

# Huizinga

and Geyl

## *A Portrait of Two Dutch Historians*

Surely all of us have occasionally participated in discussions about who was the greater philosopher, Kant or Hegel, the greater composer, Bach or Beethoven, the greater painter, Velasquez or Rembrandt. Such discussions are for obvious reasons largely irrelevant but they sharpen the mind and may give pleasure. In the case of Johan Huizinga and Pieter Geyl, however, the two historians presented in this essay, the question does not arise. Huizinga's achievement was more valuable than Geyl's. But why then this double portrait? Primarily because between the two world wars and during the first decade thereafter both were considered abroad to be the best representatives of the Dutch historical profession and both wrote books and essays which were widely read by the general public inside and outside the Netherlands. But there is another side to it: although roughly contemporaries and both roughly to be characterized as Dutch liberals, they nevertheless reacted differently to the circumstances they had to live through. It is the contrast between the two men that makes it interesting to study them in a single article.

Huizinga's life was unexciting. He was born in 1872 in Groningen, studied Germanic philology and linguistics at his city's university – where his father taught physiology – and in 1897 wrote his doctor's thesis on an aspect of Old Indian literature. He then became a history teacher at a secondary school in Haarlem, but was also allowed to give lectures in the University of Amsterdam on the ancient history and literature of India. In 1905 he became professor of general and Dutch history in Groningen. At that time his published oeuvre consisted of fewer than 200 pages and none of them related to the subject he was now expected to teach. Yet one publication on medieval town history in Holland was in preparation, and this obviously sufficed to justify what on the face of it was an eccentric appointment. Huizinga was then a happy man, happily married, thanks to his wife financially secure, with a growing family and a position in life he thoroughly enjoyed. He did not publish widely, but in 1911 and 1912 he wrote an excellent long article on the 'origin of our national consciousness' and in 1914 his book on the history of Groningen University in the nineteenth century

appeared, a book commissioned by the University which was then celebrating its tercentenary. This is a marvellous, most elegantly written work. Never before had Dutch cultural history in the nineteenth century been described and analysed on such a scale and in so witty and perceptive a manner. The lightness of its touch, and the sympathy with which Huizinga depicted the life and work of many of his predecessors without for one moment forgetting that most of them did not rise to dizzying heights, lend it a charm that is as fresh now as it must have been in 1914. It is the work of a happy man.

In the summer of 1914 Huizinga's wife died and he was left alone with five young children. This totally changed his existence. He did not remarry until 1937. For a quarter of a century Huizinga, withdrawn into his study, cultivated his sense of loss (increased by the death of one of his sons in 1920). Deep worries about the World War and what he took to be the ravages it caused in European culture changed him from the modernist he was into a conservative who feared that history was taking the wrong track and heading towards disaster.

Huizinga's general conservative attitude was not reactionary. His own historical work was not at all old-fashioned. On the contrary, old-fashioned critics considered it too innovative. His inclination towards pessimism did not burden his style, for this remained remarkably light even in books or essays of considerable complexity. His sorrow, moreover, did not hinder his creativity. In 1914 his book on Groningen University came out. In 1915 he accepted a call to Leiden where he taught 'universal history', that is, all history since the fall of the Roman Empire except Dutch history for which there was another chair. He did so until November 1940 when the University was closed down by the Germans, who had conquered the Netherlands in May 1940. One of the subjects he dealt with in his first lectures at Leiden was American history. As a result he was able to write a book with penetrating and well-informed essays on the United States. It appeared in 1918. In 1919 he published his *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen), his largest and his most famous book. In other words, Huizinga published within five years three substantial works about totally different subjects, each of them in its own sort a masterpiece and all highly original in their approach.

*The Waning of the Middle Ages* is regarded as Huizinga's major work. Over the years it was translated into (in that order) English, German, Swedish, Spanish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Finnish and other languages. It was read by a cultivated general public that enjoyed the accomplished poetic style and the force of the images which, though presented in vivid detail, served the broad philosophical interpretation put forward by the author. Here solid and profound scholarship was made to serve the purpose of the imaginative writer. Among professional historians the book undoubtedly had some influence; mostly in Germany, but later also in France where from the 1930s Huizinga was hailed as an innovator who prepared the revolution in historiography which younger French historians attempted to bring about, with some success. Yet Huizinga, who took the value of his writings for granted but did not seek to establish a school, was rather embarrassed by such enthusiasm, and it is easy to see why. After finishing the book he was occasionally led by outside pressure – it was not easy for a

well-known publicist to escape from the duty to give public lectures – to return to the subject but he did so with some reluctance. His interests were wide and varied. Although obviously a historian of culture, he did not develop a method to be used by himself or others in relation to all subjects which drew his attention. His approach was too personal for this; moreover, it changed from case to case.

