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978-0-521-39653-0 - The Princes of Orange: The Stadholders in the Dutch Republic

Herbert H. Rowen

Excerpt

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Prologue: lieutenants of the crown

Like the Dutch Republic itself, the stadholderate was an improvisation. Both were old structures adapted to new needs and a new situation, the product of the peculiar course of the Revolt of the Low Countries. The Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands was a rump remnant of the “Burgundian state,” as historians call the assemblage of lands under the rule of the French dukes of Burgundy since the late fourteenth century.¹ But it was more than a rump; it had become a new nation, a new state, in which the stadholderate changed character.

The core of “Burgundy” was neither the duchy of Burgundy within France itself nor the adjacent “Free County” (Franche-Comté) of the same name within the Empire, but the seventeen² provinces that straddled the delta of the merged Rhine, Maas (Meuse) and Schelde (Scheldt) Rivers as they flowed into the North Sea. They had never formed a unified state in the modern sense, such as France and England had already become, but were little more than a congeries of lands acquired by the Burgundian dukes beginning in the late fourteenth century and by their heirs, the Habsburgs of Austria and Spain, in the first half of the sixteenth. Their unity consisted essentially in shared rulership and the single policy which their resources served.³ Because the revenues of the dukes, fed by the fabulous industry, trade and agriculture of the Low Countries, were immense, the “Burgundian state” was one of the great powers of the fifteenth century. Sharing in the costs and consequences of the ducal wars, the provinces began to see, however faintly, that they had common interests, even if only to resist the bellicose policies of the dukes for which they had to pay and to urge use of Burgundian power for their own special advantage. At the same time, the

1 See A. G. Jongkees, “Vorming van de Bourgondische staat,” in: *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (2nd edn, 15 vols.; Haarlem, 1977–83), III, 191.

2 The number was conventional. Several of the “seventeen” were not provinces at all but titles held by Charles V in the Low Countries.

3 Richard Vaughan (*Philip the Bold: The Formation of the Burgundian State* [Cambridge, Mass, 1962], 237–38; *John the Fearless: The Growth of Burgundian Power* [New York, 1966], 287–89) emphasizes that the Burgundian state was already a “political entity,” although not one territorially or juridically.

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dukes gradually set various central organs over the provincial institutions to make them serve the Burgundian purposes more effectively. The result was the emergence of a significant sense of common fate and the formation of common administrative structures that were two of the most important elements in the embryonic nationhood⁴ of the Netherlands.⁵

After 1430 the dukes became more “Netherlandish” (to use the term to include the French as well as the Dutch-speaking provinces)⁶ than Burgundian, and their usual residence was at Brussels, the capital of Brabant. They were therefore able to exercise their governance in the Low Countries either directly or through lieutenants (in Dutch *stadhouders*, the term which has come over into English as “stadholders”). These lieutenants were identical with the “governors” in France, who were the military and political leaders in the provinces on behalf of and under the authority of the royal crown.⁷ They fell between the two poles of governmental power, at the one end the intensifying administrative centralization of the dukes and at the other the persistent local self-governance of towns and noblemen; indeed, the primary task of the stadholders was to connect the two poles into a single system of effective rule. They had no fixity of office, however; although usually notables from within the province or at least the Low Countries as a whole, they commanded the duke’s troops as captains-general and executed his instructions.⁸

A significant innovation came late in the fifteenth century, after the death of Duchess Mary, when her widower, Maximilian of Habsburg, governed the Netherlands on behalf of their son, Duke Philip the Handsome. Frequently absent from the country because of his duties as King of the Romans (elected successor to the Imperial throne) and Austrian archduke, Maximilian named Duke Albert of Saxony as his stadholder-general in the Netherlands.⁹ Philip came of age in 1493 and governed in

4 Jongkees, 101–92, 196–98; Leo Delfos, *Die Anfänge der Utrechter Union, 1577–1587: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der niederländischen Erhebung, insbesondere zu deren Verfassungsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1941; reprint edn, Vaduz, 1965), 19; J. J. Poelhekke, *Frederik Hendrik, Prins van Oranje: Een Biografisch Drieluik* (Zutphen, 1978), 23; P. Geyl, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* (reprint edn; 6 vols.; Amsterdam, 1961–62), 1, 145.

5 The names “Netherlands” and “Low Countries” were already losing their strictly geographic denotation and becoming the designation of a particular territory.

