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978-0-521-39260-0 - The Nobility of Holland: From Knights to Regents, 1500-1650

H. F. K. van Nierop

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN EARLY MODERN HISTORY

The nobility of Holland

This book is the first full-scale analysis of the social and political transformation of the nobility of Holland during the revolt against Spain. In the late medieval county of Holland the nobility played a significant role, but in the seventeenth century it appears to have been obliterated by bourgeois merchants and urban regents. The author argues that this 'decline' needs re-examination, and bases his study on three key aspects: the demographic evidence for the decline of the nobility; the economic vicissitudes of the sixteenth century which gave rise to the myth of its impoverishment; and, finally, the political and administrative powers of the nobility in the reigns of Charles V and Philip II during the Dutch Revolt and in the Republic.

The conclusions are surprising. The nobility of Holland was extremely successful in maintaining its position in a bourgeois republic. In conjunction with the urban regents, the nobles formed the country's administrative, political and economic elite, and, from a social point of view, they maintained a strict apartheid by marrying exclusively within their group.

Widely acclaimed in the Dutch edition of 1984, this is an important contribution to the history of the Netherlands as well as to the more general study of European elites.

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*Edited by Professor J. H. Elliott, University of Oxford,
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The nobility of Holland

From knights to regents, 1500–1650

H. F. K. VAN NIEROP

Senior Lecturer in History, University of Amsterdam

Translated by

Maarten Ultee

Professor of History, University of Alabama



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Preface to the English edition

This book is based on the first Dutch edition of 1984. That edition included eleven appendices, mostly lists of names, as well as additional illustrations, which have been omitted here. The text, notes and bibliography of the English version have been revised by the author and translator.

Since the first edition, historical interest in the nobility and other elites in the Netherlands has increased greatly. We now have studies of the nobility in Groningen, Drente, Utrecht, the Veluwe and Brabant. The general contours of the Netherlands nobility during the *ancien régime* are becoming clear. The particularism of the Netherlands did produce important constitutional differences among the provincial aristocracies. But my view that the nobles adapted creatively and successfully to changing circumstances and remained a significant force in the Dutch Republic appears confirmed in all the provinces. Naturally, on some points there are differences of insight, interpretation and emphasis. Several works might have led to further research and revision, but only minor corrections could be made for this edition. In my opinion, the most important conclusions of this book still stand.

Among recent studies, Sherrin Marshall has written a book about the noble families of Utrecht and their relations in surrounding provinces for the same period.¹ She devoted more attention than I did to the family life and religious life of the nobility: consequently, our two books complement each other. To my mind, it would not be useful to note every point where we differ in facts or interpretation. The reader can be the judge. Nevertheless, the differences in our demographic statistics suggest we should underscore the limited value of these deceptively exact data in a pre-statistical age. H. Feenstra published his revised dissertation on the *jonkers* of Groningen as a book covering the period from the middle ages to the seventeenth century; he has also written about the nobility of Drente during the Republic.² S. W. Versteegen studied the *jonkers* in

¹ Sherrin Marshall, *The Dutch Gentry, 1500–1650: Family, Faith, and Fortune* (New York, Westport and London, 1987).

² H. Feenstra, *Adel in de Ommelanden. Hoofdelingen, jonkers en eigengeërfden van de late middeleeuwen tot de negentiende eeuw* (Groningen, 1988); *Drentse edelen tijdens de republiek: een onderzoek naar hun economische positie* (n.p., 1985).