In *The Waning of the Middle Ages* Huizinga studied the decline of medieval civilization, apparent in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Burgundian court culture notwithstanding its conspicuous pomp and richness. Although Huizinga appreciated the art of the so-called Flemish Primitives, among them Jan van Eyck, as one of the greatest achievements in world painting, he did not accept that it should be characterized as a product of the incipient Northern Renaissance, as was done by many of his contemporaries. In his view it bore the features of the general late medieval civilization of Northern France and the Low Countries, and this was a civilization at its end, unable or unwilling to step outside the boundaries defined by its predecessors in the thirteenth century. In the thirteenth century medieval culture had realized its full potential. In its scholastic system it had found ways to explain the order of the universe and the microcosm; in its Gothic church architecture it had succeeded in giving concrete shape to the truths and values revealed by religion and philosophy. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this solid framework was maintained. Its intellectual profundity and aesthetic quality, however, was threatened by the exuberance of the later generations. The original themes were not further developed but popularized, trivialized by an immense volume of allegories, symbolism, crude details. A civilization, so Huizinga suggested, declines when it stops expanding and exhausts its energy in endlessly rehearsing the same truths, explaining them over and over again and proving them right by the most banal analogies and examples.

Though publications continued to flow from his pen during the 1920s, all of them valuable, some of them fairly substantial, Huizinga seemed to suffer from a loss of direction. His attempt to write a large book on twelfth-century civilization as a sort of counterpart to the work of 1919 miscarried and he abandoned the project in 1930. After that date he began to collect material on a totally different subject: the element of play involved in culture. Culture, he thought, begins as play. After satisfying their elementary needs, human beings fill their spare time by playing together. This is the origin of culture. Culture begins as play, that is, as a series of acts which are not necessary for assuring the survival of societies and individuals, but are constricted by rules and performed with dedication and a certain element of competitiveness. It may be singing or dancing, it may be ritual, it may be fighting, bodily fighting or fighting in words. From such beginnings the whole fabric of refined culture springs, and to be lasting culture should remain loyal to at least two aspects of this origin: it should cherish the element of play and, because it has to do this, keep to the rules without which play is impossible. In his short but dizzily erudite *Homo Ludens* (1938) Huizinga explored this theme in the entire history of mankind. The book earned astonished respect, was much translated (an English edition appearing in 1949) and widely read. Yet it probably does not possess the enduring quality which made *The Waning of the Middle Ages* a classic.

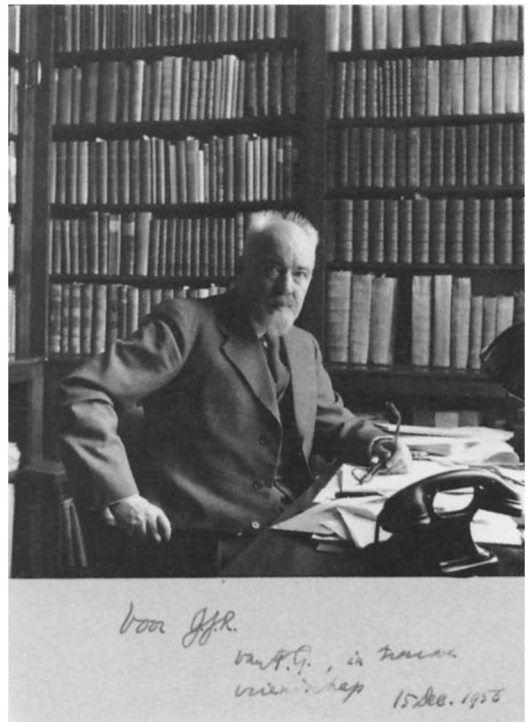
*Homo Ludens* contains a moral lesson. Huizinga condemned contemporary culture for having become intolerably serious, totally undisciplined and just as overloaded as late medieval culture. He made a plea for self-control, modesty, respect for ethical values and other virtues which seemed to get lost in the gigantic production of all sorts of wild vagaries and fashions. This links *Homo Ludens* with the pamphlet-like book he had published three years previously under the title *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (In de schaduwen van morgen, 1935; English edition 1936). In its subtitle Huizinga indicated that he wished to give a diagnosis of 'our' age's spiritual suffering. It is a highly subjective and angry book, a catalogue of instances of cultural barbarism and repellent cynicism. It is not a scholarly work. It was an immediate success, a best-seller, the only one in Huizinga's oeuvre. Part of its popularity was probably due to the fact that the book, though it left out politics, was in a sense thoroughly political all the same. It must have been clear to all its readers that the general cultural degeneration which Huizinga diagnosed was in his view particularly virulent in countries ruled by totalitarian systems of government. Obviously the book could be interpreted as an attack on Nazi and Bolshevik ideology.