6 See Geyl, *Geschiedenis*, 1, 139, which, however, in accordance with the author’s “Great Netherlands” principle, emphasizes the Dutch–Flemish (*Diets*) character of the Burgundian state – not of the dukes themselves – at the expense of its French element.

7 See Robert R. Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France* (New Haven and London, 1978).

8 Paul Rosenfeld, “The Provincial Governors from the Minority of Charles V to the Revolt,” *Anciens Pays et Assemblées d’états*, 17 (1959), 16.

9 For the conflict-filled rule of Maximilian in the Netherlands, see Helmut Georg Koenigsberger, “Fürst und Generalstaaten: Maximilian I. in den Niederlanden (1477–1493),” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 242 (1986), 557–79.

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person. However, his marriage to the Spanish infanta Joanna, who became the heiress to the Castilian and Aragonese thrones in 1498, led him to make two journeys to Spain in 1501 and 1506. On both occasions he named lieutenants-general to govern in the Netherlands during his absence. He did not return from his second trip, dying in Spain in 1506. He was succeeded as lord of the Low Countries by his six-year-old son Charles, the most famed of all Habsburgs as King Charles I of Spain (1516), Emperor Charles V (1519) and head of the House of Austria. During his minority the governorship-general was in the hands of his aunt Margaret of Austria, dowager duchess of Savoy, and even after he came of age in 1515 Charles, who returned to his native Netherlands only infrequently, continued her in her office until her death in 1530. During this period, therefore, the provincial stadholders were themselves beholden to governors-general.¹⁰

It was during the last half-century of the rule of Charles V that the stadholdership was consolidated in the form that would be adapted and transformed during the Revolt. We need pay little attention to the governorship-general, for the stadholderate under the Dutch Republic did not develop out of that office but out of the provincial stadholdership. The powers of the governors-general were universal, save always the superior authority of Charles, who however gave his full confidence to the Regents, Margaret of Austria and her successor, Mary of Hungary, as full-fledged members of the House of Habsburg.¹¹

The powers of the provincial governors were more carefully circumscribed. The stadholders were always appointed by the ruling prince himself, although on the advice of the Regent. They were recruited from the high noble clans that had served the Burgundians well, but their fidelity had been bought by munificent rewards and was hardly selfless.¹² Mary of Hungary in particular saw the peril that lay in the nobles' desire to pass on the office of provincial stadholder to heirs, for then they would be tempted to see themselves no longer as just exalted servants but as having powers in their own right.¹³

Governors exercised virtually all the rights of the ruling prince within their provinces. For the inhabitants, they were the government above the

10 P. J. Blok, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Volk* (8 vols.; Groningen, 1892–1908), 1, 547–48, 563–64.

11 Blok, *Geschiedenis*, 1, 548–49; N. Japikse, *De Geschiedenis van het Huis van Oranje-Nassau* (2 vols.; The Hague, 1937–38), 1, 45.

12 Blok, *Geschiedenis*, 1, 563–64; Rosenfeld, 4–5, 16–17, 25; H. G. Koenigsberger, "Orange, Granvelle and Philip II," *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (hereafter abbreviated as *BMGN*), 9 (1984), 575–76 (this article is reprinted in the author's *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern Europe*, London and Ronceverte, West Virginia, 1985, 97–119).

13 Rosenfeld, 10, 35, 37.

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local authorities. Two elements – military command and influence over election of members of some town governments – were crucial for the eventual development of the republican stadholdership. Much of the stadholders' prestige and effective power came from the fact that the professional armed force in the provinces was in their hands as captains-general. Almost equally important was the right of appointment to municipal offices within the provinces during the annual election called the *wetsverzetting* ("renewal of the government"),¹⁴ for it limited the ability of the dominant cliques within the towns to govern on their own, without the effective control of the officials at Brussels. Only Friesland and Gelderland, the most recently acquired of the provinces, retained by special pledge of the Emperor the right to elect their own municipal officers, not merely to propose their names to the stadholder.¹⁵ However, in the provinces of Holland, Zeeland and Flanders, even this limited right was taken away from Regent Mary, who also forbade the stadholders in office to nominate their successors, lest they come to consider their posts as in practice hereditary.¹⁶

