

Flemings and Brabanders in the land of Rembrandt

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Six months ago I was invited by the Ministry of Justice to attend the presentation of an educational video intended for people applying for immigration to the Netherlands. In an attempt to control the influx of immigrants, Immigration and Integration Minister Rita Verdonk wishes to introduce a compulsory exam for potential immigrants in which they have to demonstrate a basic command of Dutch and some understanding of Dutch society. The idea is that they sit the exam, using a voiced computer program, in their country of origin, or in the nearest country with a Dutch embassy.

This video – which was made by a production company with the ominous name “Odyssee Productions” – starts off by giving to potential immigrants the message “Look before you leap.” The Netherlands is not a land of milk and honey, we are warned. Anyone still wanting to make the transition to this cold and chilly region, where tsunamis pose a constant threat, must have a minimal grasp of the country’s national history, its institutions, customs and traditions. Next comes a history lesson, beginning with the struggle between the Catholics and the Protestants – by the latter the film means the entire population of the Netherlands, of course. That creepy Spaniard Philip II tortured the innocent Protestants so ferociously, that they had no choice but to rebel.

Ladies and gentlemen, from time to time I am confronted with popularized accounts – written as well as visual – of the history of Holland’s Golden Age which slightly get at me. And every now and then, I find myself surprised by the comments of deeply serious historians and art historians whose central theme is this period – the Age of Rembrandt. Historical museums, popular books and travel guides, completely ignore the role of the exodus from the Southern Netherlands, which especially after the fall of Antwerp, in 1585, must have taken on massive proportions. Serious books cannot ignore the phenomenon altogether, but they very rarely delve into it more deeply.

There was not a word in the citizenship video about the fact that the Reformation was a phenomenon that spread from Flanders and the province of Brabant. When “Holland” finally manages to drive away the Spaniards, there seems to be an immediate return to prosperity. The video offers potential immigrants the inspiring example of Amsterdam during the 17th century: even then half the population was made up of “foreigners”. What it fails to mention, however, is that these foreigners were mostly well-to-do refugees from Flanders and Brabant.

Of course I understand that a condensed video message can’t tell the whole story. But even so, it’s not just the video. Sure: the idea that the Dutch nation formed itself, on the strength of its merits alone, and regardless of any existing ties with neighboring countries; the idea that it was predestined to become a thriving society modeled according to the principles of freedom and reason, goes back to the 17th century, and grew out of very concrete circumstances. None the less, I find it strange that this image of the Netherlands as the “New Israel among the gentiles” lives on to this day – be it in a secular form – in the way in which it presents itself and its people to the outside world. And since the average Dutch

youngster has little or no grasp of geography or history, his or her sense of national identity tends to center around the same old stereotypes. These clichés leave no room whatsoever for any sense of community between present-day Holland on the one hand, and Belgium or Flanders on the other.

We are eagerly awaiting the results of a new cultural and historical “canon”, commissioned by the Minister of Culture, Education and Science, Maria van der Hoeven, on 1 September 2005. This canon which is currently being drawn up by a committee chaired by the literary historian, Frits van Oostrom, will underpin the future development of historical awareness in Dutch schools and universities. I feel confident that this committee of prominent academics will make an excellent job of incorporating the pieces of history and culture “shared” by the Low Countries. The canon is due to be presented later this year.¹ However, the very fact that this country needs such a canon, says something about the historical identity crisis with which it is grappling.

It would be interesting in this context, to devote a more extensive study to the way in which Holland has portrayed itself historically over the last sixty years, and to compare this to the way the Flemings have presented themselves. There is certainly ample material available, from a distant as well as a more recent past. I’m thinking, for example, of the commemoration, not long ago, of the 175th anniversary of the riots in Brussels, which led to Belgian independence. This was the unhappy ending of a second period in history in which the two regions were united under the same rule, an era which very much shaped the way in which the two countries regard each other.