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the Veluwe region over the 'long' eighteenth century.³ The great power of the Veluwe group was not a relic of the middle ages, but first arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. J. Aalbers wrote a fine review article about the nobility of Holland, Utrecht and Guelderland in the early eighteenth century, which was published in a volume with other useful contributions on elites in the northern Netherlands from the middle ages to the present.⁴ Various authors have treated the history of the nobility of Brabant in medieval and early modern times.⁵ I have also written a short article on noble bastards in the sixteenth century, which may serve as a supplement to chapter 4 of this book.⁶

Several recent studies of the history of Holland shed new light on questions treated here. *Holland under Habsburg Rule, 1506–1566* by James Tracy covers the subject in an impressive manner.⁷ Not until this period did Holland develop into a 'body politic' that could bear the burden of the revolt against Philip II and take over sovereignty. This was the result of external circumstances such as the wars with Guelders, the growth of provincial institutions and responsibilities, particularly in the fiscal sphere, and the growth of a communal political consciousness that provincial privileges had to be defended. Tracy's book deals at length with the role of the States, the Ridderschap, the Court of Holland and many noble and non-noble office-holders. Earlier, Tracy had written an important study of the tax system in sixteenth-century Holland.⁸ He attaches more significance to the tax exemption of the nobility than I have done.⁹ The nobility was exempt from contributions to the *ordinaris-bede* (regular subsidy granted by the States), but did have to pay the *accijnzen* (excise taxes) that were used to finance provincial loans. Furthermore, nobles were exempt from taxes on land that lay 'buiten de schildtalen' (outside the property assessments, last revised in 1514/15). The government had little success in its attempts to make the nobles pay more taxes. Another interesting point is that the Holland nobility disappeared from the group of purchasers of life-annuities and perpetual loans (lenders to the state) at about the same time that nobles ceased to hold administrative offices.

³ S. W. Versteegen, *Gegoede ingezetenen. Jonkers en geërfden op de Veluwe tijdens Ancien Régime, revolutie en restauratie (1650–1830)* (Amsterdam, 1989).

⁴ J. Aalbers, 'Geboorte en geld. Adel in Gelderland, Utrecht en Holland tijdens de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw', in *De Bloem der natie. Adel en patriciaat in de Noordelijke Nederlanden*, ed. J. Aalbers and M. Prak (Meppel and Amsterdam, 1987), pp. 56–78.

⁵ J. Verbesselt et al., *De adel in het hertogdom Brabant* (Brussels, 1985).

⁶ H. F. K. van Nierop, 'Adellijke bastaarden in de zestiende eeuw', in *Bestuurders en geleerden. Opstellen . . . aangeboden aan Prof. Dr J. J. Woltjer . . .*, ed. S. Groenveld, M. E. H. N. Mout, and I. Schöffers (Amsterdam and Dieren, 1985), pp. 111–22.

⁷ *Holland under Habsburg Rule, 1506–1566: The Formation of a Body Politic* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1990).

⁸ *A Financial Revolution in the Habsburg Netherlands: 'Renten' and 'renteniers' in the County of Holland, 1515–1565* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1985).

⁹ Cf. Tracy's review of my book in *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 17 (1986): 111–12.

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On the States of Holland and the position of the Ridderschap in the sixteenth century, we now have a dissertation by J. W. Koopmans.¹⁰ An article by R. H. Vermij on the nobility in meetings of the States examines why the nobles were less inclined to hold offices after 1530.¹¹ My own answer, that the nobles withdrew of their own volition, no longer appears entirely satisfactory. Vermij suggests that the initiative was taken by the government: in its striving for an obedient officer corps, it no longer wanted nobles in the apparatus. He points out that nobles did continue to hold functions in the service of the States. The disappearance of the nobility from administrative offices must thus be seen in the light of the emancipation of the States from central authority. This explanation is not implausible for the 1550s and 1560s, but it is difficult to see how it could already have been true in the two preceding decades. The disappearance of nobles from offices appears to me inarguable, yet the causes of this process are still very unclear. For an explanation I should be more inclined to consider changes in patronage, also the subject of recent studies.¹² Further research in the correspondence of the regent and the stadholders with the Court of Holland and the bureaucracy will be required to resolve the issue.

