The Dutch Revolt Began 450 Years Ago

William of Orange and the Wilhelmus Still Alive and Kicking

At the beginning of November 2017 the third Rutte cabinet took office in the Netherlands. One of its aims, according to the coalition agreement, is 'to increase knowledge of our shared history, values and freedoms.' It follows that the coalition partners have a pronounced opinion on that 'shared history'. 'Equality, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or religion; tolerance towards those holding different opinions and division of church and state. ... Those are values of which we are proud and which make us who we are.'

Obviously those 'values' derive from Dutch history. Indeed, the coalition partners believe they can point to the moment of their birth. Now that knowledge of them is under pressure 'in times of uncertainty and globalisation', they charge schools with the responsibility of 'teaching children the Wilhelmus, including its context.'

That is an odd diktat. The origin of the Wilhelmus is as a beggars' (rebel) song. It dates from about 1570, a few years after rebels in the Low Countries had taken up arms against their legitimate monarch, Philip II. In fifteen couplets the anonymous author describes the dilemma facing the leader of the rebels, Prince William of Orange: how to serve the Dutch, without failing in his loyalty to the king. Trust in God must provide the key. Because of its great propaganda value the song was never entirely forgotten in the succeeding centuries. In 1932, after a lobbying campaign by among others the celebrated historian Johan Huizinga, it finally acquired the status of the Dutch national anthem. Initially the choice of the Wilhelmus was anything but uncontroversial. Social Democrats and Communists were opposed to it. Only during the Second World War did the song grow into a widely supported symbol against the German occupying forces.

So the Wilhelmus is definitely part of the Dutch cultural heritage. But the song says next to nothing about the 'values' that the coalition partners, according to the coalition agreement, associate with Dutch identity. Such ideas were not yet current in 1570. Only two centuries later, in 'the period of wigs and revolutions', did some of them become common coin. Others were not generally accepted until the late twentieth century.

The idea of making knowledge of the Wilhelmus a compulsory part of the school curriculum comes from the Christian Democrat party. But it also reso-

William of Orange and Marnix of Saint-Aldegond, Antwerp, 2012
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nated with progressives. In the favourite publication of the left-wing intelligentsia, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, influential voices like Herman Vuijsje and Elsbeth Etty stressed that the text is first and foremost a call to oppose tyranny. This, they argued, gave it enduring topicality.

The search for common ground in the past

The intensive search for their identity by the Dutch has been underway for a good decade and a half. Pim Fortuyn was the first established politician to give voice to the growing discontent with progressive European integration and continuing immigration. His murder, in the spring of 2002, deflated the myth of an open, virtually non-violent society which had gained currency in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then the belief that history gives meaning to the present has been renewed, and fearing that knowledge of history is becoming lost the government is trying desperately to maintain it. In 2006, for example, a government-sponsored 'national canon' was produced. If the new government has its way, every Dutch citizen will henceforth be presented with a copy of that canon booklet, and apart from that it will be an indispensable part of the naturalisation ceremony.

Almost axiomatically in this climate all kinds of groups appropriate history for their own ends. For example, Dutch citizens of Surinamese origin have successfully drawn attention, both in the public arena and in academic research, to the nation's slave-owning past and after an occasionally fierce debate 'Black Pete', the assistant of Saint Nicholas, is gradually disappearing from the streets.

Taco Dibbits, the director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, has a sharp eye for such developments. In May 2016, in the knowledge that history can break or heal, he declared just before becoming director, in an interview for the *Art Newspaper*: 'The Rijksmuseum has the power to unite people... We must search for common ground in the past.' As a result in 2020 the Rijksmuseum will feature a general exhibition on the history of Dutch slavery. Before that, in the autumn of 2018 and spring 2019 the exhibition 'Eighty Years of War' will open. It looks as if that exhibition will anchor the image of William of Orange, and by extension the Dutch Revolt, in the national memory for at least one generation.

Eighty Years' War

Four hundred and fifty years earlier, in May 1568, the troops of Lodewijk van Nassau, William of Orange's brother, joined battle with the government forces led by Jan van Ligne, the local Habsburg governor, near Heiligerlee, in the extreme north-east of the Low Countries. That battle is regarded, somewhat arbitrarily, as the start of the Eighty Years' War, since in it the rebels had gained their first (Pyrrhic) victory on Dutch soil.