According to the Flemish historian Marnix Beyen, in a review in *Ons Erfdeel*, the recent spate of books from the South has resulted in surprisingly little controversy. This is not so much a sign of a generalized nationalist sentiment among Belgians, but rather of the need, anno 2005, for historical commemorations which will satisfy the general nostalgia. The central focus of these books is not a quest for national identity, but a noncommittal and brief escape from the present. “Paradoxically enough, the cultural-historical change of the past few decades, which has contributed to the unmasking of the nation as a cultural construction, has given (Belgian) historians the space to indulge in national history once again,” writes Beyen.² Recent works about the revolt of 1830, and the subsequent construction of the Belgian state, are characterized by a “mild deconstructivism”.³

Of course, I can see a tendency towards the deconstruction of Holland’s more recent past everywhere – take the Second World War, for example. But I can’t help feeling that large sections of the population still hold to a very traditional view of the Golden Age. A view in which stereotypes dating from the 19th century, the age of nationalistic historiography, live on. The only exception to this is the acknowledgement of Holland’s very substantial share in the slave trade at the time, though the way this has happened is another story. To the average Dutchman the Golden Age is mostly a series of

¹ See the website of the Ministry of Culture, Education and Science: <http://www.ocw.nl>, search for “historische canon”.

² Marnix Beyen, “Nostalgie naar een vervlogen natie. Een terugblik op de historische productie naar aanleiding van 125 jaar België”, *Ons Erfdeel*, February 2006, pp. 121-25.

³ In the autumn of 2005 the Noord-Brabants Museum in Den Bosch mounted the exhibition *Broedertwist (Fraternal discord)*, which is currently on show at the Stedelijk Museum in Leuven. The exhibition illustrates the development of Belgium’s new national awareness, as well as the new identity of the offended Netherlands. Pieter Rietbergen and Tom Verschaffel, *Broedertwist. België en Nederland en de erfenis van 1830*, Waanders, Zwolle, 2005, 112 p.

stereotypes, which were recorded for posterity by political historians such as Robert Fruin⁴, who argued that “deep-seated differences in background, national character, history, religion, government, and social conditions” inevitably led to a complete separation between North and South.⁵ Or you could think of the images used by a man of letters such as Conrad Busken Huet⁶, whose cultural historical studies *Het Land van Rubens* (1879) and *Het Land van Rembrand* (two volumes, 1882) launched the “Golden Age” as a concept in Dutch 17th-century art, claiming Rembrandt as its greatest painter, and tracing back to this period the stereotypical cultural differences between the two countries.⁷

Popular summaries of Dutch history such as the “Naar Nederland” video which I mentioned at the beginning, often simply begin with the Eighty Years’ War. Or they touch briefly on what went before, a period in which the histories of North and South largely overlap, but in which the North happened to play a relatively minor part. After this the South is not mentioned again. It is as if a bit of the iceberg has broken off and melted away. And then, out of the blue, we are presented with the United Provinces: free, immensely rich, commercially and intellectually at the top, and with a city like Amsterdam, which miraculously increases its population from 27,000 to 100,000 in the space of a few decades (between 1560 and 1622). The recent bestseller *Een kleine geschiedenis van Amsterdam* (1994), by Geert Mak⁸, devotes literally one page to the subject of this miraculous tripling of Amsterdam’s population, and the influence of “tens of thousands” of immigrants from the southern Netherlands, who arrived in the city in the aftermath of the fall of Antwerp, in 1585, “with their specialist knowledge of commerce, their capital, their trades, artistry, culture, flamboyance and language”. Sure, the moment of their arrival receives due recognition, but no sooner have these southerners arrived, than Mak loses sight of them again. Integration must have been a super quick process in those days.

