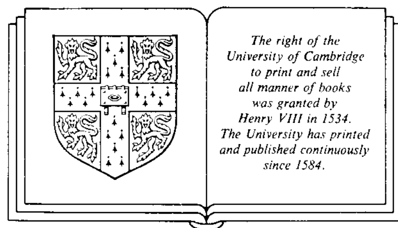
JOHN DE WITT

Statesman of the "True Freedom"

HERBERT H. ROWEN



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I

To the threshold *1625–1650*

If difficult times are the anvil on which the hammer of personal merit forges historical greatness, the circumstances in which John de Witt took his first office were not favorable.

Things were going extraordinarily well, in fact, for the Republic of the seven United Provinces of the Netherlands. One of the smallest states in Europe, it had built itself into a great power. Spain's century-old predominance had been smashed, and the Dutch even more than the French had been the artisans of its defeat. France itself was in the grip of civil war, which for all that men knew in 1650 might augur for it the same fate that had befallen Spain. England too had come through a decade of civil war, although the firm hand of General Cromwell had already taken control. Germany had ceased to exist as an effective political entity; the settlement at Westphalia consecrated its conversion into a congeries of middling, small and miniature states over which the Habsburg emperor reigned but did not rule.

The Dutch Republic, however, had soared while contemporaries had floundered and fallen. Its navy and army were among the most powerful in Europe, and its strength rested upon the solid foundation of unexampled riches, drawn from Dutch domination over the trade and shipping of Europe from the Baltic to the Levant. The Dutch population numbered only about one and a half million, but what it lacked in numbers it made up in economic prowess. Holland was the entrepôt of Europe where international trade converged and spread out again, where the grain and timber of the North were exchanged for the wines and luxury goods of the South. Behind the prosperity of fishermen, shippers and traders, there lay a substantial and varied industry and a sturdy agriculture.

The Dutch economic ascendancy was more fragile than one would have assumed from the sight of its massive wealth. The

entrepôt function was new, inherited from Antwerp in the previous century; and it could pass into the hands of another country in turn, or disappear as multilateral trade developed, with countries trading directly with each other rather than through Dutch intermediaries. England and France in particular had often displayed a desire to shake off their maritime and commercial dependence upon the Dutch, and once they recovered from civil war they possessed the means to challenge them.

Politically, too, the strength of the Dutch derived not only from their own resources, considerable as they were, but even more from the coincidence that the great powers were all facing grave problems at one and the same time. It was a conjunction of circumstances that was not likely to last, and again it was England and France who presented the most dangerous eventual threat. Each had a vastly larger territory than the United Provinces, and each had a much more numerous population, the English three times as many, the French ten. Furthermore, each was self-sufficient in foodstuffs, whereas the Dutch had to import great quantities of grain or starve, and they had to trade in order to find the wherewithal to buy their supplies.

Finally, if it came to a showdown between the Dutch and either of these erstwhile and uncertain friends and potential competitors, the fundamental strategic advantages lay with the English and the French. Britain lay safe from invasion behind the wide moat of the Channel and the North Sea; France was difficult to assault even though it lay on the continent. The powerful Dutch navy might deflect English power at sea, reviving under Cromwell's guidance, but it could not do more against the island state. It could do equally little against the French, the greatest land power in Europe, for whom the navy was always secondary. Indeed, only the intervening buffer of the Spanish Netherlands – modern Belgium – protected the Dutch against the immensity of French military power.

Furthermore, the Dutch rise to political power had been a victory, in a way, over the Dutch political system itself. The revolt of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century had been intended to protect provincial and local power against the destructive intrusions of central authority directed from Brussels and ultimately from Madrid. The creation of a new, independent state in the northern Netherlands had been an unintended result of the rebellion. It was not created from above by a monarch imposing his authority upon

restless barons and rebellious towns, but by the provinces and their constituent elements – towns and nobilities – joining together in a loose-knit federation. To the outside world the United Provinces were a single state in the shape of the States General, but within there was an assemblage of seven provinces, each with its own provincial States that were effectively sovereign over its internal affairs. The structure of national decision-making was complicated, slow-moving and uncertain, and the rule of majority was seldom recognized or practiced.

That the system worked, and worked as well as it did, was the joint accomplishment of the Princes of Orange, who were stadholders in five of the seven provinces (cousins held the same office in the other two), and of the province of Holland, where the wealth and hence the tax-paying capacities of the Republic were concentrated. When the Princes and the province of Holland worked hand in hand, all went smoothly; but when they came into conflict, the fragile unity of the Dutch state was in peril.

