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RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN DUTCH HISTORY  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM:  
A First Survey<sup>1</sup>

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In the English-speaking world, and particularly in the United Kingdom, Dutch history is a very small specialism. Its practitioners form an exclusive group, possibly esoteric, but above all small. This is partly a matter of language: although certain early modernists can manage to sort through the sources of the history of the Low Countries with a knowledge of French, to study Dutch history properly generally requires a reading knowledge of Dutch, which is a rare attribute amongst historians in Britain. So Dutch historians in the UK know each other and each other's work, and are looked upon by the profession as a whole as a small splinter-group, a micro-tendency.

In contrast to this, however, Dutch history is in certain ways perceived to be very much part of the mainstream of European and indeed world history. As long as one does not need to read the sources, the history of the Low Countries is seen as impossible to ignore and even integral in early modern European history, when the Dutch Republic was a major force to be reckoned with in political, social, economic and cultural terms. In any discussion of European art from the early Renaissance onwards, the Low Countries are usually seen to have played a seminal role. Even in the period after 1750, the Dutch experience is beginning to be recognized as, at the very least, an interesting reflection of mainstream European history; this has resulted from an increasing interest in smaller (not to say 'minority') groups, from the work of a few scholars with a talent for publicity (e.g. Simon Schama), from the evocative Dutch experience of the Second World War, and perhaps from a growing respect for and interest in the Netherlands since the war, in particular for its apparently humanist society, its economic strength, and its role in European integration.

Before looking at what exactly goes on in Dutch history in the UK, some stage props are necessary. Firstly, although art history, especially of the Golden Age, accounts for much and perhaps even most of the interest in Dutch history in the English-speaking world, I do not intend to deal with

it in this article, despite the ever-increasing confluence at the edges of cultural and social history: I am not competent to summarize the efforts of the art-historical profession in Britain. Secondly, I must declare an interest: I teach at Hull University, and study the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Netherlands: this is likely to colour my analysis, in leading me to concentrate on the university sector (rather than secondary education or non-academic work), on the modern period, and on Dutch as opposed to Belgian history. And thirdly, what do we mean by 'Dutch' history? For the purposes of this article, which will deal often with the early modern period, Dutch must mean 'of the Low Countries'; increasingly in the modern period it comes to mean 'of the Netherlands'.

Dutch history as such is not taught very much in the British education system. In the EC, the British and the Luxemburgers concentrate most on their own national histories in their school curricula, ignoring most often the experience of their neighbours, including that of the Dutch.<sup>2</sup> At all levels, though, the experience of the Low Countries comes into courses about early modern Europe from the Middle Ages onwards: the Carolingians and the Burgundians are central to the experience of medieval Europe, though they are seldom recognized as the forerunners of today's inhabitants of the Low Countries. From the mid-sixteenth century, the Dutch Revolt occupies a central position on the European stage, with the Dutch exploits in overseas expansion, especially in South-East Asia, adding colour to continental events in politics, economics and culture. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are seen as a time when the Dutch returned - perhaps rightfully - to their peripheral role in Europe, respectable but no longer protagonists, until World War Two, when first the dramatic experiences of the Nazi occupation, epitomized in Anne Frank's diary and the Hunger Winter, attract attention, and then the economic success of the 1950s, followed by the permissive society and enviable welfare state of the sixties and seventies, bring the Dutch to the attention of the British educational world again, not least because of the Dutch contribution to European integration. It will not escape notice that this periodization of Dutch history follows very closely indeed the pattern common in the Netherlands itself until quite recently: glory in the Middle Ages and early Republic, undistinguished obscurity from about 1750 to 1945, and increasing sunshine thereafter. Things have changed in the Netherlands now, and more attention is focused on the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than on the period before or after; perhaps the new trend will in time filter through to the UK. For the moment, though, we are dominated by the Dutch Revolt and Republic, and that era is certainly the most dramatic with which to kindle the imagination of both school and college listeners.

Dutch history is usually portrayed and perceived as a part of European history, like Spanish or Italian history, expanding or contracting in its

significance down the centuries. At certain British universities, however, there are some specific courses given over to Dutch history. At University College London, Jonathan Israel holds the Chair of Dutch History and Institutions, and with the presence in the same College since the early 1980s of the Department of Dutch (previously located in Bedford College), a Burgundian specialist (David Morgan), a lecturer in Dutch art history of the Golden Age (Charles Ford), plus the presence - until very recently - of Graham Gibbs nearby in Birkbeck College, UCL is the national focus point for Dutch history. Israel teaches three courses specifically on Dutch history: a survey course from the early Middle Ages to the present, mainly for first-year students from the Dutch Department, with about six enrolments each year; a second-year optional course in the History Department on the Golden Age 1588-1713, with about ten students each year, and a third-year highly specialized documents-based course called 'The Dutch Republic in rivalry with England, 1647-72', which attracts two or three students each year. A very recent development at UCL is the setting up of an interdisciplinary M.A. course in the 'Culture and History of the Dutch Golden Age', to which the Departments of Dutch, History and Art History all contribute.

