

The People's Bird

On Belgians and Their Pigeons

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[R A F D E B O N T]

Pigeon!
Winged cloak of grey,
In the city's hellish maw,
One glance and you fly away,
Your grace holds me in awe.
Ben, in: Man Bites Dog, 1992
(C'est arrivé près de chez vous)

In 1878 Sylvain Wittouck, a town clerk in West Flanders, published a comprehensive handbook for pigeon fanciers complete with advice on hygiene and allopathic and homeopathic medications. Wittouck's intention was that this monograph should offer 'scientific knowledge' to everyone involved in pigeon racing. And it was aimed at a large readership. Whilst the success of dog and cock fights or song contests with 'blind finches' had drastically declined (partly because of new laws on the protection of animals), pigeon racing flourished as never before in the late nineteenth century. In 1878 it ought to have been clear, according to Wittouck, that the sport dedicated to these 'graceful air travellers' 'is no humbug but, on the contrary, a respectable game.' Furthermore, it was a game with a national flavour. After all, there was no other country where pigeon racing was as widespread as in Belgium.

The carriers are waiting

The fact that until recently there were programmes devoted to the pigeon fancy on both French- and Dutch-language public-service radio in Belgium should be an indication of the position it held in the national culture. The programmes in question always listed the places where pigeons were to be released. It was a virtual network of towns and villages, most of which any particular listener would never have visited: Arras, Bierset, Quiévrain, Elsenborn, Kleine Brogel or Le Touquet. The review included fashionable French seaside resorts, but also outlying villages in the Kempen and small Walloon industrial towns. Listeners were told what the temperature was in these places and which direction the wind was coming from there. They learned



whether visibility was good, moderate or bad and whether the carriers were waiting or not. These radio reports had an important place in pigeon fanciers' lives and the place-names referred to still play an important role in their collective memory. In the preface to a heritage book about pigeon racing published in 2006, Yves Leterme (Prime Minister of Belgium 2008-2011), who at the time was Minister-President of Flanders, remembers: 'Clermont, Jourdan, Arras, Quiévrain, Limoges, Bordeaux, and occasionally Barcelona - they were names that radiated heroism.'

Photo by Stephan Vanfleteren.

In 2004 the Dutch-language 'Information for Pigeon Fanciers' was banished from Radio 1 to the medium wave. Soon afterwards they did away with it in French-speaking Belgium too. Until then the two programmes had been regular listening in the living rooms of thousands of families – like the shipping forecast, which had already been abolished. In Flanders, certainly, it had always been very static radio: a list read in a disciplined fashion by the same presenter for nearly thirty years. From the 1960s onwards the programme was unfailingly announced by the same signature tune, based on *I do so love my pigeon loft* (Ik zie zo gere mijn duivenkot) by Bobbejaan Schoepen. 'Information for Pigeon Fanciers' seemed changeless, and therefore a remnant of times gone by. That is probably why its disappearance provoked a feeling of unease in many people. A point of reference had disappeared. It was the radiophonic equivalent of the abolition of the Belgian franc or the bankruptcy of the national airline, Sabena.



Photo by E. Bonte.

Not only the 'Information for Pigeon Fanciers', but also the actual practice of keeping pigeons has since become a subject of nostalgia. Since 1950 the number of pigeon fanciers in Belgium has steadily declined and nowadays it is mainly the preserve of older people. Probably because of this, pigeon racing features increasingly often in books devoted to times gone by or lost youth. Pigeon fanciers belong to a universe in which village policemen, poachers and café landlords figure. It is a nostalgic universe, often with a national flavour. In *My Belgium* (Mijn België, 2004), published on the occasion of the country's one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary, Leen Huet says: 'Breeding pigeons is as much a part of the Belgian people's soul as the inclined plane of Ronquières and news reports about raised stop logs.' Dimitri Verhulst comes to a similar conclusion in *Tuesday Land. Sketches of Belgium* (Dinsdagland. Schetsen van België), which was published on the same national birthday. The opening story in the book is called 'Komkomkomkom' and is dedicated to a pigeon fancier. In an interview about the book Verhulst said: 'Maybe pigeon racing is an atavistic Belgian characteristic. After all, what do you do with a pigeon? You send it away but actually you want it to come back again as fast as possible. That is a typically Belgian thing to want.' Leterme would certainly *not* agree with this. Indeed, in the above-mentioned preface he stated categorically: 'Pigeon racing is Flemish. And therefore it is also popular.'