Huizinga was not merely a sober scholar; he was a sensitive man whose approach to the subjects he studied was both analytical and divinatory. Though perfectly capable of rational argumentation and of positivist research he was more than ready to let himself be guided by intuition and inspiration and often had the impression of establishing direct contact with past reality. During the 1930s his inclination towards a form of mysticism (a mysticism, however, which was perfectly controlled and by no means exuberant) brought him very near to a positive experience of divine providence, that is to say, he not only came to value Christianity as a necessary antidote to the decline he thought to see around him but to accept the reality of God's will. He used this insight in his interpretation of Dutch history. For the emergence and survival of the Dutch nation, he declared in some strange but intriguing essays, it was hard to find a rational explanation. Nor do the inexhaustible richness and beauty of Dutch seventeenth-century civilization, especially its painting, easily lend themselves to being understood in terms of historical development, there simply being no preparatory factors discernible which could be said to have made the whole phenomenon possible. As a result Huizinga looked with almost religious awe at Dutch existence and achievements. In Huizinga's view Holland was a unique case. It could not be explained. It was there to be admired as a gift from God.

Huizinga had a difficult time during the German occupation. He died on 1 February 1945, a few months before the German defeat in May. His reputation was high. Soon after the end of the war friends and pupils decided to prepare a definitive edition of his works and despite the chaos, the poverty, the shortages of that period they succeeded in publishing with remarkable expedition the nine volumes of his *Collected Works* (Verzamelde werken, 1948-1953). His writings are still often discussed and the recent publication of his correspondence (3 vols., 1989-1991) has renewed interest in his ideas and his personality.

Pieter Geyl (1887-1966) was like Huizinga a nationalist, but of a different complexion. Huizinga's emphasis was on gratitude to providence for having

Pieter Geyl (1887-1966) in the fifties. This photo was dedicated to G.J. Renier, his successor at University College London.



Portrait of Johan Huizinga (1872-1945).

allowed the Dutch to become and remain a nation, Geyl admonished his readers to feel pride at Dutch greatness. In his study of 1912 'on the origin of our national consciousness' Huizinga had shown that Dutch nationhood was an ambiguous concept. If the Burgundian dukes and their Habsburg successors had managed to unite the Low Countries more firmly than in fact they did, one single nation might have emerged out of what we know now as Belgium and the Netherlands with, consequently, a national feeling relating to the whole area rather than the seven provinces of the Dutch Republic alone. Geyl agreed with this view, but only to a certain extent. Huizinga attached far greater importance than Geyl to the aspect of state building; there are passages in his work in which he interpreted nations as the products rather than the producers of states. So for him the rise of the Dutch nation was no problem: when the Dutch Republic came into existence during the late sixteenth century it was quite natural that a form of national consciousness developed firmly tied to that new state. Geyl, however, adopted the view that not the state but language is the foundation of nationhood. As the Dutch language was spoken in the northern provinces which later became the Dutch Republic and hence the present monarchy as well as in some of the provinces excluded from the Republic and eventually part of the independent Belgian state, there was something deeply wrong with the history of the Low Countries. Nature, Geyl propounded, had predestined all the Dutch-speaking provinces to form one national state. This did not happen.

The Dutch Republic did in fact become a nation, but a truncated one. The Dutch-speaking provinces in the Southern Netherlands (generally called Flanders) were quite unnaturally joined with the French-speaking provinces (generally called Wallonia) into an artificial political entity (generally called Belgium). This was a tragedy for all concerned, brought about by the military outcome of the Revolt of the Netherlands – the result, therefore, of outward circumstances, not of natural development.

Geyl was fifteen years younger than Huizinga. He went to school in The Hague and studied history, Dutch language and literature at the University of Leiden. In 1913 he obtained his doctor's degree in history with a dissertation about a seventeenth-century Venetian diplomat residing in The Hague. That same year he moved to London as the correspondent of an influential liberal newspaper (*Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*). He did not remain a journalist for long. In 1919 he was appointed to a new chair of Dutch Studies at University College London. In 1936 he returned to the Netherlands as professor of modern history in the University of Utrecht. He had long been waiting for an opportunity to leave Britain, where he had become a respected scholar and teacher but, for obvious reasons, did not find a large audience for the ideal he cherished most: the so-called emancipation of Flanders.

