

Introduction



The Significance of Dutch History

“The Dutch are quite small and can never be top nation really,” the famous English parody *1066 and All That* (1930) concluded after acknowledging their successful Golden Age naval exploits. Though intended as anything but a judicious assessment of Dutch history, the mock appraisal is amusing precisely because many do think of the Netherlands as too small to be a big factor in European or world history. Even modern Dutch historians tend to think disparagingly of their own national history. The modest size of the Netherlands, in the context of larger nations or mammoth transnational processes, seems to doom the country’s past to the historical dustbin.

This book, in contrast, is committed to the idea that Dutch history is “big” enough to be of great interest to many readers. In the first place, the history of the Netherlands has been chiefly characterized by intense and quick adaptation to new situations that have had wider consequences. For the last six centuries at least – if not longer – the country has been at the forefront of human change, playing a central and leading role in the development of the modern economy; in the development of technical innovation, most famously but hardly exclusively related to water management; at times in defining artistic and intellectual expressions of creativity. In doing these things, the Netherlands has punched above its weight and size in the last six centuries, becoming in the course of these centuries prosperous and well educated, all the while being governed, for the most part, by the rule of law that offered a stabilizing context for these achievements. One could argue, if one is interested in such comical distinctions, that the Dutch Republic

Introduction

did get very close to becoming “top nation” in the seventeenth century, and even as it settled to the status of a small country in Europe and mid-sized colonial power it continued to play a role in continental and global affairs beyond what its size would suggest.

Perhaps another way of putting it is that the Netherlands stands out in its extensive and intricate involvement in long-term globalization processes. Ancient migrations and subjugation to Roman and Frankish rule exposed the country early on to new influences. Dutch participation in the flow of people, ideas and goods in the later Middle Ages eventually made them the middlemen of Europe, and later, during the Dutch Republic, the world. Since that time, the Dutch have been deeply influenced by, and dependent upon, these larger transnational dynamics, just as they continued their own significant role in shaping the modern world. Given its small size, which depended so much on interactions with the outside world, there is no better country than the Netherlands to study the history of globalization.

The second reason why Dutch history is important is that it is a fascinating study in how a perennially fractured and highly differentiated society managed not only to survive but to thrive. No lord exercised absolute rule for long over their Dutch subjects. From the Middle Ages power was widely diffused among many players, and the expansion of religious diversity – more extensive for a long time than practically anywhere else in Europe – after the Reformation only made the country more fractured. That this situation did not lead to endemic chaos – despite serious periods of dislocation and violence – is one important reason to study the history of the Netherlands. The Dutch frequently needed to find common cause in tackling shared problems or in facing common enemies, creating over time the practices of consultative government and citizen participation that have by now characterized Dutch society for a long time. This success has perhaps made the Dutch and Dutch history dull to some, lacking the exciting instability that has characterized more colorful – and

Defining the Netherlands

bloodier – regions of Europe or the world. Yet that success is just as important and as compelling for those wanting to see how diverse societies manage to hold together – which in the Dutch case also involves many turbulent and violent episodes.

The abiding themes of this book, in summary, are the Dutch historic ability to adapt to their continually changing situation, often effectively so, whether against their environment; their economic rivals; or their mortal enemies, foreign or domestic; as well as their sustained ability to create a relatively tranquil commonwealth that necessarily took account of the fractured nature of power in Dutch society. These are human and not uniquely Dutch themes, but the striking contours of the Netherlands' past offers particularly compelling insights into each.

Seen this way, the history of the Netherlands is an improbable success story, of how the residents of a soggy wasteland made for themselves a free, secure and prosperous society. But the paths to that success were uneven and paved with difficulties, and for that reason this history cannot be a facile onwards-and-upwards narrative. Violence, inequality, divisions, instability and deprivation – all of these things accompanied Dutch achievement, even in its recent history, perhaps even to the present day. Dutch trading talent, for example, was – to put it mildly – not always a win-win outcome for all parties, and Dutch freedoms, stubbornly defended and deeply cherished, were not freedoms meant for everyone in equal measure. This history, then, is at pains also to recognize the complexities and the shadow sides of a past that for so long has been marked by signal successes and triumphs.