This had happened twice. The first time had been the struggle between Oldenbarnevelt and Prince Maurice after the conclusion of the truce with Spain in 1609. The bitter rivalry of the political architect of the Republic and its military defender, who had worked so closely with each other for decades, ended with Oldenbarnevelt's trial and beheading in 1619, but Maurice won not only by using the voice of the other provinces against Holland but also by rallying strong forces within Holland to his side. He did not employ his opportunity to reorganize the Dutch state upon either a monarchical or a unitary basis; the dream of the Prince of Orange reigning as duke and count had lit up the eyes of many of Maurice's courtiers, but he had been satisfied with the reality of political domination. The notion of unifying the Republic into a state on the pattern of Spain or France or England did not occur to anyone as either dream or practical goal.

The second time had been the crisis through which the country had just come. William II's coup d'état had broken the traditional if often troubled alliance of Orange and Holland. The ruling party in Holland was determined now to prevent any recurrence of such events as the seizure of the six deputies and the near assault upon Amsterdam. But if they were not to waste the chance that had come their way so unexpectedly, they needed leadership of their own that would create a single will and a coherent policy out of the multiple

needs and aspirations first of Holland itself, and then of the whole republic. They needed a new Oldenbarnevelt, not as a builder but as a rebuilder; and they wanted no new Maurice to stand alongside him, either as collaborator or competitor. It was the task that would come to John de Witt, not at once but over the course of three years.

While dynastic monarchs – or quasi-dynasts like the Princes of Orange – were born to leadership of states, John de Witt entered the world of politics with a lesser opportunity. He was not born to power but only to the chance that it would be given to him. He was a member of the class from which the "regents," as the Dutch called members of the governing bodies in the Republic, were all recruited.

The De Witt family had provided aldermen, burgomasters and magistrates to Dordrecht for three centuries, almost as far back as the recorded history of Holland's first city goes in any detail. During the seventeenth century, John's father and uncle had both served in the government of the province, always as allies of the Prince of Orange until the recent dispute between William II and Holland. Yet the De Witts were not the first family of Dordrecht, a rank disputed between the Muys van Holy and Van Beveren clans; but the De Witts were linked to both of them by marriage. The family wealth had been earned in a timber business, but like so many of the prospering bourgeois of Holland, Jacob de Witt had sold out his direct stake in commerce in order to devote himself fully to work in government, while drawing his income from real estate and government bonds. He was well known in intellectual circles in Holland, more as a friend of the truly creative minds than as himself a significant poet or thinker.

He had married outside the confines of his city, choosing as a bride Anna van den Corput, from one of the leading Calvinist families in the Brabant city of Breda. It was politically an alliance of mixed value. States Brabant, as the northern part of the province conquered by the Dutch was called, remained stubbornly Catholic and was not admitted to participate with a vote in the States General; on the contrary, it was administered by officials named by the States General, always Reformed and reserving to their brethren in the Calvinist faith, however few in number, the benefits of government patronage and office. The Van den Corputs and their friends were in the front ranks of these beneficiaries of

"Generality" rule. Anna therefore brought to her husband not political allies, although her family had once been quite eminent, but political clients. On the other hand, it had established numerous links with regent families in many of the cities of Holland. Over the years John would address as "cousin" – a tie of more than sentimental value in the world of Dutch politics – many whose connections with him were through his mother.

John was born on September 25, 1625. The year is given as 1623 in several contemporary records, but the figure is an obvious error, even though the hard proof of a baptismal entry for him in the family church, the Grote Kerk near the De Witt home, is missing. But since there is a proper entry in 1623 for his brother Cornelius, who was two years older, the issue is beyond serious dispute. Perhaps John was born in Dordrecht and baptized in a village nearby. In any event, his rights as a natural-born citizen of Dordrecht were never challenged, as they would certainly have been had he been born, say, in The Hague, as one writer has suggested.