The section on the aristocratization of the regents in the Republic in chapter 8 was based on the historical literature available at the time. Since then our knowledge has increased considerably.¹³ The view of contemporaries and historians that the regent-patriciate competed with the nobility through the purchase of manors and the pursuit of titles now appears simplistic, to put it mildly. Among the urban patriciate, the possession of manors was exceptional and remained so even in the eighteenth century. This was already apparent from my data on the continuing predominance of nobles as owners of manors. Evidently the regents were able to distinguish themselves from the bourgeois in general without coming into collision with the nobility. For the present, we have no answer to the question of who were the new non-noble owners of manors.

¹⁰ J. W. Koopmans, *De Staten van Holland en de Opstand. De ontwikkeling van hun functies en organisatie in de periode 1544–1588* (The Hague, 1990).

¹¹ R. H. Vermij, 'De Staten van Holland en de adel in de periode van de opstand', *Holland. Regionaal-historisch tijdschrift* 18 (1986): 215–25.

¹² H. F. K. van Nierop, 'Willem van Oranje als hoog edelman: patronage in de Habsburgse Nederlanden?', *BMGN* 99 (1984): 651–76. Wim Blockmans, 'Corruptie, patronage, makelaardij en venaliteit als symptomen van een ontluikende staatsvorming in de Bourgondisch-Habsburgse Nederlanden', *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 11 (1985): 231–47. *Klientelsysteme im Europa der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Antoni Mączak (Munich, 1988).

¹³ L. Kooijmans, *Onder regenten. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Hoorn 1700–1780* (Amsterdam and Dieren, 1985). M. Prak, *Gezetten burgers. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Leiden 1700–1780* (Amsterdam and Dieren, 1985). J. J. de Jong, *Met goed fatsoen. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Gouda 1700–1780* (Amsterdam and Dieren, 1985). C. Schmidt, *Om de eer van de familie. Het geslacht Teding van Berkhout 1500–1950. Een sociologische benadering* (Amsterdam, 1986). L. Kooijmans, 'Patriciaat en aristocratisering in Holland tijdens de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw', in *De Bloem der natie*, pp. 93–103. Joop de Jong, *Een deftig bestaan. Het dagelijks leven van regenten in de 17de en 18de eeuw* (Utrecht and Antwerp, 1987).

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After completing this book I still had a number of questions in my mind. One of the most intriguing was, how was it possible for the members of the Compromise of the Nobility, who were obviously so prosperous, to call themselves 'Geuzen' or beggars? I hope to have solved this problem by interpreting the symbolism of the beggars' movement as a case of carnivalesque inversion.¹⁴

I am indebted to more people for help and support than I can mention here. Without the encouragement, assistance and tolerance of my parents, I would not have become a historian. It is sad that my father did not live to see the original publication in 1984. Juliaan Woltjer was more than my adviser. He generously shared his unsurpassed knowledge of the sixteenth century, as well as his stack of photocopies. He also taught me the value of common sense for the study of history. The members of his informal sixteenth-century seminar commented on the various chapters as they took shape. My colleagues at the Historisch Seminarium of the University of Amsterdam were generous in allowing me time for research and writing. The employees of various archives and libraries I visited during my research were friendly and helpful without exception: I should like to mention in particular the collaborators of the Amsterdam University Library. Eco Haitzma Mulier was (and is) indispensable both as a stimulator and a critic. I profited immensely from lengthy discussions with Alastair Duke, Jonathan Israel and James Tracy. The late Huub Jansen read the finished manuscript and shared his knowledge of late medieval Holland. L. J. van der Klooster taught me that the Holland nobles I thought I knew so well actually had faces, and assisted me in collecting the illustrations. Walter Wybrand Marcusse was an enthusiastic and patient publisher in 1984, and again for the revised paperback Dutch edition of 1990. Maarten Ultee produced a translation which is both accurate and tasteful. He did not lose his temper when I repeatedly changed the original text in Dutch after he finished translating it. Nothing shows the shortcomings of a text so relentlessly as a translation. Tine, Leonie, Samuel and Gulian as they successively entered my life took it for granted that I was busy with a book for most of the time. I am immensely grateful to them all.