The range and depth of the stadholders' powers can be seen with precise definition in the instructions given to the Prince of Orange, William I, when Philip II, who succeeded his father Charles V in 1555, named him stadholder of the counties of Holland and Zeeland and the land of Utrecht as well as certain other adjacent territories in 1559. His tasks were defined both broadly and specifically. On the one hand the instructions maintained Philip's "rights, highness and lordship," and on the other protected the rights of his subjects and safeguarded them against all "oppression" (*fouilles et oppressions*). William was to seek the "welfare" of the provinces. He would provide justice to all who sought it and enforce the sentences of the courts. He would continue in the customary way to appoint burgo-masters and members of the town councils. He would provide for the watch in the towns and garrisons in the fortresses, and call the States into session when needed. Overall, he was to do "everything and anything" that "a good and faithful governor-general can and should do."¹⁷ Although these instructions gave the general tone of the powers entrusted to the

14 The word *wet* means literally "law," and the aldermen and burgo-masters were "*de heren van de wet*," "the lords of the law." The term *wetsverzetting* at this time meant the normal election, but under the Republic it came to mean dismissals and appointments out of the ordinary course.

15 Rosenfeld, 23, 44–46; Blok, *Geschiedenis*, I, 566.

16 H. de Schepper, "De burgerlijke overheden en hun permanente kaders," in: *Algemene Geschiedenis*, v, 337.

17 Commission as governor and lieutenant-general of the counties of Holland and Zeeland, the land of Utrecht, West Friesland, Voorne, Den Briel, and lands adjacent and annexed to these counties, given by Philip II to William of Orange, 9 Aug. 1559, M. Gachard, ed., *Correspondance de Guillaume le Taciturne, Prince d'Orange* (6 vols.; Brussels, Leipzig, Ghent, 1850–66), I, 487–88.

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stadholders in the other provinces and to different stadholders over the years, they varied considerably in detail and were not always as precise.¹⁸

Whatever difficulties occurred in the relations between the provincial stadholders on the one hand and the Emperor Charles V and the Habsburg governors-general on the other, they were still only ripples on the surface during his reign. A fundamental harmony of interests was carefully cultivated by the Emperor, and it was displayed for all to see in the final act of his rule when, during his abdication at Brussels in 1555, he gave his speech of farewell resting upon the shoulder of the young Prince William of Orange. Charles had received his first education in politics in the Netherlands, the land of his birth, and he understood its situation throughout his life, even though he spent more and more of his years in other realms under his scepter. For their part, the stadholders always had more to gain in Charles's service than they could hope to win by baronial opposition to him; the complaints by Mary of Hungary about their ambitions were aroused not by incipient rebellion but by their effort to carve out for themselves the greatest possible range of action, the greatest independence of judgment, within a collaboration that neither side ever called into question in principle. Furthermore, although both the rulers at Brussels and the stadholders sought to limit and inhibit the restless self-assertiveness of the towns, in particular notoriously rebellious Ghent, they did not attempt to abolish the provincial States or the States-General, without which the collection of taxes would have been far more difficult and laborious. The central councils established in Brussels were not intended to replace the States and even less the autonomous municipal governments, but to make them more amenable to the needs of the crown.

In this complex and inherently ambiguous relationship, the stadholders played an essential role. They were on the spot, the eyes, ears and the enforcing arms of the Emperor. Whatever the advances of centralized and bureaucratic government in Brussels, it remained much too thin to be able to govern the provinces directly. It rested upon the work of the stadholders in place. The stadholders for their part acquired a familiarity with local conditions – the interests involved, the persons in contention, the peculiarities of institutions and the traditions to which the people held – that could seldom be matched in Brussels. A stadholder with the ability to project himself imaginatively into other people's predicaments might therefore find himself in the position of seeing the situation from below as well as from above.

The tensions of the relations between the ruler and the stadholders, already evident during the regency of Mary of Hungary, became more

¹⁸ Schepper, 337.

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difficult after the accession of Philip II. Born and raised in Spain, Philip lacked his father's easy familiarity with the Low Countries. He took quite literally the injunctions of political theorists on the totality of his sovereign powers, subject always to the higher sovereignty of God, which he accepted with equal literalness. In Spain Philip tempered his absolutism with a ready skill in governing with the *grandees* and the States assemblies (*Cortes*), but he resented having to do so in the Netherlands. A key difference was that there the great nobles dominated the Council of State, in which members of the Order of the Golden Fleece had a seat by right. They benefited, too, by the continued strength of the States assemblies, of which they were leading and influential members. In 1576, William was to recall that Philip had expressed to him in so many words his distaste for the arrogance of the States, and hinted that it rested upon the support given them by unnamed persons.¹⁹