Since Pieter Geyl – but with more of an open mind from the 1960s onwards – the objective historical view of the Flemings’ contribution to the Golden Age has of course broadened. As far as I know, however, there has been no large-scale, systematic investigation into – for example – that process of integration, which I would expect to produce some interesting insights. In the opening chapters of *The Embarrassment of Riches* – translated into Dutch under the title *Overvloed en Onbehagen*⁹, Simon Schama offers interesting information about dominant Flemish immigrants in the North, and about the fact that it would take almost a whole century before the Dutch would come to accept as their fatherland just the Seven Provinces, Drenthe and the parts of Flanders, Brabant and Limburg directly governed by the States-General. “Even then there were factions among the population, and these were not just Calvinists, who were longing for a ‘reunification’ extending across the river boundaries”, Schama writes.¹⁰ Elsewhere he gives psychologically acute descriptions of the Calvinists from the South, who were true “heavy weights”. Having gained ground against the orthodox Gomarists at the Synod of Dordrecht,¹¹ (1618-1619), they put pressure on the stadholder to reconquer the South from which they

⁴ Robert Jacobus Fruin, Rotterdam 1823 – Leiden 1899, Professor of the History of the Netherlands at Leiden University, from 1860 to 1894.

⁵ R. J. Fruin, *Het voorspel tot den tachtigjarigen oorlog*, 1859.

⁶ Conrad Busken Huet, man of letters, The Hague 1826 – Paris 1886.

⁷ Although it should be said that Busken Huet also put special emphasis on the cultural unity of the Low Countries before the outbreak of the Eighty Years’ War, see for example, *Het Land van Rembrand*, vol. 1, chap. 6, published on the web: <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/dsp/ljc/huet/>

⁸ Geert Mak, *Een kleine geschiedenis van Amsterdam*, Olympus, Amsterdam, 1999, p. 96 (first edition: 1994).

⁹ Simon Schama. *Overvloed en Onbehagen. De Nederlandse cultuur in de Gouden Eeuw*, Contact, 1987.

¹⁰ Schama, p. 8.

¹¹ Gomarus or Goemaere was born in Bruges (Bruges, 1563, Groningen 1641). For a while he was professor at Leiden University, but when the “moderate” Jacobus Arminius was appointed there, he resigned in protest and became a preacher.

had fled.¹² However, Schama is not really inclined to dwell on the collective influence of the southerners.

If Dutch historians err on the side of caution in their treatment of mass immigration, the Flemings have more than made up for it: 2004 saw the publication of the highly readable *1585. De Val van Antwerpen en de Uittocht van Vlamingen en Brabanders* (The fall of Antwerp and the exodus of the Flemings and Brabanders) by Gustaaf Asaert, who is the former Keeper of Public Records in Antwerp.¹³ Before him the Fleming Hugo de Schepper, professor in Nijmegen, and Ludo Beheydt, who teaches at the Universities of Louvain-la-Neuve and Leiden, had given much attention to the relationship between art and culture in the Netherlands, and the influence of southerners on the Golden Age.¹⁴ And let's not forget Dr. Jan Briels, who made the study of emigration from the South his life's work, and who has been overlooked in the Netherlands, in my opinion.¹⁵

Briels focuses on the scale of the mass migration from Brabant, Flanders and the Walloon provinces during the last quarter of the 16th century, and how this affected the extraordinary cultural growth which subsequently took place in the Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands. I mentioned earlier that the traditional "Dutch" historiography on the whole does no more than register this mass influx of immigrants, and in some cases even tries to play it down.¹⁶ This is all the more surprising if you remember that, before the Revolt, the North played only a marginal role culturally and economically within the Netherlands. Even the province of Holland was strictly speaking part of the *hinterland*, as can be inferred from the population figures and tax revenues from the 17 provinces: the Antwerp historian Guido Marnef calculated that for the period 1540-48 the county of Flanders paid 33.80 % of the total inland revenue, while Brabant paid 28.76 %; Holland, on the other hand, provided only 12.69 % and Zeeland a mere 4.37%.¹⁷ The contributions from the remaining future Provinces of the Netherlands were negligible.