He was the youngest of four surviving children. The family life was a blending of the stern demeanor of parents committed to the strict tenets of Dutch Calvinism as laid down at the Synod of Dort, and the warm intimacy characteristic of the Dutch in their private life. Strong ties of affection – what we would call filial and fraternal love if we did not live in an unsentimental age – bound the children to their parents and to each other. The two eldest, both daughters, at first treated their little brother with the superior wisdom of their years. When he grew older and displayed an intelligence quite beyond the ordinary, they learned to mingle admiration with their admonitions. In later life, when he held high office and his abilities and powers were public knowledge, they gave him due deference and respect, and even sought reassurance of his love. Cornelius and John were so close in age that they became virtual equals, going to school and then to university at the same time and at the same level. We cannot say how early Cornelius learned to look to his brother as his superior in intelligence and judgment, but he too came to defer to him with an easy acceptance that infuriated his own wife, Maria. If the psychologists are right in holding that a childhood marked by strength of affection and steadiness of relations prepares the adult for meeting challenges with controlled emotions and self-assurance, then John de Witt the Grand Pension-

ary was shaped for his great task as a man by the character of his life at home as a boy and a youth.

The brothers began their education at the local Latin school, which had an excellent reputation. John in particular showed high aptitude in his studies. Like other lads of his generation, he learned to write in the Gothic hand that would remain in use in the Netherlands for another half-century, but he wrote it with a characteristic clarity and strength that few of his contemporaries possessed. It probably was a hint of the qualities of mind and personality that he would show in later life. But then we should remind ourselves that its very regularity, which nothing, neither endless hours of toil nor perplexities without number, could seem to shake – nothing, indeed, but the death of a beloved wife – may have been the sign of a soul too perfectly controlled. Be that as it may, he became fluent in Latin and French, the indispensable linguistic tools, and acquired a bit of English and German.

In 1641, when he was sixteen, he and Cornelius went to Leiden to begin university study of law. He soon discovered an intellectual love other than law, mathematics. So far as we know, he did not meet the French mathematician–philosopher René Descartes, who was living near Leiden in these years, but he studied informally with Descartes's friend, the professor of mathematics Frans van Schooten, who was one of the very first to teach mathematics in the Cartesian mode.

John mastered law in both the forms necessary for a Dutch jurist, the Roman law common to most of western and central Europe and the customary law of the Netherlands. By the time he ended his formal studies three years later, he had the formal body of law (which included the generally accepted political theory of the age) at his fingertips. A friend of his father's who was a noted juridical scholar was astounded by his command during an informal examination. For the rest of his life De Witt (as we shall now call him, except when necessary to distinguish him from his brother) was to use his legal knowledge with skill and accuracy, although it required the usual apprenticeship in a lawyer's office to learn the actual operating principles of Dutch courts, which were not touched upon in the highly theoretical law taught in the university. Yet there is no sign that the law ever captured his imagination or enthusiasm for itself, as had mathematics. It never occurred to him, however, to seek to make a living as a mathematician: that was a

career limited to a few university professors and a handful of military engineers. Most mathematicians, like Descartes himself, were brilliant amateurs of independent means. De Witt's choice of career was simple: either he would become a practicing lawyer or he would enter political life. But for the moment he did not need to make the choice.

In 1645 Jacob de Witt traveled to Denmark and Sweden as leader of a Dutch diplomatic mission. He took with him his two sons and their cousin, John de Wit (actually a namesake of our John, but one who wrote his name with a single "t"). They served as "noblemen" (*edellieden*), as unpaid junior aides to the accredited envoys were called; thus they were initiated into the forms and content of diplomacy. In Stockholm the young queen, the brilliant and erratic Christina, gave her hand to the young "noblemen" to be kissed during the embassy's public audience. When Jacob had to stay on alone for continued negotiations, he kept with him his nephew, who had been serving as secretary to the embassy. His sons left for home by way of Germany. Although the major fighting of the Thirty Years War was past, the country was still dangerous for travelers and they hired an armed guard. They got through without difficulty, but it was the young men's first direct experience with what war can do to a country. Their homeland had been at war for almost eighty years, of course, but no major campaigns had been fought on its own territory for decades. Yet, so far as we can tell, the travelers' concern was for themselves, not for a war-scarred and war-wearied nation. To ask them to have had such compassion is to read modern sensibilities into seventeenth-century man. What did strike to their hearts was the news when they reached The Hague early in 1645 that their mother had died in Dordrecht only three days before.

The brothers had to handle their grief without their father, who did not return from his mission until September. Within a month he had arranged for them to go on a grand tour of France and England to complete their education, formal and informal, as was becoming common among young Dutchmen of good birth and education.

