

PLAIN LIVES IN A GOLDEN AGE

This is an account of the ordinary people of the province of Holland, in the seventeenth century, Holland's 'golden age', and in particular during the eighty years of war with Spain. First published in Dutch as four short volumes, it has been recognised as a pioneering attempt to write a history 'from below', based on a mass of contemporary documentary evidence, much of it previously unexplored.

Professor van Deursen explains first how the common man made his everyday living, as a labourer, for instance, or a peasant, sailor or soldier, and how much he had to spend. The second section answers questions about the way people spent their spare time, in playing, drinking, and (more occasionally) reading. Courtship and marriage are discussed, along with the everyday life of married women, who were nearly always obliged to add to the family income through their own labour. Professor van Deursen then examines the common man as subject and citizen, his relations with the authorities and his grudging attitude towards taxation. The final section deals with religion and popular culture. Although folk were free to make their own choices among a variety of denominations – Calvinist, Catholic, Mennonite among them – every sect was tinged by a strict sense of propriety and sobriety.

Professor Van Deursen is an outstanding and gifted scholar of the seventeenth-century Netherlands. His breadth of coverage over a wide range of questions in social history, such as the family, sex, and working and living conditions, will ensure that this English translation by Dr Maarten Ultee will become a standard work for students. The volume is attractively illustrated throughout with contemporary paintings, engravings and pamphlets.

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A. T. Van Deursen

Frontmatter

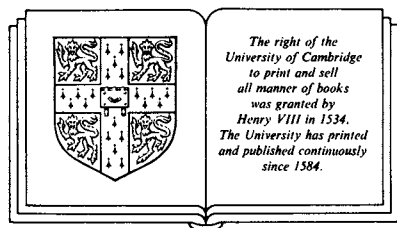
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PLAIN LIVES IN A GOLDEN AGE

*Popular culture, religion
and society in
seventeenth-century
Holland*

A. T. VAN DEURSEN

Translated by Maarten Ultee



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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

This book has a simple aim: to tell how the common people of Holland lived during war with Spain. That sentence says it all. It speaks of telling, rather than of analysing or exploring in depth. Our goal is both simple and modest. Description must precede explanation; and so long as much of the description remains uncertain or totally obscure, any detailed attempt at explanation must be premature.

The reader will infer from that initial mention of the common people that the book will not discuss the elite, but rather all the other members of society: petty shopkeepers and wage earners, peasants and craftsmen, soldiers and sailors, beggars and vagrants, groups which included both men and women.

In discussing the common people of Holland, i.e. those who lived in the province of that name, the provincial sample is not taken as representative of the whole United Provinces of the Netherlands. The present text may indeed apply to other regions, but not necessarily so. The enclosing dates of the study are 1572 and 1648, the years in which Holland won and established its independence. However, the latter date receives more emphasis than the former because the emphasis has been placed on the 'Golden Age', generally speaking the first half of the seventeenth century.

Finally, the book describes how the common people of Holland *lived*. Of all the words in my opening sentence this one has the most pretensions. It has no limits, and thus cannot be realised. But might we not thus describe all historical writing, which can at best only approach 'the truth'? If the reader comes even a little closer to the reality of everyday life in seventeenth-century Holland, our story will not have been told in vain.

Many people have assisted directly or indirectly in the preparation of this work. In the Dutch edition I mentioned Mesdames Corry van Renselaar and Joke Roelevink, and I should like to repeat their names here. I must also add that of the translator, Dr Maarten Ultee, whose resourcefulness always found a solution for the most impenetrable problems. Despite his efforts, any shortcomings still found in the text remain my responsibility.