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ARTS AND SOCIETY IN FLANDERS
AND THE NETHERLANDS

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KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK



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'Single Dutch'? What Next?!

Dutch Studies in the Anglophone World

A growth industry? Undoubtedly. Setbacks? Some, alas, – but fewer and farther between now than in the past. Resounding successes? Most definitely, a string of them. The future assured? Not quite – it's uphill all the way.

At a first glance, the figures look impressive enough. Leaving the Netherlands and Flanders out of account, Dutch is currently taught as an academic subject at around 250 foreign universities, in some 40 different countries. The Dutch themselves, most of whom are only dimly aware of any active interest in their language and culture in the rest of the world, tend to be highly surprised when confronted with figures like these. They are even more surprised when they learn that this interest has been increasing substantially in the last couple of decades. Why, they ask, should anyone choose to study a language like Dutch in the first place? And why should the world show more of an interest now than before?

Those involved in teaching Dutch language and culture at universities across the world, the 400 or so enthusiasts at the chalkface, have become adept at countering such questions by inquiring 'Why not?' and switching to a sales pitch. Viewed from a European perspective, they declare, Dutch is not a minor language, merely one of the smaller among the major languages of the EC. Just look, they argue, at the formidable economic strength of the Low Countries and the enviable stability of their currencies. Consider their prominent role in international organisations. Reflect on the intricate workings of a tightly knit, eminently humanist, famously tolerant society with enlightened intellectual traditions, imaginative social schemes and daring technological feats to its credit. Ponder, they continue, the rich history and the even richer art history of these parts: the medieval and Burgundian splendour of Flanders and Brabant, the awesome wealth and power of the Dutch Republic in its Golden Age, the vast overseas empires of the Netherlands and Belgium of modern times, and the continual presence, whether aligned with the ruling circles of the day or half hidden in the interstices of history, of the artists and painters, from Van Eyck to Van Gogh and all the great names in between. And remember, they conclude, that behind all this, all the time, there is a language, Dutch by name, that provides direct

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access to this world and allows the outsider to gain a genuinely intimate understanding of this society and its culture. And don't forget, they add almost as an afterthought, that in studying Dutch you're getting two for the price of one, for although the Netherlands and Flanders look alike in certain respects, there are differences between them: sometimes obvious, more often subtle, always significant.

While the detail of the case can probably be refined, rephrased and strengthened in all manner of ways, its hard core is incontestable. Dutch is the third Germanic language and more people speak Dutch than all the Scandinavian tongues put together. In economic terms the Benelux countries carry a great deal of clout in Europe, wholly disproportionate to their limited geographical size. Their contemporary societies are open-minded, cosmopolitan, advanced. They have as much reason as any other nation to take pride in their national past. And both the Netherlands and Belgium have distinctive characteristics of their own.

Dutch Studies, then, ought to be a thriving academic discipline in the world at large. It is, in some ways. In other ways, it is not; or not yet. A closer look at the figures mentioned at the beginning, and the facts behind them, reveals the two-edged nature of the current situation. Some 400 academics employed at 250 different universities suggests a thin spread, with few major centres. Add to this the geographical distribution, which is decidedly uneven: the countries immediately bordering on the Netherlands and Belgium show by far the greatest concentration, with sizeable numbers being found also in South Africa and Indonesia, for good historical reasons. This means Dutch has only a very limited presence in universities in the rest of the world, including most of the English-speaking world. The good news, however, is that generally speaking business is – no, let's not tempt fate: not booming, therefore, but coming on rather nicely all the same. For the fact is that barely one or two generations ago the study of Dutch at universities outside the Low Countries hardly existed. There were isolated enthusiasts, hard-working pioneers, lone wolves and literary scholars. But their impact depended entirely on their personal initiative and persuasive powers. The field itself had little infrastructure, few financial resources, and no continuity to speak of.

Much has changed in the last thirty years, in some cases dramatically. Since the mid-1960s the number of foreign universities offering Dutch has more than doubled. In 1970 the International Association for Dutch Studies (*IVN; Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek*) was set up, providing a focus and a platform for the rapidly growing community of 'international' university teachers of Dutch. The Association acts as an information clearing-house, provides practical support and services, ensures regular contact with academic circles in the home countries, organises large-scale triennial conferences (alternately in the Netherlands and Belgium) covering all aspects of the language and culture of the Low Countries, and publishes its own thrice-yearly journal *Neerlandica extra muros* – which has doubled its size over the last three years or so. Whereas the first-ever gathering of 'foreign' university teachers of Dutch, in 1962, was attended by all of seventeen delegates, today's *IVN* conferences have become media events attracting two hundred and more. The Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*), a Belgo-Dutch intergovernmental organisation founded in 1980 to coordinate

the efforts of the Dutch and the (federal) Flemish authorities with regard to language and literature, has identified the study of Dutch at foreign universities as one of its priorities and lends financial support to a range of academic centres and initiatives across the world and to the International Association for Dutch Studies.