The other centre in the UK where there is an attempt at some sort of comprehensive cover is Hull, where I myself teach four courses on Low Countries history, in which the Netherlands and Belgium get approximately equal coverage. There is a survey course on 'Dutch Culture and Civilization' for first-year students of the Modern Dutch Studies degree programme, available as an option to students from other departments, with an annual uptake of about twelve. A second-year course with a similar enrolment is on Dutch and Belgian economic and social history from 1815 to 1945, and a fourth-year specialized course on the Benelux countries since 1945 carries on from it, with the same student numbers. Fourthly, there is a background course for third- and fourth-year students on the history of the Low Countries from prehistoric times to 1815. These courses are part of the Modern Dutch Studies programme, and focus progressively on modern, even contemporary history. On the other hand, Hull has other areas of expertise in Dutch history: J.L. Price offers a third-year option on the Dutch Republic 1555-1795, based on English-language material and attracting 15-20 students each year, and M.L. Smith teaches a special subject on the Second World War, concentrating on the Low Countries and making use of Dutch-language sources.

The other outposts where Dutch history is taught tend to be one-man bands. At Southampton University, Alastair Duke teaches a third-year special subject on the Dutch revolt, supported by the presence of the Dutch specialist David Pinder in the Geography Department, and at St. Andrews, where until recently Geoffrey Parker was installed, Andrew Pettegree runs

a document-based special subject on Calvinism, which makes a special feature of the Low Countries in the early modern period. Other universities dabble in teaching Dutch history to non-specialists: Kent (D.J. Ormrod), East Anglia (J.R. Jones), Sheffield (K.D.H. Haley and G. Newton), and Swansea (H. Dunthorne). In the past there were others, such as Cambridge (Charles Wilson and Simon Schama), UMIST (R.T. Griffiths), and the London School of Economics (A.C. Carter), to add to this list. Although it amounts to quite a string of names, when placed in the context of the fifty-odd university institutions in the UK (not to mention polytechnics), that list represents a very select band, in which UCL and Hull are the only ones with a broad coverage and the wide use of sources in the target language.

The same people who teach Dutch history are involved in researching it, together with a handful of researchers who are usually aspiring to become teachers as well. Again the centre is University College London: the endowed Chair in Dutch history has been held by such luminaries as Pieter Geyl, G.J. Renier, E.H. Kossmann, K.W. Swart, and, for the last few years, by the prolific Israel. With the possible exception of Renier, all these have made a major impact on Dutch historiography. Again, Hull comes in second, with (in the past) Richard Vaughan on the Burgundians, J.L. Price on the Republic, M.L. Smith on the German occupation, and myself on the nineteenth century. The same list of universities where Dutch history is taught can be used to indicate where it is researched, with the addition of Ole Grell at Cambridge, René Gerson at North London Polytechnic (who has published on the French period), and Bob Moore at Bristol Polytechnic (who works on the refugee problem in the Netherlands in the 1930s).

One way of looking at research is to check the lists of (doctoral) dissertations being researched at British universities. Since 1978 fourteen theses have been completed on Dutch history (excluding art history), three each on the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries, and one each on the eighteenth and nineteenth. In 1989 in *Theses in Progress* there were eight further dissertations listed as being researched:<sup>3</sup> these lists are not entirely exhaustive, but they provide a probably accurate picture of a very small core of seriously committed research students, clustered around the interests of the tenured members of the academic profession at the universities already mentioned. The main subjects of research are presently the Reformation and early Revolt, Anglo-Dutch relations, the economic and cultural achievements of the seventeenth century, and the economy and religion in the nineteenth century. It comes as no surprise that Anglo-Dutch relations, from the sixteenth century onwards, are of particular interest, with a special place reserved for the Dutch, Flemish and Walloon communities in Britain. The London Strangers Churches have been investigated by Andrew Pettegree (St. Andrews), David Ormrod (Kent) and Ole Grell (Cambridge),<sup>4</sup> and Alastair Duke has two PhD students working on the