The translation of this book was made possible by a grant from the Netherlands Foundation for Scholarly Research (NWO).

¹⁴ H. F. K. van Nierop, 'A Beggars' Banquet. The compromise of the nobility and the politics of inversion', *European History Quarterly* 21 (1991): 419–43.

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| <i>AAGB</i> | <i>Afdeling Agrarische Geschiedenis Bijdragen</i> |
| <i>AGN</i> | <i>Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden</i> , 12 vols., Utrecht and Antwerp, 1949–58 |
| <i>AH</i> | Archief van het Hoogheemraadschap |
| <i>ARA</i> | Algemeen Rijksarchief |
| <i>BGBH</i> | <i>Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis van het Bisdom Haarlem</i> |
| <i>BMGN</i> | <i>Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden</i> |
| <i>BMHG</i> | <i>Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Historisch Genootschap</i> |
| <i>BVGO</i> | <i>Bijdragen voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde</i> |
| <i>FA</i> | Familiearchief |
| <i>GA</i> | Gemeentearchief |
| <i>HA</i> | Huisarchief |
| <i>HRA</i> | Archief van de Hoge Raad van Adel |
| <i>JbCBG</i> | <i>Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie</i> |
| <i>Kn</i> | W. P. C. Knuttel, <i>Catalogus van de pamflettenverzameling berustende in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek</i> , 9 vols., The Hague, 1889–1920 |
| <i>Kron HG</i> | <i>Kronijk van het Historische Genootschap te Utrecht</i> |
| <i>LJ</i> | <i>Leids Jaarboekje (Jaarboekje voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde van Leiden en Omstreken)</i> |
| <i>NAGN</i> | (Nieuwe) <i>Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden</i> , 15 vols., Haarlem, 1977–1983 |
| <i>Nav</i> | <i>De Navorscher</i> |
| <i>NL</i> | <i>Maandblad van het Genealogisch-heraldisch Genootschap: 'De Nederlandsche Leeuw'</i> |
| <i>NNBW</i> | <i>Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek</i> , ed. P. C. Molhuysen and P. J. Blok, 10 vols. (Leiden, 1911–37) |
| <i>PP</i> | <i>Past and Present</i> |
| <i>RHMC</i> | <i>Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine</i> |
| <i>Res. Holland</i> | <i>Resolutiën van de Heeren Staaten van Holland en Westvriesland</i> , 276 vols. (The Hague, ca. 1750–98) |
| <i>TvG</i> | <i>Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis</i> |

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| | |
|------------|---|
| <i>TvR</i> | <i>Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis</i> |
| <i>VG</i> | <i>Verspreide Geschriften</i> |
| <i>VW</i> | <i>Verzamelde Werken</i> |
| <i>Wap</i> | <i>De Wapenheraut. Maandblad gewijd aan geschiedenis, geslacht-, wapen-, oudheidkunde, enz.</i> |

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Note on currencies

Two kinds of currency are mentioned in this book. The Holland pound (*Pond Hollands*, abbreviated as £), a money of account, was divided into 20 *schellingen* or shillings (s.), or 240 *penningen* or pence (d.). Thus 1 *schelling* was worth 12 *penningen*. Another system was based on the *gulden* (guilder or florin, abbreviated as *f*). It was divided into 20 *stuivers* or stivers (st.), or 240 *penningen*. A *gulden* (sometimes referred to as *karolusgulden*) had the same value as a pound, a *stuiver* was equivalent to a *schelling*. Because *schellingen* and *stuivers* had the same value, prices were sometimes illogically expressed in pounds and *stuivers*. In some cases, however, the Flemish pound was used; its value was six Holland pounds or guilders. Throughout the text I have followed the language of the sources, rather than convert everything into one particular currency.