In reality there had been unrest for almost two years in the Low Countries. In August 1566 the Iconoclastic Fury was unleashed in South-West Flanders and had subsequently spread like an oil slick to large parts of the country. Ham-

Frans Hogenberg, *Mechelen Sacked by Spanish troops in 1572*, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Erwin Olaf, *Exquisite Corpses. The Last Tribute to the Counts Egmond and Horn*, 2012
('Re-enactment' of the painting by Louis Gallait, 1851)

pered by the great distance – messages from the Low Countries took a month to reach Spain – Philip II reacted as if in slow motion. The expeditionary force under the command of the Duke of Alva charged with quelling the uprising, arrived only a year later in the Low Countries. When it subsequently became clear to William of Orange that he, like Counts Egmond and Horn, would be held responsible for the troubles and would pay a high price, the prince fled to his ancestral estates in order to direct the resistance from there. The battle of Heiligerlee was a part of an invasion plan coordinated by him. That plan failed dismally. But the revolt continued, gradually turning into a war and finally lasting eighty years.

Two very different states emerged from the war: the Republic of the United Provinces in the north and the royal, Habsburg Netherlands in the south. The former was the forerunner of the present Kingdom of the Netherlands, the latter, after various historical vagaries, became the Kingdom of Belgium.

North and South, then, share the past of the Dutch Revolt. But in the collective memories of the two nations the episode is housed in different places. In Belgium, anti-clerical activists presented themselves in the mid-nineteenth century as rebels (*geuzen*). They saw the *reconquista* by Philip II's regent Ales-

sandro Farnese who between 1579 and 1585 had wound up the Calvinist city republics of, for example, Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels and Ghent and in so doing had reestablished Habsburg authority in the south, as a horrific scenario. For them the triumph of the counter-reformation church heralded a period of deep decline. A similar scenario threatened to repeat itself if the Catholics gained the upper hand over the Liberals in the party conflicts that flared up violently from time to time. Those sentiments were expressed in a masterly way by Charles de Coster in his *Légende … d'Ulenspiegel*, first published in 1867. The book, in fact the first important historical novel from French-speaking Belgium, soon achieved cult status. In the following century the hero Ulenspiegel appealed to much wider groups, from Flemish Nationalists collaborating with the German occupying forces to the Soviet director Aleksandr Alov, who filmed De Coster's novel in 1976.

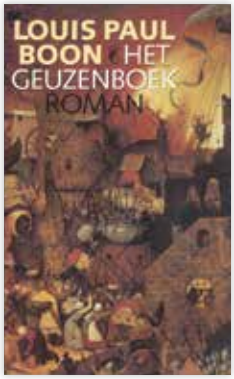
So De Coster's *Ulenspiegel* was part of the historical culture of the young Belgian state. Meanwhile that shared historical culture has disappeared almost completely as a result of Flemish emancipation. French speakers can scarcely relate any longer to the past of the Dutch Revolt. Even as a *lieu de mémoire* this episode has disappeared from the collective past.

Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, *Fishing for Souls*, 1614,
oil on panel, 98.5 x 187.8 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Cover of the first impression of Charles de Coster, *La légende et les aventures héroiques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs*, Paris (Librairie internationale), 1867. Engraving by Hippolyte Boulenger

A vulnerable hero

In Flanders the Revolt persisted longer as a living memory. Following the example of Charles de Coster at first mainly anti-clerical activists referred to it. For example, in the mid-1870s, the Liberal Antwerp town council originally named many streets in the newly developed Zuiderkwartier after heroes from the Revolt. Where Alva's oppressive fortress had once stood, Graaf van Egmontstraat and Graaf van Hoornestraat were full of splendid mansions for the rapidly expanding Antwerp bourgeoisie. Almost 150 years later, in 2012, they were joined at the back of the Royal Fine Art Museum by statues of William of Orange and Marnix of St. Aldegonde. They are surrounded by seventeen bluestone columns: one for each province. This stresses the sadness at the division of the Low Countries and hence the (relative) decline of the south.



At the end of the 1970s best-selling author Louis Paul Boon still belonged to the old Belgian anti-clerical tradition. In his posthumously published *Geuzenboek* he described: 'how the South had gone under in blood and bitter tears... Having been misled the rebels, although they had been able to seize power, had stalled in their charge against the Roman Catholic church walls.' Driven by their own interests the high nobles, with William of Orange at their head, had like cynical power-brokers used the rage of the people for their own ends. Although *Het Geuzenboek* had been written quickly, was carelessly edited and became a very thick tome, the compelling style made up for all imperfections. Once he had come to himself again the influential Catholic critic Kees Fens stated in *De Volkskrant* that he 'had never been so anti-Catholic for seven hundred pages.'