Southampton Walloon and Sandwich Dutch communities.<sup>5</sup> The tercentenary of the great Anglo-Dutch coming-together of 1688 has been a focus of attention, with many symposia, conferences and lecture series on Anglo-Dutch relations held around the country and on both sides of the North Sea in 1988/89.<sup>6</sup> Anglo-Dutch trade has been a focus of research,<sup>7</sup> and work has also been done on Anglo-Dutch diplomatic relations around 1900<sup>8</sup> and at the end of the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

The outlets for this research are reasonably plentiful: both Oxford and Cambridge University Presses have published several studies on Dutch history over the years, in addition to what other publishers are prepared to launch on a less sustained basis (the Athlone Press, Hambledon Press, Hull University Press, etc.). We have our own Journal of Low Countries Studies (*Dutch Crossing*), and the now quite venerable series *Britain and the Netherlands* has for thirty years reported the proceedings of the triennial Anglo-Dutch historical conferences, ten of which have been held since 1959. British historians interested in the Netherlands have some opportunities for getting together and discussing their work, though it is naturally more difficult for those working away from the more popular Revolt and Republic subject-areas: the Low Countries history seminar at the Institute of Historical Research in London meets once a month or so during the winter to hear papers from researchers on Dutch history, and various less regular conferences and symposia are held for special occasions, most notably in recent years on the Glorious Revolution and related themes. In April 1989 there was a major international conference held at UCL entitled 'The Low Countries and the World', which attracted some 200 delegates (including *neerlandici* and art historians) from all over the world, offering some ninety papers; current plans are to repeat this event every four years. So the opportunities for the initiated to meet, discuss, publish and publicize their work are quite favourable for such a small subject-area, and it must be said that the funding agencies have not been ungenerous in their support, especially in recent years for projects with an Anglo-Dutch theme.

Formal exchange schemes, which facilitate interaction between UK scholars and students of Dutch history and their target area, have been on the increase of late. For some time, Dutch- and Belgian-funded appointments at British universities have helped to put in place Dutch historians to help 'spread the word'; in addition there are Anglo-Dutch groups for the study of ecclesiastical history, labour history, the history of universities, maritime and military history, and no doubt several other fields. British lecturing staff have long led student groups over to the Low Countries for field trips connected with early modern history courses, and every Dutch historian in Britain has his own network of contacts, friendships and collaborations in the Low Countries. Recently some of these have been institutionalized and properly funded by the European Communities under their ERASMUS

scheme to promote student exchange. UCL has an ERASMUS link with Leiden University and with Louvain-la-Neuve in history, and Hull runs no less than three major networks concerned with Dutch Studies. Southampton is forging links with Rotterdam and now Amsterdam, Swansea with Amsterdam, and many more. These links allow students of all disciplines to travel to the Low Countries for part of their studies, and no doubt this will result in more of them being bitten by the Dutch history 'bug'. And of course it brings Dutch and Belgian students into Britain, sometimes in considerable numbers. I estimate that at any one time there are up to one hundred Dutch and Flemish students around Hull University alone, many of them historians (although the most popular subject is still English literature). ERASMUS also promotes staff exchange, so that British universities can invite Dutch historians to come and teach, while sending off their own Dutch enthusiasts (amongst others) to teach in the Low Countries. There is a staff-exchange programme at Hull, which has been running for some years now, with Utrecht, Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Leuven Universities, and schemes of this kind are now sprouting up everywhere.

What attracts students in Britain to Dutch history? There seem to be several reasons, but amongst lecturing staff there is general agreement that, once they are hooked, student motivation is very strong indeed, even if numbers are modest. That motivation can often be derived from personal circumstances. Another route, particularly to an interest in the history of the early modern period (1500-1800), is through general European history courses, where the main themes are often reflected particularly vividly in the Dutch experience, almost as a microcosm. Students are impressed with the tolerance and freedom of Dutch society in the Republic, by its economic success, and by its cultural achievements. Yet another route is a curiosity about contemporary Dutch society: deceptively familiar, easy-going and with a lively youth culture, juxtaposed with economic prosperity; students become interested in the historical roots of this culture. The numbers may be small, but I have not come across an area of history where student motivation is so genuine.