How have Dutch Studies fared in the English-speaking countries? In what follows I shall leave South Africa out of the picture, as it is a special case. The country has only recently begun to emerge from a long period of political and cultural quarantine; the first Dutch Studies conference which international scholars felt free to attend was held in Potchefstroom in January 1992. In addition, the close linguistic affinity between Dutch and Afrikaans – the latter being a daughter language of the former – means that the study of Dutch there is markedly different from that in the rest of the world. The focus in the following account will be on Britain, the USA and Canada, with only a few words on Australia and New Zealand. The story, it will be seen, is in most places one of steady, sometimes spectacular growth, growth both in size and in depth, coupled however with a continuing underlying vulnerability. But let us line up some facts first.

We should start with the thin end of the wedge. Australia and New Zealand provide perfect if contrasting illustrations of the precarious existence of Dutch as an academic subject in a world far removed from the home countries. The vital statistics have to do with immigration, financial support, and local university policy. Courses in Dutch language and literature began to be taught in the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of Melbourne in 1942. The section had a full programme and a staff of four in the 1960s – and was closed down in 1992. Among the reasons were the falling numbers of Dutch-speaking immigrants to Australia after the main wave in the 1950s and the loss of affinity of second-generation immigrants with their parents' mother tongue, leading to dwindling student numbers. The final blow came when the Dutch Language Union cut the financial lifeline and the University decided to sacrifice the ailing section rather than risk a drain on its resources. As a result, Dutch has ceased to exist as a university subject on the Australian continent. However, as the Melbourne section closed its doors, the University of Auckland took over the torch and established its own course in Dutch, the first ever in New Zealand. This post too is dependent on the linguistic bond tying an immigrant community to a corner of Western Europe, on at least a measure of external funding, and on the skill and commitment of one person offering a Dutch option as part of a German language and literature programme. It is a fragile base to build on.

Melbourne and Auckland may be unusual cases and, given the conditions, more at the mercy of the elements than most. Still, the same or similar factors are involved in many Dutch Studies departments or sections in British, American and Canadian universities, even if in those countries the discipline has become rather more firmly established and, indeed, has grown and grown. This is true of Canada, and it is certainly true of the United States. In Canada, as in Australia, Dutch immigration took off in the post-1945 period. Dutch was first taught at Canadian universities in the 1960s, starting out as a forlorn extracurricular option in the Department of German at the University of Toronto in 1960. Thirty-odd years on, half a dozen universities and colleges in Canada offer courses in Dutch language and culture in

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one form or another, membership of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association Canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS / ACAEN), founded in 1971, approaches two hundred, and the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies / Revue Canadienne des études néerlandaises* has been appearing twice yearly since 1979. The latest chapter in the story of Dutch in Canadian higher education is being written at the large and prestigious University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where a two-year 'Netherlands Studies' component is expected to be added to the curriculum shortly, with the aim of establishing a full four-year programme in due course.

Much of the Canadian interest in Dutch Studies stems from the presence of a large immigrant community of Dutch descent, as it did in Australia, as it does in New Zealand, despite the vast differences in the absolute size of these communities. And in Canada too Dutch is normally taught as an option to undergraduates majoring in German or another language. As a result, there is room for only a limited amount of graduate work and research. Meanwhile the difference in scale and the intense activity within CAANS and its regional 'chapters' has made a crucial qualitative difference. Dutch Studies meetings and conferences in Canada now attract historians, art historians and social scientists as well, and sheer multidisciplinary enthusiasm appears to create its own momentum.

By and large, this is also the situation in the USA, where the scale is larger still. Again, immigration played its part, but this time in a more distant past. Between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century around a quarter of a million Dutch people, many of them belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church, settled in the US. While their numbers remained relatively small, they proved slow to assimilate, especially in the Midwest. In the nineteenth and the early twentieth century Dutch courses at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, and Central College in Pella, Iowa, catered for these fiercely religious communities. So did Calvin College (founded as Calvin Seminary, 1876) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where between them the two doyens of American Dutch Studies, H.J. van Andel and Walter Lagerwey, taught for most of the present century and where Dutch is still on the syllabus today.