The field of associations that Leterme evokes differs from that of Huet and Verhulst. For the former Minister-President, pigeon racing is mainly important for creating communities. It is a 'popular sport that brings people together and which, along with so many other types of association and organisation, ensures that society stays together'. Here Leterme is repeating an old argument. As long ago as 1878 Sylvain Wittouck said that 'this splendid hobby brings all the classes and levels of society [...] together as brothers'. 'Yes,' he continued, 'apart from the enjoyment and benefit that it provides this hobby is also conducive to developing friendly relations.' Authors like

Huet and Verhulst, on the other hand, find the pigeon fancier appealing as a rather surrealistic character – an icon of a rather surrealistic country. For them pigeons returning from Quiévrain are as much part of Belgium as Holy Blood processions and cycle racing, or Captain Haddock, the Atomium, Belgian chip stalls and rustic farm-style houses.

A somewhat sadder variation of this same universe is the focus of *The Carriers Are Waiting* (*Les convoyeurs attendent*), a Belgian film from 1999 with Benoît Poelvoorde in the leading role. In it the waiting carriers are a metaphor for ‘bad weather’ and the dead-end situations in which ordinary people endeavour to survive in the suburbs of post-industrial Walloon Charleroi. Here absurdity is combined with sadness. The pigeon breeder plays a secondary role in the film, along with majorettes and schoolmasters. The main character is a man who wants to get his son into the *Guinness Book of Records*. He can’t think of anything better than to train the boy to open and close a door as often as possible in 24 hours. In this film, waiting for the carriers is the sad Belgian variant of waiting for Godot.

The atmosphere of *The Carriers are Waiting* is very different from the jubilant national pride that pigeon racing evoked in previous decades. In 1911 Wittouck argued: ‘We can [...] state with pride, that Belgium, our dear fatherland, is the cradle of the science of pigeon keeping and that in addition to the well-deserved honour and fame, Belgium can also claim to be the father of it.’ Wittouck was referring here to the fact that Belgians had been the first in the world to organise pigeon races. As early as 1806, pigeons were released in Paris that flew back to Liège, and in 1816 a flight from London to Antwerp was arranged. In the 1820s races were organised from Ghent and Brussels. Cities such as Verviers, Namur and Lier followed.

Initially, pigeon keeping was anything but a popular sport; it was a rather expensive hobby for the urban elite. Over time the sport became cheaper and around the middle of the nineteenth century workers increasingly became involved in it. The expansion of the railway network round 1840 was of crucial importance here, as in previous years pigeons had had to be transported by horse and cart or carried on the backs of walkers. Mineworkers, in particular, developed into passionate pigeon fanciers during this period. ‘Managers of coal mines,’ wrote Wittouck, ‘know from experience that the best workers can be found amongst those who have pigeon binoculars in their homes.’ At the end of the nineteenth century the hobby spread from the industrial centres to the countryside. In the same period the first pigeon magazines began to appear with the results of the races, advice on care and advertisements for ‘pigeon elixirs’. In subsequent decades the number of pigeon fanciers continued to rise. In 1951 the Belgian Pigeon Association, the *Belgische Duivenbond*, had no fewer than 237,965 members.

