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

Herbert H. Rowen

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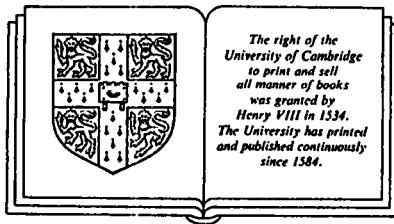
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

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[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1988

First published 1988

First paperback edition 1990

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Rowen, Herbert H.

The princes of orange: the stadholders in the Dutch Republic. (Cambridge studies in early modern history).

1. Netherlands—Politics and government

—1648–1795

I. Title

354.492'0009 JN5745

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Rowen, Herbert Harvey.

The princes of Orange.

(Cambridge studies in early modern history)

Bibliography

Includes index.

1. Netherlands—Politics and government—1556–1648.

2. Netherlands—Politics and government—1648–1795.

3. Netherlands—Kings and rulers—History.

4. Orange-Nassau, House of. I. Title. II. Series.

DJ158.R693 1988 949.2'04 87—18323

ISBN 0 521 34525 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 39653 0 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2001

Cambridge University Press

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*To the memory of
Jan den Tex and Jan Poelhekke*

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Preface

Political history has usually been studied in two separate ways. One is to look at events, the working out of actual politics; included in this approach is the biography of individual statesmen. The other is to examine institutions, the formal structures and explicit rules that hold sway over the long run. These two approaches have most often been treated as mutually exclusive contraries, and those historians who have been effective in one have seldom been so in the other. Yet, lost in the vast middle ground between them, touching on both but distinct from either, is another kind of political history, the study of informal institutions, which we might also describe as the interplay of events and institutions. The stadholderate in the Dutch Republic was such an institution, embodying formal, informal and (to use the neologism of the *Annales* historians) *événementiel* aspects.

Like the Republic of the United Provinces as a whole, the stadholderate was an improvisation that lasted more than two centuries (with two long breaks). Again as with the Republic, it was difficult for contemporaries to fit it into the standard categories of political analysis. Modern political theory does little better, for its slots are carved for different situations. The usual solution has been to describe the stadholdership in terms of monarchy, as crippled and incomplete kingship. Although the present book is an effort to break out of this pattern, candor requires that the author at once inform the reader that he himself has used this approach, citing with certainty of its aptness Thomas Jefferson's description of William V as "half-king."¹ Indeed, this study was begun in the confident expectation that it would be an elaboration of this approach.

It was not long afterwards that I began to be uneasy about the value of the description of the stadholderate as quasi-monarchy. For one thing, my study of the proprietary aspect of the French monarchy of the *Ancien Régime*, culminating in the book *The King's State: Proprietary Dynasticism in Early Modern France*,² had been conducted as the analysis of what I call above an "informal institution." When I looked at the stadholderate in the

¹ See below, ch. 11, p. 226.

² New Brunswick, NJ, 1980.

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same way, what I discovered produced anomalies (to use Thomas Kuhn's formulation) that did not go away when I examined the problem more closely, but became worse. For another thing, my studies of the French monarchy had made me aware of the importance of distinguishing between monarchy and kingship. They are not different words for the same thing, stylistically convenient synonyms; they describe different things. Monarchy is best used as a precise word for the Aristotelian concept of the rule of one person; kingship, for a historically evolved kind of political status and power. To speak of absolute monarchy is to commit a tautology; to speak of an absolute king is not. Put in another way, an absolute king is indeed a monarch; a constitutional king (or equivalent crowned head under another title) is not.

As my investigations continued, I more and more saw the stadholderate as an institution *sui generis*: it was, as I put it in the title of my Clark Library seminar paper of 1982, "neither fish nor fowl."³ It turned out, too, that significant episodes in the history of the Dutch Republic emerged in a new light. I was able to escape the chronic anachronism of Dutch historians who saw the stadholdership as the embryonic form of the modern Dutch monarchy (or, in the more precise terminology that I insist upon above, "kingship"). I have long been averse to backwards causality in history, believing it more productive to find results than to seek origins, and I was, I think, rewarded in this case by achieving a fuller understanding of the novelty as well as the continuity of the Dutch state that re-emerged in independence in 1813–15.

This work had its inception six years ago in a conversation with Jan Poelhekke at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, and his death last year is a loss I feel all the more because he had no opportunity to read this book, even in draft form. My research was supported by a senior fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a grant-in-aid from the American Philosophical Society, as well as by the Research Council of Rutgers University: to all, heart-felt thanks. I have discussed my ideas with colleagues in this country and Europe, and my thanks go to all of them, but I must single out Andrew Lossky as the warmest of friends and the most penetrating and encouraging of critics. A different kind of gratitude is due to two friends, David Lester and Rudolph Bell, whose urgings to go the way of the word processor I did not accept for too long. It has made the completion of this work far easier than I ever anticipated. The illustrations were selected for me by my friend and colleague, J. W. Schulte Nordholt, who knows the full meaning of *quid pro quo*. All the

3 "Neither Fish nor Fowl: The Stadholderate in the Dutch Republic," in: Herbert H. Rowen and Andrew Lossky, *Political Ideas and Institutions in the Dutch Republic: Papers presented at a Clark Library Seminar, 27 March 1982* (Los Angeles, 1985), 1–31.

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customary remarks upon the contributions of spouses are still true, however trite, of my wife Mildred: Thank you for forty-six years and what has been possible in them.

Rocky Hill, New Jersey

November, 1986