Among the American universities, Columbia has had a virtually uninterrupted tradition of Dutch language and literature instruction since 1913. It was here that the first Chair was established, when in 1921 Adriaan Barnouw became the first Queen Wilhelmina Professor of the History, Language and Literature of the Netherlands. The period of real growth, however, did not come until the 1960s, when Dutch Studies components were introduced at the universities of Pennsylvania (1962), California (UCLA, 1963), Indiana (1965), Texas (Austin, 1966), Massachusetts (Amherst, 1969), Hawaii (1972) and Minnesota (1972). Since then the subject has gone from strength to strength, spreading to nearly thirty colleges and universities and spawning a wealth of textbooks and study materials in the process. The American Association for Netherlandic Studies (AANS), a resolutely interdisciplinary grouping established in 1975, currently numbers well over two hundred members, including not only Dutch language and literature specialists, but also comparatists, art historians, church historians, straight historians, political and social scientists, geographers and even musicologists. The diverse interests of the AANS membership are reflected

in the International Conferences on Netherlandic Studies which have been held biennially since 1982, moving from one place to another, and increasing in size and diversity with each move. Proceedings of AANS conferences duly appear in PAANS, the Association's Publications series. In a separate development, three universities, Michigan (Ann Arbor), Texas (Austin) and Minnesota (Minneapolis), set up Dutch writers in residence schemes, while Flemish writers were occasionally posted to Iowa (Iowa City); these schemes, however, are currently being reconsidered in The Hague and Brussels, and will be reduced to just one writer in residence, based in New York, the others being diverted to countries in Europe.

The largest centre of Dutch Studies in the USA is at the Berkeley campus of the University of California. The soil had been well prepared here, with departments of history, art history, comparative literature and South East Asian Studies having long shown an interest in Dutch material. Dutch language teaching began at Berkeley in 1959, the Dutch government endowed the Princess (now Queen) Beatrix Chair in 1971, the Belgian government followed suit with a (visiting) P.P. Rubens Chair in 1981. The investments obviously paid off: the university responded with Regents Lectureships for prominent Dutch writers (Mulisch, Nootboom), the library was designated as the prime focus for Dutch literature and history books (the collection now houses over 100,000 volumes in these two fields alone), and every other year since 1985 the section has been running its own international conferences on Dutch linguistics and literature.

The main collective achievement of those involved in Dutch Studies at American universities has undoubtedly been that they have put the subject on the map in the American academic and scholarly world. An internal communication network has been established: both AANS and CAANS have regular newsletters and a conference circuit. There are good contacts with the home countries, and close relations with associations that have overlapping interests, notably the well-organised Historians of Netherlandish Art, set up in 1983, complete with their own newsletter, conference circuit and excellent representation in the museum world. Moreover, Dutch Studies have gained a modest but relatively secure place on larger platforms: CAANS is present at the Learned Societies gatherings, and Dutch subsections have sprung up at such venues as the huge MLA conventions and the more specialist Kalamazoo Conferences on Medieval Literature. Needless to say, the quality of the discipline benefits substantially both from the exposure itself and from the contact with peer groups.

But there is another side. At just about every American university Dutch is taught in the context of a larger undergraduate programme, as one among several free-floating options, often at elementary to intermediate level only. This leaves little opportunity for in-depth study, for specialisation, for graduate work and research. Many Dutch sections are essentially one-man bands, and the one man or woman in question may have to cover a very wide range, again leaving little room for advanced work. While the spread of Dutch Studies through the American university world shows that the subject is no longer dependent on recruitment among a local immigrant population, isolated one-person posts are naturally vulnerable and may easily be swept away by freak fluctuations in student supply and demand. Most centres receive a measure of financial support from the Dutch Language Union in

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The Hague; some, including some large and dynamic ones, may be directly threatened if that support is withdrawn. Clearly, despite the breakthrough and the very real successes of the last couple of decades, consolidation is a long way off.

Broadly speaking this is also the situation of Dutch Studies at British universities, although in Britain, of course, they do things differently. Here it is the historians who have organised themselves, not the art historians. Due perhaps to the dominance of one centre, the subject does not have the equivalent of AANS, CAANS or PAANS. But it does have 'Single Dutch', i.e. a full four-year degree course in Dutch; and more.

When Dutch was introduced at University College London (UCL) in 1919, the post covered Dutch history and institutions as well as language and literature. Indeed its first occupant was the well-known historian Pieter Geyl, who was joined by a literary scholar in 1923. Following a gentlemanly disagreement between these two, however, history remained at UCL and philology went to live a separate life elsewhere in the University, at Bedford College. Here, forty years later, Dutch Studies began to grow rapidly, particularly in the 1970s under R.P. Meijer, whose *Literature of the Low Countries* (1978) has remained the standard survey in English. By this time the Dutch Department, with a staff of five, was offering a four-year 'Single Honours' course focusing on Dutch language and literature. When in 1983 the Department returned from Bedford College to UCL, the expertise available at this institution covered Dutch history, art history, and language and literature. The Centre for Low Countries Studies, set up soon afterwards at UCL, is now running a unique interdisciplinary Master of Arts course in the Culture and History of the Dutch Golden Age. The Centre organised its first international conference in 1989 – an exercise to be repeated at the end of 1994. The journal *Dutch Crossing*, which had been appearing three times a year since 1977, is now issued under the auspices of the Centre, and has expanded from a language and literature journal to encompass, like its Canadian counterpart, the social sciences, history and general culture of the Low Countries as well. Alongside *Dutch Crossing* the Centre has begun to publish the book series 'Crossways', the second volume of which saw the light early in 1993. A Dutch writer in (short-term) residence is set to become a reality at the end of 1993.

