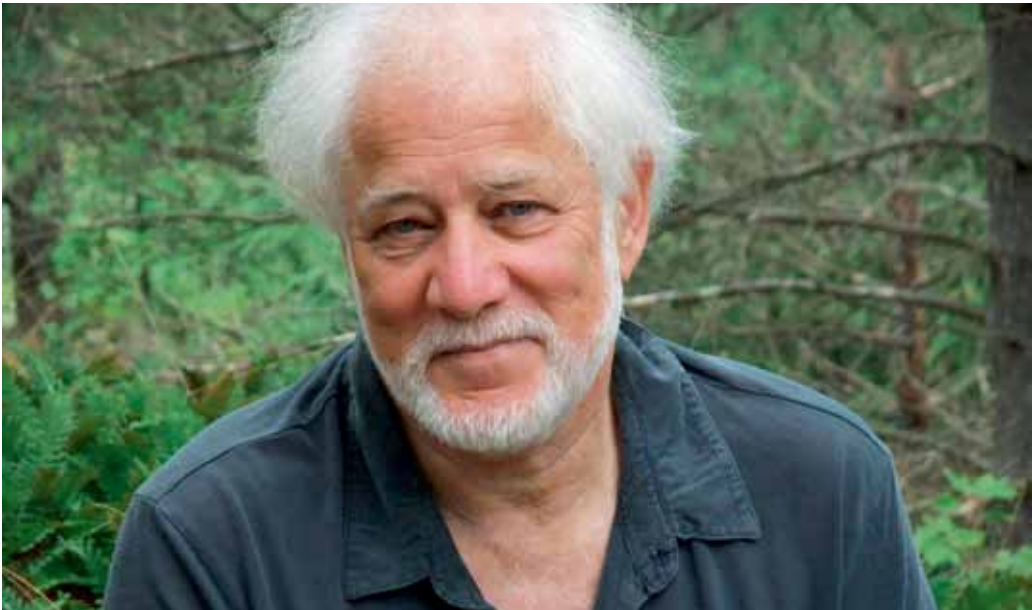
The Canadian author Michael Ondaatje (1943) is best known for *The English Patient*. He was born in British Ceylon. In 1992 he founded the *Gratiaen Trust* for Sri Lankan-born authors writing in English. The Trust is named after his mother. She is descended from Jan Frans Gratiaen (1727-1788) from Bruges, founding father of a Dutch Burgher dynasty in Ceylon. Ondaatje briefly mentions the Flemish roots of his family tree in *Running in the Family* (1982). The June 2012 issue of Flanders' cultural heritage journal *De Biekerf* (The Beehive) searched the Bruges city archive for more. Consider this article as a birthday present for Ondaatje, 70 this year (2013).

Jan Frans was born and baptized in Bruges on the 1st of March 1727, a son of Michiel Gratiaen and Isabella de Cock. Michiel, like his father Pieter, was a weaver of *fustein* – a type of cloth made from hemp and cotton – and a member

of the guild. When his business fell into debt he fled Bruges, leaving his family behind. Jan Frans grew up in an era of general hardship and crisis as a result of poor harvests and armed conflicts fought out in Flanders. He left Bruges in January 1746, aged eighteen, to board a ship of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC (Dutch East India Company).

In June he disembarked at the Cape on the southern tip of Africa. He stayed a couple of months (maybe his father lived there) before moving on to Ceylon, which was VOC trade territory. He arrived there in August 1747. He was listed as a musician, so it is likely he went for a job as such. As a member of a military band, he may have performed at social functions attended by his future wife, Anna Aletta Kokaart (or Cocquaart). She was fifteen when he married her in Colombo in December 1748. Five boys and two girls were born between 1750 and 1768. Ondaatje's mother, Doris Gratiaen, is descended from the youngest son Pieter Liebert (1766-1803),

Michael Ondaatje © Linda Spal



a Lutheran clergyman who studied in Germany.

Jan Frans did not pursue a military music career. In 1752 he was registered as an *ambtenaar* (civil servant) of the VOC. In 1758 he was a clerk in the consumer goods registration office in Calpetty, opposite the Dutch stronghold of Tutucorin, India. In 1759 and 1762 he was sworn in as secretary (keeper of secrets) of the magistrate of police. In 1770 he oversaw the arreek trade in Colombo, involving the buying, storing and selling of areca palm tree nuts, used for the manufacture of sirih, which people all over Asia like to chew. Two years later he was a *fiscaal* (a magistrate in the local courthouse), secretary and bookkeeper in Tutucorin. In 1776 he was registered as an *onderkoopman*, a junior merchant serving a VOC director of trade (*opperkoopman*). In 1783 he was a *fiscaal* and cashier in the southern Ceylonese province of Galle. Four years later he was Galle's general overseer of trade, possessing a coat of arms and a motto: *Depressa Resurgo* (I rise from the depths). He had not, however, risen to the highest ranks. When he died (1788), he had eight grandchildren. In 1796 the British took over Ceylon. The island's European establishment, including the Gratiaens, became anglicised.

In 1792 *Redeneeringen over nuttige muzikaale onderwerpen* (Argumentations about Useful Musical Subjects), attributed to Jan Frans Gratiaen appeared posthumously as a large chapter in Volume Six of the *Verhandelingen* (Journal or Yearbook) of the *Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences). In her 2001 dissertation, *De Taal der Hartstochten* (The Language of the Passions), Els Strategier states that Gratiaen literally copied the work from the original by Jacob Lustig (1706-1796). Born in Hamburg, Germany, Lustig was the long-time organist of the Protestant Martini church in Groningen in the Netherlands. He wrote in Dutch.

Lustig's *Twaalf Redeneringen over Nuttige Muzikale Onderwerpen* (Twelve Argumentations about Useful Musical Subjects) were published

in 1756 in twelve monthly instalments and afterwards compiled and sold as a book. A prime mover of music criticism and inventor of the music magazine, Lustig spotted the widening gap between composers and audiences and he tackled all relevant musical questions. Lustig was the best possible Dutch language source for Gratiaen to study through copying.

In his foreword Gratiaen mentioned that he had attended opera performances at the Monnaie theatre (opened in 1700) in Brussels. In Paris he had met the famous violin teacher and virtuoso Jean-Marie Leclair. He complained about the predicament i.e. virtual absence of western concert music in Ceylon. Getting hold of Lustig's work when he had already spent many years in the East, the new ideas presented there must have reminded Gratiaen how swiftly western music was developing, while he himself could not participate.

Did Gratiaen himself want his manuscript to be published? Son-in-law Willem Sebastiaan Boers, married to Gratiaen's youngest daughter, Johanna Gerrardina, was a relative of Frederik Willem Boers, a staff lawyer of Iman Wilhelm Falck, the Governor of Ceylon. Willem S. Boers was co-opted as a member of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences. When the Society's editorial board was in desperate need of material for its 1792 issue, Boers may have suggested publishing Gratiaen's manuscript. Printing copied manuscripts, often anonymously, was still common practise for the sake of propagating ideas and notions considered important. It would have been too late for Boers to check the origins of his father-in-law's manuscript. Or perhaps Boers was instructed by the Gratiaen family in Ceylon. In any case, Batavia's learned men were unable to recognize an existing text. Just the same, the Gratiaen name lives on to stimulate creative writing.

LUTGARD MUTSAERS