Their journey lasted twenty-one months. They saw France as it slid toward the civil war of the Fronde that broke out in 1648, and England as Cromwell's New Model Army was on the verge of final victory, but they spent much more time acquiring the social

graces and playing the tourist than imbibing the nectar of political knowledge at the source. In Paris they saw not only such notables as Cardinal Mazarin and the Prince of Condé but also gazed at the boy-king Louis XIV as he dined at the palace of the Tuileries, surely without premonition of how great a part he would play in their lives. They stayed three months at Angers, where they took their doctorates in law, which entitled them to practice at home and to be known as "Master," a form of address reserved for lawyers in the Netherlands to this day.

Afterwards they returned to their journeying. Considering that they were Calvinists to the core, they viewed an astonishing number of Catholic churches and shrines; their curiosity was marked by mild mockery, however, not by temptation. Natural wonders, fortified places and the remains of Roman antiquity also drew their interest. At some of their stops, they met members of local Protestant communities whom they found "very good company." Whether they were equally delighted with the famed Calvinist theologian Jean Deodati, a friend of their father's whom they visited at Geneva, John does not tell us in his record of the journey, but we may well imagine that this was more the work of duty than of desire.

Their stay in France ended in June 1647 when they crossed the Channel from Calais to Dover. In England they resumed their sightseeing. In London they took in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey and the Tower. Then, with two Dutch merchants as their guides, they crossed southern England all the way to Bristol. They saw Stonehenge, bathed at Bath and visited a number of English gentlemen at their estates. They enjoyed hunting at Marlborough, quite unaware of what that name would mean for the Dutch as well as the English in another half-century.

The climax of their stay in England was a visit almost at its very end to King Charles I at Reading, where he was under arrest. They were in the company of the aged but well-informed Dutch ambassador, Albert Joachimi, yet there is no indication in John's account of the journey that they discussed with him the larger significance of the political events occurring about them. What we can read back from what was later characteristic of John's career as a statesman is that he gained then no insight into the inner workings of violent politics. If anything, the sight of a captive king may have confirmed his dislike of public disorder, just as the

picture of royal panoply in Paris may have stiffened his preference for republican simplicity.

The brothers' tour of England was over in little more than two months, as compared to the nineteen that they had spent in France. What English they learned was small and halting, from the evidence of their later experience. We may take for granted that their French acquired a fluency and an accuracy of accent that otherwise would probably have escaped them. This would help John in future negotiations with foreign diplomats in The Hague, most of whom spoke French but few Dutch.

It may well be that the most significant aspect of the brothers' grand tour is the cast of mind it reveals in John himself. While he was away, he kept a logbook in which he recorded what they saw and did, and little notebooks in which he set down with meticulous precision a list of letters received from home, moneys spent and miles traveled. On his return he transferred this information into a journal, but instead of using the occasion to comment upon what he had heard and learned, or to reminisce and reflect, he merely made it a neater, drier account. He was already, it is obvious, a man whose thoughts turned out to the world around him, not inward to himself and to his place in the world. For all his intellectual gifts, he was matter-of-fact to the extreme. Should we say that he was intelligent but not an intellectual? That, although he had the powers of mind we associate with a philosopher, he would never become a philosopher–statesman such as Plato dreamed of? The judgment may be a bit harsh, but it is certainly at bottom true.

Had he anticipated such a comment from his biographer, he would no doubt have protested that he had no ambition to be a philosopher, and he would not have understood what we mean nowadays by an "intellectual." He would probably have explained that he had not undertaken a career in politics because that had been chosen for his brother, and Dordrecht had rules against multiplying offices in the same immediate family.

Their paths did not diverge, however, until both had taken their oaths as lawyers before the Court of Holland a few months after their return, Cornelius in October and John on November 11. But Cornelius went back to Dordrecht to follow in his father's footsteps and was named to his first post as sheriff less than a year later, as soon as he came of age. John stayed on at The Hague, entering

the office of a prominent lawyer and friend of Jacob de Witt's, John van Andel, to begin his practical apprenticeship.