Undeniably, the Republic owed its unprecedented expansion first and foremost to the fact that it formed a remarkably open society compared with the rest of Europe in the same period; it was easy to move around freely and the country was led by a liberal-thinking political elite, which seized every opportunity to expand at a wider social or cultural level. However, Briels argues that it was precisely the arrival of these many tens of thousands of southerners which gave the new society, still emerging at the turn of the 16th century, the chance to assert itself economically as well as socially and culturally.

Roughly how many refugees from the South are we talking about? On the basis of extrapolation from the sources, Briels comes up with the impressive figure of 150,000: a group of first- and second-generation immigrants who fled directly to the North, and a group of refugees who arrived via England and Germany. This figure implies that the southerners made up 10% of the North's population. Other

¹² Schama, p. 257; according to Briels (see below) the vast majority of Protestant worshippers were immigrants until the late 1620s. Among preachers in Holland and Zeeland southerners predominate until the beginning of the 17th century.

¹³ Gustaaf Asaert, 1585. *De val van Antwerpen en de uittocht van Vlamingen en Brabanders*, Lannoo, Tielt, 2002.

¹⁴ See, for example, Ludo Beheydt, *Eén en toch apart. Kunst en Cultuur van de Nederlanden*, Davidsfonds, Leuven & Waanders, Zwolle, 2002.

¹⁵ The most important work remains: Jan Briels, *De emigratie uit de Zuidelijke Nederlanden omstreeks 1540 – 1621 – 1630*, Haarlem, 1978.

¹⁶ An exception to this is the Amsterdam social historian Herman Pleij, who argues that much of what we regard as "typically Dutch" today, in fact goes back to the "urban culture", which was imported by immigrants from the southern Netherlands, but also partly inherited from the late Middle Ages.

¹⁷ Guido Marnef, "The Towns and the Revolt", in ed. Graham Darby, *The Origins and Development of The Dutch Revolt*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 14-15.

historians have questioned Briels's counting method, but Asaert is inclined to go for a similar high number relying on a verification of Briels's calculations through data sampling.¹⁸

In any case, the population figures for Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges bear testimony to the massive scale of the emigration. Between 1584 and 1589, alone, more than 40,000 of Antwerp's 100,000 inhabitants left. In those same years the city of Ghent lost an estimated 15,000 people – one third of its total population. Referring to Bruges and its periphery, in October 1584, the City Magistrate commented: "Plus de trois mille cinq centz maisons et bien principales sont icy vagues .. Et chascun se veult retirer de ceste ville. Depuis trois jours en sont party plus de quatre cent mesnages."¹⁹

In my opinion Briels was able to demonstrate convincingly, by reference to the sources, how important the immigration was for the North, not only politically and commercially but also in the sciences. Here is a quotation from a text of 1585 which Briels uses:

"the pensionary of Vlissingen and the first nobleman of the States of Zeeland are both Flemings, the bailiff of Vere, who is now representative of the States General, and the pensionary of the States of Zeeland and of Middelburg were all born in Brabant, and the same goes for the pensionary of the Gouw, the collector for Noord-Holland and many others, the pensionary of Amsterdam is from Mechlin, and those of Delft and Dort are Flemings. Yes, in the States General even the clerk, the officer, and the bailiffs are all Brabanders, and the secretary of the Council of State was also born in Brabant."

Research has shown that at least 950 merchants from the South were active in Amsterdam around 1600. Refugees from Flanders and Brabant founded both the East India Company and the West India Company, which secured a colonial empire for the Republic. The registration of shares in the East India Company took place in Amsterdam at the house of Dierck van Os, a merchant who had fled from Antwerp, and who with another refugee from Brabant, the ship owner Isaäk le Maire, was among the most important underwriters of the Amsterdam Chamber. While Willem Usselinx from Antwerp was campaigning for the foundation of the West India Company, his brother Hubert stayed behind and made enough money on the Antwerp stock exchange to set up the trading partnership which later founded *Belgica Nova sive Nieuw Nederlandt*, on and around Manhattan.²⁰