The positive reception of Boon's *Geuzenboek* in the Netherlands too reflected the growing interest there in Flemish literature. Four years later Hugo Claus was to enjoy if anything even greater success with his *Sorrow of Belgium*. Meanwhile performing arts did not lag behind: in 1981 the Flemish cultural centre *De Brakke Grond* opened and from 1985 on the so-called 'Flemish wave' inundated Dutch theatres. Hence it was no surprise when in 1984 the Dutch and Flemish public broadcasting companies, exactly 400 years after the death of William of Orange, jointly produced a large-scale drama series. The William of Orange who emerged, convincingly played by Jeroen Krabbé, drank a lot and committed adultery. In brief, though plagued by doubt, he lived to excess. Only the influence of his parents made the prince realise that his instinctive dislike of the persecution of heretics, if it was not to become hypocrisy, required a break with the sovereign Philip II. The William of Orange of the television series was therefore a vulnerable hero, one who was far from achieving all his aims.

Monumental traces

The professional historians who focussed on William of Orange on the occasion of the commemorative year 1984, also mainly highlighted his limitations. They stressed, for example, that the prince's decision to begin the Revolt in 1568 was born of necessity, that his military understanding was minimal, that his stubborn clinging to French support led to a miscalculation and that in the last years of his life he increasingly became the hostage of Calvinist hardliners. The Revolt, his Revolt, had not united the Low Countries, but torn them apart. In this way the Revolt degenerated from an illustrious war of liberation against a foreign invader into a vulgar civil war.

Such a vision of the Revolt did not cause friction since meanwhile for the baby-boomer generation the Second World War had come to serve as the nation's moral benchmark. In the resistance against the German occupying forces and the securing of safe addresses for persecuted Jews, the modern secular Netherlands was born. In that vision the Eighty Years' War and its outcome were just a reminder of that wretched religious division and for the inhabitants of the meanwhile heavily urbanised southern provinces, the old Lands of the Generality, mainly of centuries of backwardness.

That development saddened Edgar Nordlohne (1922-1999) greatly. This eru-

dite Liberal of Polish origin began as a journalist with the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (NRC) and in 1968 transferred to the Ministry of Education and Sciences, where he became successively director of communications and senior advisor. In the latter position he was responsible for dossiers relating to the Dutch Language Union. Previously, in 1984, Nordlohne had represented his ministry on the committee coordinating events surrounding the 400th anniversary of the death of William of Orange. Even then his personal commitment was striking. He devised a television quiz, wrote a lesson plan for primary education and advised the creators of an educational exhibition. But Nordlohne felt something was missing. In the public realm there were virtually no monumental traces of William of Orange.

True, the Father of the Fatherland had as early as the early seventeenth century been given a splendid monumental tomb in Delft and in The Hague there were two nineteenth-century statues close together, one on Noordeinde and one on the Plein. But apart from that there was nothing. Nordlohne wanted to change all that. Successive ministers did not believe in his plan and so Nordlohne finally took the initiative himself. In 1989 he commissioned the Frisian sculptor Auke Hettema to produce a bronze portrait bust of William of Orange, which he then presented to the castle of Vianden in Luxemburg. The result was positively received and so Nordlohne set up a foundation in his will and generously bequeathed funds. The foundation is charged with the task of keeping alive through 'monumental historical instruction' the memory of William of Orange as 'an icon of freedom and tolerance.' Since then with funding from the Prince William I Foundation monuments have been erected in Delft, Dillenburg, Leiden, Middelburg, Antwerp (see above), The Hague and Paris. Negotiations are still continuing on the placing of a statue in Dordrecht.

Context please

So Nordlohne's statues restore William of Orange's heroic status and in the meantime fit seamlessly with the zeitgeist.'Freedom and tolerance' were obviously the ideals that the prince embodied and in the name of which he began the Revolt against Philip II. They are also values with which the Dutch cabinet and by extension Dutch society identifies. But they say more about the present than the past. The cabinet seems to realise that, witness the addition that the Wilhelmus should be taught 'including the context'. Precisely for that reason one is so eagerly waiting for the exhibition that opens in the Rijksmuseum in autumn 2018. It seems to be just up Taco Dibbits's street. The fact that the same coalition agreement of Rutte III promises that all schoolchildren will have the chance of visiting the Rijksmuseum at least once during school hours, is for that reason alone a cause for rejoicing. ■

Translated by Paul Vincent