Dutch has been taught as part of a degree programme in Cambridge and Liverpool for many years, and nearly a dozen other universities introduced Dutch options in the 1970s and '80s. After London the main centre today is at Hull University, where a new degree programme with a focus on the social sciences and business studies was established in 1976. In Hull, as in London, a four-year specialisation in Dutch Studies is available, although the majority – and it is a growing majority – of undergraduates prefer a combination of Dutch with another subject, be it another language or the flexible and increasingly popular European Studies. At national level the subject is represented now in the Association for Language Learning (ALL), which promotes a variety of modern languages. The historians, with their happy hunting ground in centuries of Anglo-Dutch relations, have a longer tradition: their triennial conferences have been taking place since 1959, the proceedings appearing in print in the series 'Britain and the Netherlands'. The lavish William and Mary Tercentenary celebrations in 1988, which did

much to lift the Dutch image in Britain and gave rise to a spate of popular as well as scholarly books, are still producing tremors: in March 1993 the Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers delivered the first William and Mary lecture in the Cambridge Senate House.

Expansion and growth, both in size and in depth, on both sides of the Atlantic: the pictures are really very similar. Nowhere in the English-speaking world is Dutch taught as a regular secondary-school subject, so as a rule the university programmes assume no previous knowledge of the language and start from scratch. At the other end of the scale, if given half a chance, university teachers of Dutch everywhere in the Anglophone world – and across the globe, for that matter – tend to engage in literary translation or other forms of cultural promotion well beyond the walls of academe. All in all, then, the infrastructure of Dutch Studies in Britain is only superficially different from that in the USA and Canada. In Britain the discipline has a more obvious centre of gravity, located in London. At UCL alone there are seven staff engaged in the field, four of them in senior posts; the nearby Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, which are primarily research centres, also have their Dutch specialists. In all three countries, collaboration across disciplines, linking language and literature on the one hand with history, art history and the social sciences on the other, has evidently benefited all concerned.

This fact is more important than it seems, and it matters in more ways than one. It matters in respect of student recruitment. Given the increasing tendency for students to read Dutch in combination with another subject, Dutch Studies as a discipline needs to highlight its relevance not only in its own terms but also in the context of European Studies and alongside other West European languages. It is worth pointing out to students of foreign languages that diversification beyond French or German means greatly improved job prospects, for there is a genuine need for native speakers of English with a good command of Dutch – and no, it is emphatically *not* true that the Dutch all speak English anyway.

It matters, secondly, with regard to the quality of the discipline itself. The Dutch language is central to any serious understanding of Low Countries culture. Simon Schama has been castigated, and deservedly so, for his lack of close familiarity with the written sources of Dutch culture and scholarship. In contrast, and more recently, Jonathan Israel's bold reinterpretation of the 1688 Glorious Revolution as essentially a Dutch invasion is based crucially on Dutch archive material inaccessible to most Anglophone historians. Art historians, too, may wish to take note: one does not need to subscribe to the iconographic tendency in art history to realise that reading pictures as cultural products involves having recourse to the printed word as well as to the painted canvas.

It matters, finally, for the general visibility of Dutch culture and Dutch Studies in the world. While sadly, and incomprehensibly, neither the Dutch nor the Flemish cultural authorities have shown much awareness of the need to establish cultural centres – of whatever description – in the English-speaking world (the recently-founded Netherlands Institute in New York is a private initiative), it is in most cases left to the academic centres to fill the recognition gap. It is a tall order. And in this respect the language and literature division needs all the help it can get from the historians, art histo-

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rians and social scientists. Rembrandt opens doors for Dutch Studies, his contemporary the poet and dramatist Vondel does not: the strictly language-bound forms of cultural expression in the Low Countries have remained largely hidden from the outside world. Yet culture and language are interdependent. The study of the culture of the Low Countries cannot be reduced to the Dutch language, but cannot do without it either. That is why, for Dutch culture as well as for Dutch Studies abroad, a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach is both strategically and intellectually the best option.

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