This implies a certain perception of contemporary Dutch society by students and quite probably by teachers of Dutch history in Britain: they envisage an efficient, well planned economy enabling a relaxed lifestyle with high levels of personal freedom of expression in politics and the arts, a society where education is respected and rewarded, with welfare services unrivalled outside Scandinavia, and a virtual absence of a class system or consciousness. This is all observed from the vantage-point of the class-ridden UK, where for a decade and more we have enjoyed an anti-intellectual regime, the radical reduction of the welfare state, increasing intolerance and restriction of personal freedoms except in an entrepreneurial sense, a chaotic lack of planning, an increase in poverty, and an economy thoroughly malaised

except in the financial services sector: one can see the attractions. Now it is true that those of us who teach contemporary Dutch history have our work cut out to explain that the Dutch (and Belgian) economy is not all that rosy or even efficient, that society is over-congested, over-regulated and over-planned, and that the Dutch welfare state has declined as much as in the UK. But the perception is still there, tinged with an admiration for the contrast it provides with the UK.

The reasons for student motivation also imply a perception of Dutch society in the past which, although it may be as subject to illusion as the British perception of present Dutch society, is at least shared with the authority of professional historians in the Low Countries and all over the world: the heroic themes of Dutch history are generally seen to include such things as personal freedom, economic success, cultural achievement, perhaps also the struggle against the elements, and the ability of the small to achieve an impact on (or at least resistance to) the mighty. Research constantly shows most of these things not to have been all they seem, but devotees of Dutch history reckon them to have had more of an existence in reality in the Low Countries than in most other national experiences.

Dutch history is fortunate in that it has had some very able publicists in the English language in recent years. The dominant one is of course Simon Schama, who - like it or not - has opened the Golden Age to the world, but several others have written excitingly enough about Dutch history to attract many a new recruit: Geoffrey Parker, Leslie Price, Ken Haley, Richard Vaughan, and Jonathan Israel, to name only the better sellers. It is also true that the Dutch themselves have, to the benefit of outsiders, published in English rather more than their counterparts in the Italian or even French historical profession. Most of the study of Dutch history in the UK is still by specialists for specialists, but through emphasizing the centrality and integral nature of the Dutch experience to Europe and even to the history of the world, we are expanding our audience steadily.

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## NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of one commissioned by the editors of *Ex Tempore* (Department of History, KU Nijmegen), and which appeared in that journal at the end of 1990. My thanks are due to the colleagues who provided some of the information reported in this article: Hugh Dunthorne, Jonathan Israel, Leslie Price, and especially Alastair Duke, who researched the information on dissertations on Dutch historical topics. The analysis and conclusions, however, are my

responsibility alone. I have made no attempt to be comprehensive in my coverage, and I apologize to anyone who has been neglected in my survey. Similarly, I have included references only where strictly necessary.

2. Information obtained through EURYDICE (Education Information Network in the European Community) for a Hull University third-year dissertation in Modern Dutch Studies by J.E. Lunn.
3. See *Theses Completed* and *Theses in Progress* (published by the Institute of Historical Research in London) since 1978.
4. A. Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London* (Oxford, 1986); D.J. Ormrod, *The Dutch in London: the influence of an immigrant community 1550-1800* (London, 1973); O.P. Grell, *Dutch Calvinism in Early Stuart London: the Dutch Church in Austin Friars, 1603-1642* (Leiden, 1989).
5. Andrew Spicer and Marcel Backhouse, respectively.
6. One example, taken from many, of a study of Anglo-Dutch relations, timed to coincide with the 1688 tercentenary, is K.D.H. Haley, *The British and the Dutch: political and cultural relations through the ages* (London, 1988).
7. Three PhD theses are a good point of departure: for the 18th century, on cultural-social relations, see H. Dunthorne, 'The Alliance of the Maritime Powers, 1721-1740' (PhD, University of London, 1978) [later published as *The Maritime Powers 1721-1740: a study of Anglo-Dutch relations in the age of Walpole* (New York, 1987)]; and on trade, D.J. Ormrod, 'Anglo-Dutch Commerce, 1700-1760' (PhD, University of Cambridge, 1973) [see also *idem*, *English Grain Exports and the Structure of Agrarian Capitalism 1700-1760* (Hull, 1985)]. For trade in the post-war period, see F. Deakin, 'Anglo-Dutch Trade Flows 1955-75: their effects on and consequences for Dutch port development and planning' (PhD, University of Hull, 1985).
8. Yvette Mead, preparing a Hull University PhD thesis.
9. R.T. Griffiths dominates this field, though he has not been based in Britain since he left UMIST for the VU Amsterdam (and latterly Florence) in 1979. See J. Eisen, *Anglo-Dutch Relations and European Unity, 1940-1948* (Hull, 1980); W. Mallinson, of the Dorset Institute of Higher Education, is presently preparing a University of London PhD on post-war Anglo-Dutch diplomatic relations.