Not only pigeon racing but the homing pigeon itself was a Belgian creation. According to many pigeon handbooks, the type of pigeon that is used worldwide for pigeon racing is a cross between the Antwerp breed (which is big and slender) and the Liège breed (which has a sturdier appearance and a short beak). So both the Walloon and the Flemish parts of the country can claim their place in the history of the origins of the homing pigeon. In 1975 the successful pigeon fancier and diplomat, Henry Landercy, warned against the dangers of ‘the imagined superiority of the Walloon or the Flemish pigeon’. Pigeon racing has a Belgian soul. Furthermore, the homing pigeon became an important export product. Indeed the breed spread with the sport, first to Northern France, later to the Netherlands, England and Germany, and most recently to the Middle East, China and Taiwan. In these latter countries, especially, very high prices are paid for Belgian pigeons. When the renowned



Photo by E. Bonte.

pigeon breeder Pros Roosen died in 2010, his pigeons were auctioned for a total of 1.38 million euros. 156,000 euros were paid out for his most sought-after pigeon, De Blauwe Prins (The Blue Prince). The buyers were Chinese.

The people and their feathered friends

In 1981 a major study was carried out into the sociological profile of the Belgian pigeon fancier. The results were hardly surprising. The majority of them, according to the study, were older, married men over fifty. They preferred to compete over 'medium distances', for example Orléans, and in 'speed' (or 'short distances', for example Quiévrain). The sport's geographical heart lay in Flanders, where around 80% of pigeon fanciers were active. They lived in the towns (51%) and urbanised municipalities (44%). The majority of them were working class (51%) or white-collar workers (18%).

The image of pigeon racing is that of a 'popular sport' pure and simple – an image that combines amazingly well with the idea that this hobby brings together all levels and classes. Or, as Jozef Henin put it in *To Become a Champion* (Om kampioen te worden, 1926): 'One finds pigeon fanciers at every level of society. From king to simple workman, you can find people fond of Venus's beloved bird everywhere; but the pigeon fancy is still the *popular sport par excellence*.'

In its capacity as a 'popular sport' pigeon racing is sung about by 'popular' singers, written about by 'popular' writers and performed in 'popular' theatre. We have already mentioned the song 'I do so love my pigeon loft', by the cowboy of the Kempen, Bobbejaan Schoepen – a number that made him one of the most popular artists in Flanders. Twenty-five years later the Antwerp *Strangers* had their own hit with 'Oh, my blue-bar' ['Oh, mijne blauwe geschelpte'], adapted from 'Paloma Blanca' from the Dutch *George Baker Collection*. With this song about pigeon racing, the *Strangers* became part of a long Belgian (mainly Flemish) literary tradition. Pigeon fanciers had already featured in literary work by Jan van Rijswijck (*The Pigeon Fancier's Household*/Het duivenmelkershuishouden, 1886), Pieter Geiregat (*Stories of the People*/Volksverhalen, 1888), Leo Meert (*The Pigeon Fanciers*/De duivenmelkers, 1906) and Jef de Pillecijn (*The Champion*/De Kampioen, 1934). The 'people's poet' Guido Gezelle dealt with the subject in his poems: ('Clap-clap-clap / my thirteen pigeons / beat their wings / one on top of the other' / 'Klap-klap-klap / m'n dertien duiven / slaan hun vlerken, de eene op de aâr'). And from the middle of the nineteenth century pigeon breeders were very prominent in popular theatre too. In the 1850s Emmanuel Rosseels' *The Pigeon Fancier* (De duivenmelker) was performed over a thousand times in Antwerp. In Liege Henri Simons's *Li Bleû-Bihe* (1886), played in Walloon dialect, was a great success and in Tournai Arthur Hespel's Picardian *Les Nocés d'Ein Coulonneux* (1912) was also greeted with acclaim. Pigeon fanciers turned up in popular dramas as well as in sitcoms and farces. There is no doubt that the unusually popular Flemish TV programme *FC De Kampioenen*, which not coincidentally has a pigeon fancier amongst its characters, is part of this latest tradition.