The immigration undoubtedly had a huge impact on the developing of the intellectual climate during the Golden Age. In 1600 at least 418 immigrants were employed in the education sector in the North. Between 1578 and 1603, all teaching in Amsterdam's Latin schools was supervised by rectors from the southern Netherlands, and between 1575 and 1630 The University of Leiden had no fewer than 28 professors from the South on its staff, among them the famous Justus Lipsius. Publishing became a thriving industry thanks to a unique climate of intellectual freedom, but also as a result of the large numbers of printers, bookbinders, publishers and book traders – roughly 250 in all – who had come over from the southern provinces. Among them were two well-known men, Christoffel Plantin from Antwerpen (temporarily) and Louis Elsevier from Leuven. The vast majority of university printers as well as many of the municipal printers were from the South. The Dutch are inclined to forget that pivotal figures such as Joost van den Vondel, Abraham de Coninck, Karel van Mander and Jacob

¹⁸ Asaert, p. 47.

¹⁹ Speech by Jan Briels at the presentation of the Visser-Neerlandia Prize, Brussels, 2004.

²⁰ Prof. em. Hugo de Schepper, *Een verhaal over historische identiteit en identiteitsbesef in de Lage Landen*, <http://dutchrevolt.leidenuniv.nl/Nederlands/links>.

Duym all came originally from the South. And there were plenty of other areas in which the southerners excelled. Briels shows that a substantial number of graphic artists and book illustrators working in Amsterdam and elsewhere during the early decades of the 17th century had come from Flanders or Brabant. Even Lieven de Key, who was appointed Town Architect of Haarlem and built the Meat Market (Vleeshalle) there, and who in the 20th century was still regarded as the father of “Old-Dutch architecture”, was a refugee from Ghent. The famous Amsterdam writing master Lieven van Coppenhol, whose praises were sung by Vondel and who was immortalized by Rembrandt, was also a southerner by birth. And then there are the artists, who form a category of their own. Briels traced 228 painters from Brabant and Flanders who took refuge in the North, among them famous names such as Frans Hals, Gillis van Coninxloo, Hendrick Aerts and Roelandt Savery. During the early decades of the 17th century the art trade in Amsterdam was also largely in the hands of immigrants from the South. It would be well worth analyzing the tremendous political and social tensions that arose in the towns where large numbers of southerners settled.

I could go on like this, quoting from the writings of Flemish historians. But what matters here, ultimately, is not the “counting of heads”, nor, for that matter, should the history of the Golden Age become an instrument of some kind of opposite, Flemish nationalism. What is important, however, at least in my view, is that we rectify the idea, still popular in the Netherlands, that the Golden Age was exclusively the product of internal developments – *internal* in the sense of strictly belonging to the territory of the United Provinces. Many fault lines divide present-day Belgium and nobody now believes, à la *Henri Pirenne*, that the Belgian state was always in the stars. Sometimes you get the impression, however, that what little popular understanding of history in the Netherlands remains boils down to the idea that the Netherlands were somehow always predestined as a nation. In fact, historians today agree that the Dutch Republic was largely an artificial creation, the product of war and geographical boundaries.²¹

I read this recently in the handbook of Dutch culture, *The Netherlands in Perspective*, by William Z. Shetter: “An indispensable component in our attempts to understand the Dutch is how they relate to the Dutch-speaking people just south of them.”²² Any historian or art historian with a professional interest in the Age of Rembrandt knows about the emigration from the South. However, our knowledge is often too fragmented, and much of the interaction between the *newcomers* and the *natives* remains completely unknown, even to the majority of well-educated Dutch people. A better understanding of the contribution of Flanders and Brabant to the Golden Age would enhance our general appreciation of that splendid era in Dutch art history

²¹ Darby, p. 6.

²² William Z. Shetter, *The Netherlands in Perspective. The Dutch way of Organizing a Society and its Settings*, Nederlands Centrum Buitenlanders, Utrecht, 2002 (first edition 1990), p. 175.