The choice of Van Andel to be John's guide and host was significant in one respect. He was not a member of the official Reformed church but a Remonstrant, one of the sect formed by the Arminians purged after 1619 by the triumphant Gomarians. Yet Jacob de Witt had been one of the Gomarians, in fact the treasurer of the Synod of Dort. What happened to his religious convictions during the intervening three decades? We know almost nothing about how the change occurred, but a complex man had grown out of the simple young one. He remained an orthodox Calvinist in his religious principles. It is also evident, however, that he had sloughed off the persecuting propensities of the Gomarians in favor of a religious tolerance that few of the orthodox clergy as yet professed. The choice also displayed Jacob's courage, for the hostility of the dominies could have untoward political consequences: but what, looked at one way, may be courage of conviction, may be, looked at another way, stiff-necked determination to go one's own way.

Life for John de Witt, now all of twenty-two years of age, became a mixture of work, enjoyment and study. He put to use the social graces he had acquired or polished while in France. He flirted with the maidens and was accused of jilting one who also lived in the Van Andel home as a guest. He played the violin. He may even have written poetry; at least some attributed to him was read by a nineteenth-century Dutch scholar who thought it poor stuff, but it has since been lost and we cannot make up our own mind. Yet our best guess is that the critic was right: De Witt's was not a soul from which poetry was made. He went to the theater and the fair, dressed well and ate well. No self-denying puritan, he continued to be a precise disciplinarian for himself. He kept a methodical record of his expenditures down to the last stiver. He found relaxation, however, in mathematics. He took up the study of conic sections and drafted a major treatise which worked out solutions in a modern manner, but allowed it to slumber in manuscript.

The one topic that does not seem to have interested him was politics. It goes utterly unmentioned in all his letters written during the years 1648 and 1649, the very years so agitated by the conflict over army reduction. It was as if, having left a political career to his brother, he had also decided to leave to him interest in affairs

of state. But we are speculating without any hard facts. All we can say is that he was not drawn to politics like a moth to the flame: it was no compulsive activity without which he wilted, the only work he felt worthy of him.

Events caught him up in the mid-summer crisis of 1650. The arrest and imprisonment of his father wrenched him from his lackadaisical attitude toward politics, and he sped down to Dordrecht to work for his father's release. After a brief discussion with the Old Council, the town's governing body, he continued on to Loevestein a few miles upriver to be on the spot. There was no question of offering resistance to Prince William's blow, only of softening its impact. John sought his father's release without loss of honor, and Jacob inside the castle took the same approach. Even before the Prince gave permission first for letters and then for personal visits, John managed to smuggle in a note to his father.

The settlement at Amsterdam set the pattern for one at Loevestein. William told a deputation from the prisoners' towns that he would let them go if they gave up their offices, as the Bickers had done. One elderly deputy accepted the Prince's terms at once, but Jacob's sons rejected them as implying that their father had been guilty of a crime or misdeed. Only after the States of Holland officially abandoned their insistence upon army reduction on August 13 did the impossibility of further resistance become evident.

Jacob thereupon asked the Old Council to relieve him of his seat in its ranks and of his other offices "in view of the present state of times and circumstances," and his request was granted. Even then John was insistent that there must be no indication that they had negotiated with the Prince with the city as intermediary: it had to be clear, even if unstated, that they were giving way only to force. William, having won the essentials, released the prisoners. On August 19, Jacob de Witt was again a free man.

That was all that could be hoped for. Political aspirations for Jacob and his sons could be written off. Of itself this was no loss to John, whose prospects as a lawyer remained excellent, and he returned to The Hague to pick up his tasks in Van Andel's law office.

The acceptance of defeat seems to have been total. The only thing to fear was that William would be vengeful, and during the months of life that remained to him there was no sign that he was.

Many years later a French visitor to the Netherlands, the Count of Guiche, reported in his memoirs that Jacob de Witt was irredeemably embittered, each day instructing his son at their first meeting in the morning, "John, remember Loevestein!" But Guiche was not in Holland at the time and, although he claims to know that this happened "from first hand," there is no contemporary source to confirm it. Besides, Guiche was a notoriously inventive memoir writer. In any case, John's own correspondence would indicate the contrary, if anything. He seldom mentioned politics at all until late October. Then, in a letter to a cousin, he discussed two new pamphlets that stirred public interest. One was favorable to the Prince, the other hostile, and John judged the former to show knowledge and good sense. The latter he did not characterize at all. This was the attitude we would expect from someone observing politics with curiosity and not commitment, the placid acceptance of a decree of fate.

William's death on November 7 shattered that placidity. Fate, ironic, unpredictable fate, had reversed her decree, and the door to politics was once again open to John de Witt. This time he was ready to enter.