Defining the Netherlands

In order to offer this history, this book looks chiefly at historical developments within the *territory* that *at present* constitutes the Kingdom of the Netherlands. That is in itself something of a challenge, and for several different reasons.

Introduction

The first challenge has to do with Holland. For many English speakers, Holland is synonymous with the whole of the Netherlands. The reason for this conflation is historical: since the sixteenth century Holland has been the most populated and the most economically powerful part of the country. Down to the present day, it is where most of the country's political, economic and cultural elites live and work. It is the part that still attracts the most tourists and visitors to its cities, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, and still offers the stranger the country's most quintessential landscapes: the dikes, the polders, the windmills. For this reason, it is tempting to fold the history of the Netherlands into the history of Holland. Yet in reality the two modern provinces of North and South Holland constitute only about a sixth of the total size of the country. Moreover, their decisive dominance over what is the Netherlands might be restricted to the time of the Dutch Republic, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to this, Holland was not the most important force in the region, and the creation of the unitary state in 1798 diffused its influence thereafter. My work here attempts to correct an overly Hollando-centric view of Dutch history by pointing to telling developments and events elsewhere, all the while taking account of Holland's significance.

Another conundrum is “the south,” and the fact that the Netherlands is tied so closely to other parts of the Low Countries. Dutch society owes much in language and culture to developments in Flanders and Brabant, the Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium, where for a long time everything seemed to happen earlier than in “the north.” Until the unforeseen outcome of the war between Spain and the young Dutch Republic divided “north” and “south” they were for several decades joined together as the Burgundian Circle, and commercial and cultural synergy between them had been more or less unfettered for centuries. Seen from this perspective, it is difficult to ignore southern developments, at least before the seventeenth century. Complicating this picture is

Defining the Netherlands

that a large part of the southern provinces of the Netherlands – Limburg, North Brabant and Zeeland – were once part of Brabant or Flanders, underscoring the point that from a territorial point of view the history of the Netherlands is also the history of Brabant and Flanders, and not just of Holland or the other northern and eastern provinces.

To this might be added that some southeastern parts of the Netherlands became “Dutch” only in the early nineteenth century, having constituted until then parts of the Holy Roman Empire. And if one considers that almost all of the Netherlands was once part of the Holy Roman or German Empire, one could conclude that “Dutch” history must be considered part of “German” history. Indeed, the designation “Dutch” (*deutsch*) is a reminder that centuries ago English speakers regarded the Dutch and the Germans as a single people.

However tempting it might be to tell the history of Belgium and Germany along with the Netherlands, and however refreshing it might be to offer a perspective that transcends national boundaries, a “concise” national history such as this does not allow for it. What I have attempted to do is to pay significant but not extensive attention to developments in Flanders and Brabant, especially in relevant periods, with more attention to the parts of these old provinces that are now part of the Netherlands. Keeping the history of “the south” and (to a much lesser extent) Germany obliquely within the boundaries of this story might be seen as a marginalization of these parts, but I see their slanted inclusion precisely as a way to emphasize that there are other historical strands of Dutch history than a “northern” or Hollando-centric vision alone would allow.

Tricky, too, is the issue of the country’s colonial past and present. The Dutch once had an extensive “seaborne empire” that at present has been reduced to six Caribbean islands: Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten, all formally part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Since Sri Lanka, Surinam,

Introduction

South Africa and especially (given its longstanding importance) Indonesia no longer constitute part of this kingdom, they fall by definition outside the confines of this book. And yet here, too, a studied avoidance of the intensive Dutch interactions with these places seems a distortion even of a history that defines itself by the territorial boundaries of the present. I have thus felt the need to give some very modest attention to the Dutch imperium as it historically developed.