Another important difference concerned the size and character of the administrative apparatus available to Philip in Spain and in the Netherlands. It was highly developed in Spain and was essentially an emanation of the central government; in the Low Countries, on the contrary, it was much less advanced, with the few central agencies, however important, set over rather than taking the place of local and provincial governments, which retained a very large measure of continuing autonomy. When Philip attempted to diminish the role of the Council of State as the principal advisory body for the new governor-general, his half-sister Margaret of Parma, there was no adequate apparatus in place through which she could govern, even with the skillful guidance of Antoine Perrenot, a churchman from Franche-Comté who was elevated to the cardinalate under the title of Granvelle.

The immediate issue that brought on the clash²⁰ between Granvelle and the *grandees* – the Spanish term nicely expresses the status of the highest nobility in the Netherlands – was the reorganization of the bishoprics in the Low Countries, which Philip II had obtained from the papacy in 1559. It was not so much the undoubted rationality of the reorganization – creating an adequate number of bishoprics and withdrawing them from the jurisdiction of archbishops in Germany and France – that drew the fire of the nobles as that they had to pay the price of the change. The reorganization, by assigning the wealthiest abbeys to the new bishops to supplement their revenues, both took away moneys that ordinarily went to noble families and at the same time gave the bishops the representation in the provincial States that historically belonged to the abbots. In addition, there

19 William I to the States General, no date (Nov. 1576), William I, *Correspondance*, III, 146–47.

20 For this conflict, see H. G. Koenigsberger, "Orange, Granvelle and Philip II," 573–95.

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was some unhappiness among the nobles at the prospect that the reorganized Catholic Church would be in a position to enforce the inquisition against heretics on which Philip had set his mind. A tradition of Erasmian toleration (however it be defined, its consequence was a detestation of burning bodies to save souls) was strong among the nobility, as among many classes of the population. The final blow to the *grandees* was the withdrawal of the king's confidence from them in favor of the Regent, Margaret of Parma, and especially of her advisor, Granvelle, who was totally Philip's servant. Although the great nobles were still granted key military and political offices, notably the stadholderships, their feeling of exclusion from rights to which they were entitled was not assuaged, all the more because Margaret and Granvelle considered that the post of stadholder undermined the Regent's authority.²¹

The opposition of the *grandees* coalesced in 1562 with the formation of a league aimed at the overthrow of Granvelle's ascendancy and their refusal in 1563 to attend meetings of the Council of State so long as he was present. The king conceded to them for the moment by transferring the cardinal to Spain the next year. Although the transformation of peaceful political resistance into outright civil war was to take several years, so that the beginning of the Revolt of the Low Countries cannot be precisely dated, it is fair to say that this strike of the *grandees* was either the start of the Revolt or was a Pre-Revolt (to follow the usage of the French historians who call the events of 1787–9 in France the "Pre-Revolution"). Although this resistance was in a way a replay of the baronial rebellions of earlier centuries, it was unusual in that it was the very class that had supported the crown most effectively during the Burgundian rule that now took up the challenge to the Burgundian heir who reigned as the Habsburg king in Spain.

21 Horst Lademacher, *Die Stellung des Prinzen von Oranien als Statthalter in den Niederlanden van 1572 bis 1584: Ein Beitrag zur Verfassungsgeschichte der Niederlande* (Bonn, 1958), 40.

I

William I: from courtier to rebel

At first glance William I, Prince of Orange and Count of Nassau, as the ranking nobleman in the country,¹ might well have seemed the least likely person² to lead the revolt that broke out in the Netherlands in 1566.³ Born 25 April 1533, he had been sent as a boy from his birthplace in Germany to take up the inheritance of his cousin, René of Chalon. René had been the first to combine the sovereignty of the tiny principality of Orange, an enclave in southern France, with the vast wealth and the leading military and political role of the counts of Nassau in the Low Countries. Growing to manhood, William adapted to the plush luxuriance of his new life at the Brussels court of Charles V,⁴ but retained in his relations with persons of all classes an earthiness that had been characteristic of the first ten years of his life in the Nassau castle at Dillenburg. Although even before the Emperor's abdication Charles's son Philip seems to have resented the confidence and affection that his father bestowed upon the Prince of Orange, it was not until the four years of Philip's residence in the Netherlands ended with his departure for his native Spain in 1559 that the king clearly came to

1 See H. F. K. van Nierop, "De adel in de 16de-eeuwse Nederlanden," *Spiegel Historiae*, 19 (1984), 163–68, and *Van ridders tot regenten: De Hollandse adel in de zestiende en de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw* (Dieren, Gelderland, 1984) for an overview of the nobility in this period.