Some years before 1914 Geyl had decided to support Flemish efforts to break the supremacy of the French language in Belgium. In Flanders only the Dutch language should be used in the administration, the courts, in business, the schools, the universities, for Dutch was the original language in that area and the mass of the people still spoke it. In innumerable articles in the press, in lectures, meetings, committees, Geyl fought to further this cause. But apart from involving himself in discussions relating to practical politics, he set himself the task of demonstrating the fundamental unity of all the Dutch-speaking provinces and the tragedy of its disruption in the form of a long narrative. Between 1930 and 1937 he published three volumes of his *History of the Low Countries* (*Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, partly translated in English 1932-1964), that is, of the Northern as well as the Dutch-speaking parts of the Southern Netherlands. Then the project halted. He had reached the year 1751; only in 1959 did he bring his narrative forward to 1798, but he had then enlarged the scale to such an extent that it was clearly impossible to continue the book in this manner. Yet although a failure in the sense that it was left unfinished, and moreover rather unequal in quality, Geyl's work had an enormous impact both on the general reader and on his fellow historians. Since Geyl's intervention it was no longer admissible to repeat the tired and complacent views about the age-old contrast between Belgium (including Flanders) and Holland which had for so long obscured past and present reality and caused deep misunderstandings.

At the time of Huizinga's death in 1945 Geyl was a well-known and powerful personality in the Netherlands. Under the German occupation he had behaved courageously. He was appreciated for his originality, and feared for his outspoken criticism of views he disagreed with. He was a formidable polemist and so enormously energetic that few were able to keep pace with him. He enjoyed a solid prestige outside the Netherlands. His book on *The Revolt of the Netherlands* (1932) was a text much studied by British and American undergraduates; learned articles in English historical journals had given him the reputation of being a serious scholar. But he had

not yet become as famous as Huizinga was. Abroad, it was only after the war that Geyl rose to the status of a celebrated and influential author. He owed this to his critical assessment of one of the books which made the greatest possible impression at that time: A.J. Toynbee's *A Study of History*, largely written before the war (6 vols. 1934-1939) but immensely popular only after it.

Geyl started his attack on Toynbee's system in 1946 and continued it when further volumes were published. It is impossible to indicate here the full extent of the discussion. Two points may suffice. First, Geyl objected to Toynbee's ambition to explain the whole course of human history and showed that his results were by no means based on empirical research, as he claimed, but on a preconceived scheme. More important still, he passionately criticized Toynbee's pessimism as to the future of Western civilization. Toynbee prophesied – or gave Geyl the impression of doing so – the fall of Western culture and of its dominance, whereas Geyl maintained his firm belief in its continuing vitality. Thanks to these elements the debate was raised to the level of a controversy not only between two professional scholars but between two views of life, two attempts to make sense of history with the purpose of defining basic attitudes in relation to a generation's expectations and ambitions. Given the widespread pessimism of the post-war years and the widely felt veneration for Toynbee's majestic achievement, Geyl's attack – firm but polite, though in the course of the years becoming more strident – was courageous and he was much admired for it. He had in the long run many followers, and thus exercised concrete influence in one of the most complicated and fundamental intellectual discussions of the 1940s and 1950s. This made him famous. What side would Huizinga have chosen had he lived to witness the debate? It is difficult to say, but he might well have felt far greater sympathy for Toynbee's religious point of view than Geyl, who was an agnostic, did.

Geyl's work, though at least three times as large as that of Huizinga, is narrower in scope and less profound. But it is in many respects innovative; it is lively, extremely readable and forceful. We owe him a great debt. In a warm tribute to him (1958) A.J.P. Taylor wrote that Geyl 'represents the ideal to which historians strive ... He has the air of a historian when he simply crosses the street. Even when he is wrong (and I think he is sometimes), he is wrong as only a historian can be.'

E.H. KOSSMANN

LIST OF TRANSLATIONS

JOHAN HUIZINGA:

*Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1968.

*Homo Ludens. A study of the play element in culture*, New York, 1970.

*America. A Dutch Historian's Vision from Afar and Near* (ed. H.H. Rowen). New York, 1972.

*The Waning of the Middle Ages. A study of the forms of life, thought, and art in France and the Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*, Harmondsworth, 1976.

PIETER GEYL:

*Debates with Historians*, Groningen, 1955.

*The Revolt of the Netherlands, 1559-1609*, London, 1958.

*The Netherlands of the Seventeenth Century*, 2 vols., London, 1961-1964.

*History of the Low Countries: Episodes and Problems*, London, 1964.