Because the Dutch Caribbean remains part of the Netherlands, its islands receive relatively much attention in this history compared to the former colonies, even as I continue to take account of their rather small size (only about 2 percent of the kingdom's total current population live there). The importance of slavery to most of these islands accounts for the multiple references to it in this book, a focus that exceeds that which some Dutch histories have given the phenomenon. And it also explains the focus on Atlantic slavery in contrast to slavery in the East Indies, which, though differently constituted, was at least as widespread as it was in "the West."

A final word on "territory" is less problematic but still worth saying, and that has to do with the relationship between the Dutch and the water. Simply put, the Netherlands historically has been a shapeshifter, taking on new forms as the sea made its claims on the land and as the Dutch fought back. Some lands once subject to human habitation have sunk irretrievably beneath the seas; the western coastline, for instance, was at points kilometers further west than it now is, and this is only one of many examples. Other areas have been claimed or reclaimed from the water, most successfully and extensively in the twentieth century – a campaign that continues into this century through the expansion of Rotterdam harbor. This history, in thinking territorially, pays attention to the changing boundaries between land and water as the Dutch experienced it in the course of centuries.

Coverage and Periodization

Coverage and Periodization

This book is the only one that covers the whole history of the Netherlands in a few hundred pages, a size that allows enough room to lay out the most important developments without being too abbreviated. The book in its style aspires to be comprehensive by paying attention to a range of different developments in Dutch history, so that a reader might get a taste of the breadth of it. And yet my background and specialization reveal certain emphases. In the first place, it will be clear that I am a modernist, privileging the period from the late sixteenth century onwards. Those familiar with Dutch history may further distill that I am particularly at home in the two most recent chapters, covering the period after 1870. Nevertheless, I believe it important to offer a comprehensive overview of all of Dutch history. Two of the seven chapters are thus devoted to the period before 1588 and the establishment of an independent Dutch state. A national history without this early history would be a truncated one.

My choice of topics reveal my commitment both to “coverage” and to a hierarchy of interests that I hope is only subtly evident. Political history, the tried-and-true way of structuring national histories, is the leading framework here as well, giving as it does considerable attention to important domestic and international developments in the realm of politics. Religious history, so important a part in the Dutch story of managing (or failing to manage) difference, is also highlighted – a choice made easier by my own expertise in this field. Economic and social developments, vital as they are, also receive systematic focus. Cultural and intellectual advancements receive less systematic attention, though I diligently attempt to point to the “highlights” of Dutch cultural life that are an indispensable part of this country’s heritage. Some attention is also paid to the military history of the Netherlands, as recognition that the boundaries of the Dutch state and its predecessors have often been violently contested.

Introduction

This last point has bearing on a final one: the periodization of the chapters. All chapters, except for the very end, which culminates in the present day, start and conclude with some kind of foreign intervention. This underscores a basic pattern of Dutch history: that the country's past has been shaped by numerous interfaces with external developments that intruded into the affairs of the Dutch. These expressions of outside influences are not only – or are even most importantly – defined by armed invasion, but more by long-term economic and cultural processes. Still, the choice of periodization, and the discontinuities in Dutch history that they suggest, have been chosen to illustrate how much external actors – including outright invaders – have determined the historical direction of this country.

Nevertheless, as I have stressed, the Dutch were not simply the passive objects of such interventions. No nation, group or individual is ever simply that. The Dutch, as I have argued above, have proved adaptive and inventive in the face of new external challenges: whether the water, or machinations of the Great Powers. Without stooping to clichés about “brave little Holland” or avoiding the darker sides of Dutch history, I hope to offer readers a portrait of a country that will elicit some sympathy for the way the Dutch tried to rise above difficult circumstances and create, in ways however circuitous and unpredictable, the enviable country that it is today.