2 This characterization is implicit in K. W. Swart, "Wat bewoog Willem van Oranje de strijd tegen de Spaanse overheersing aan te binden?," *BMGN*, 99 (1984), 554. For a brief presentation of William as the noble leader of the Revolt, see S. Groenveld, "Ter Inleiding: Willem van Oranje. Een hoog edelman in opstand," *Spiegel Historiae*, 19 (1984), 158–62.

3 The best modern account of the revolt is Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt* (revised edn, 1979). Despite the title, it views the events from the perspective of the Low Countries as a whole, Dutch–Flemish and French–Walloon speakers both. Parker treats as actually three successive revolts what in modern times is usually called "the Revolt of the Low Countries" in the singular. Kossmann and Mellink agree that the singular is inaccurate, pointing to contemporary descriptions of "The Wars (or: The Civil Wars) in the Netherlands," but they place even more stress upon its complex and contradictory characteristics (E. H. Kossmann and A. F. Mellink, eds., *Texts concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* [Cambridge, 1974], "Introduction," 1–2).

4 P. Janssens, "Willem van Oranje aan het Brussels Hof 1549–1559," *Spiegel Historiae*, 19 (1984), 174–81.

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look upon William with a suspicious eye. Yet, respect for his importance and influence prompted Philip to name William to the Council of State and to the Order of the Golden Fleece,⁵ and upon quitting the country to appoint him stadholder for Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht, like two counts of Nassau, Henry III and René of Chalon, before him.⁶

There was good reason for Philip's distrust. The Prince of Orange was a faithful subject of his king, to be sure, but he did not see himself or his fellow grandees as no more than exalted instruments of the royal will. He took as his second wife⁷ Anna of Saxony, the daughter of Maurice of Saxony, a notorious foe of Charles V, despite the dissuasions of Granvelle and Philip II, thereby calling into doubt the sincerity or at least the fervor of the Catholicism he had adopted on coming to court to take up René's inheritance.⁸ Furthermore, William's Catholicism was in the Erasmian tradition, wide in its acceptance of doctrinal variation and hostile to the imposition of faiths by force. It was a commitment that he adhered to even as he changed his church membership; it may even have been, as one historian suggests, the fundamental cause of his conflict with Philip.⁹

Orange was proud of his high rank and jealous to preserve the right to take a leading part in the king's government that he believed his rank gave him. He had practical experience of government both as stadholder and as a member of the Council of State, the highest of the central councils instituted by Charles V.¹⁰ He was neither a republican, believing in government without a crowned head of state,¹¹ nor a democrat, for whom rule ought to rest in the "people." But he was not an upholder of absolute monarchy either, one who imposed no limit other than divine law and ultimate divine judgment upon the power of the king.¹² He was a constitutional conservative, accepting the established traditions in the Low Countries, where for centuries the dukes and counts had governed with the participation of States assemblies in conformity with hallowed practice and

5 M. E. J. Baelde, "De Orde van het Gulden Vlies," *Spiegel Historiae*, 19 (1984), 169–73.

6 P. J. Blok, *Willem de Eerste, Prins van Oranje* (2 vols.; Amsterdam, 1919–20), I, 6, 9, 49.

7 For a brief account of William's wives, see Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, "Vrouwen rond Willem van Oranje," *Spiegel Historiae*, 19 (1984), 181–86.

8 Parker, 51.

9 Swart, "Wat bewoog," 554–55. M. E. H. N. Mout ("Het intellectuele milieu van Willem van Oranje," *BMGN*, 99 (1984), 596, 605–13) calls this view of William's attitude into doubt, referring to his "reputed (*vermeende*) Erasmianism."

10 See Kossmann and Mellink, "Introduction," 6–7, where the traditional view of the nobility's "lack of administrative capacity" is rejected.

11 He used the word *république* in accordance with contemporary custom as a synonym for a state, any country in the political sense. See William I to States General, end November 1576, William I, *Correspondance*, III, 153.

12 A. A. van Schelven, *Willem van Oranje: Een boek ter gedachtenis van idealen en teleurstellingen* (4th edn; Amsterdam, 1948), 61.