In popular literature pigeon fanciers are often not very nice figures. They neglect their families, spend their time gambling and in cafés, and brag and curse. In Rosseel's moralising play the ill-mannered main character is so caught up in pigeon racing that his young son dies of neglect. This makes the pigeon fancier repent and at the end of the play he promises to better his life ('Hurrah! After rain comes sunshine; all's well that ends well'). According to the literati, however, pigeon fanciers neglected more than their families. In *Before Flanders is Lost* (Eer Vlaanderen ver-



Photo by E. Bonte.

gaat, 1927) the Flemish militant Jozef Simons links it, in particular, to the neglect of the Flemish cause. One of his characters claims dogmatically: 'Your average Fleming drinks and plays around with pigeons – the Flemish militant votes on motions. As long as the average Fleming can drink his Sunday pint in peace and win a prize in the race from Arras or Bordeaux, the Flemish militant will not get him near his stall'. According to Simons, Flemings were just *Lamme Goedzaks* – mild-mannered *bon-vivants* – and pigeon racing symbolised that cast of mind.

Even outside moralistic literature the image of the pigeon fancier is often negative. He poisons cats, forbids the neighbours to hang out their washing, complains about boys playing football and denies his wife her holiday every year. It is no different in Verhulst's *Tuesday Land*. The pigeon fancier is included, it is true, in a nostalgic 'declaration of love for the 'little' Belgian', but then principally as a favourite enemy. Verhulst: 'Our neighbour was a pigeon fancier, a *duivensjapper*, as they say, and that fact alone was sufficient reason to mount one vendetta after the other against him. *Duivensjappers* are troublesome people, they impose their will on the whole neighbourhood. [...] If we were playing in the garden when his pigeons had to dive into their loft, he was up like a shot, and all we got in return was that our backyard was always covered in pigeon shit. The result could only be war.' Finally, when the pigeons of the neighbour in question came back from Quiévrain, Dimitri's uncle Potrel shot down 'the whole damned lot'. That, too, is nostalgia.

Nostalgia of a very different kind overcomes politicians when they speak of pigeon racing. Yves Leterme is not the only one to consider himself a defender of the pigeon fancy. In 2004, when Belgian Railways decided they would no longer transport pigeons by rail to the places where they were to be released, several representatives of the people made a fuss in the Chamber. The Socialist Phillipe de Coene pointed out that the rail company's decision would mainly affect 'very ordinary people'. The Liberal Guido de Padt talked of a 'man-in-the-street' sport and 'an important social fabric' that was under threat. He added that 'transporting the pigeons by rail is really in our genes'. The Christian Democrat, Pieter De Crem, immediately suggested bringing in a 'pigeon cheque' to preserve the transport of pigeons by rail for posterity.

The abolition of the pigeon transports in the same year that the 'Information for Pigeon Fanciers' disappeared was the writing on the wall. In recent years it has been generally acknowledged that Belgian pigeon racing is in trouble. In the press there are articles about drug use and falling membership of the Belgian Pigeon Association. A recent poll of pigeon fanciers themselves indicates that there is considerable discontent amongst them too. Many apparently harbour a 'nostalgic longing for a past when pigeon racing still meant something'. Responses to the poll show a deep cultural pessimism. The pigeon breeders complain of the Association's 'profiteering mentality', the rising cost of their hobby, increasing regulation and interference by 'the greens'. There is an idea that there used to be more social contact in the pigeon fanciers' clubs years ago, whereas now everyone goes straight home. And there are references to the 'big money' that has destroyed much of the old ways.

Parallel to (and perhaps because of) this decline, pigeon racing is also being turned into heritage. Lavishly illustrated books sponsored by the heritage sector are being brought out, pigeon-racing clubhouses are being put on the architectural heritage list, and on heritage days attention is paid to 'the racehorse of the working classes'. Pigeon racing has become a subject of nostalgia. Dissatisfaction with the current situation has led to the past being cherished – a past in which pigeon racing was still said to be a real people's sport. ■