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Title: Ernst Kossmann -

Obituary

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Scholar with an unrivalled knowledge of Dutch history from the Roman era to the present day.

EVEN in such a crowded field as the study of Dutch history, Ernst Kossmann was outstanding. He was also a central figure in Anglo-Dutch relations, both while he taught Dutch history at University College London in the early 1960s and for many years afterwards.

His reputation as an historian rests first of all on his work on political theory and thought in the Dutch Republic. In 1974 he edited *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands*, a valuable collection of pamphlets justifying the Dutch Revolt between 1565 and 1588, with a long and masterly introduction.

His *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic* appeared in translation in 2000, offering a very Dutch, sober-minded and critical examination of the historical documents and the republican ideas they contain.

Ranging far and wide, Kossmann was perhaps the last historian at home in all periods of Dutch history, as is evident from the standard work that Oxford University Press published in 1978, *The Low Countries, 1780-1940*. In 1986 this was expanded into a two-volume work in Dutch ending in 1980. A trailblazing double-portrait of the modern history of the Netherlands and Belgium, it is a model of comparative history writing.

Over the years, Kossmann also published a formidable number of essays: vignettes of prominent historians, and critical examinations of cherished notions such as "the spirit of the age", "toleration", "national identity" and "Dutchness".

Erudite and judicious, these essays were products of a very sceptical mind, truly a historian's historian.

Ernst Heinrich Kossmann grew up before the war in Rotterdam, where his father was director of the municipal library. His was a close-knit and highly cultured family of assimilated Jews, in whose life music, books and *Bildung* were of central importance. With his twin brother Alfred, who went on to become a poet and novelist, he attended the *Gymnasium Erasmianum*.

In 1943 the twins were arrested, after which they spent two years doing forced labour near Strasbourg, where, as Ernst recounted in his autobiography, the work was hard, but he also learnt French and hung around in pubs and cinemas. After the war he went to Leiden to study history, not least for the insight it might offer into the origins of the catastrophe through which his generation had lived.

His doctorate, in 1954, was awarded for a study in French of the *Fronde* opposition to Cardinal Mazarin in the 17th century. So when he became a reader at University College London, he was not a historian of the Low Countries. He made his mark straight away, however, and in 1962 he became Professor of Dutch History, giving a fine inaugural lecture about 17th-century attitudes to the Dutch Republic.

He revived Dutch studies at the Institute of Historical Research, which holds an important Dutch collection in its library, and, with John Bromley, organised a series of conferences on Britain and the Netherlands, the first of which was held in Oxford in 1959.

Although he was rather shy as a teacher, Kossmann and his wife Jo, a medieval historian in her own right, welcomed students and visiting scholars to their flat in West Hampstead in a very relaxed and Dutch environment, where the scholarly and the domestic mingled seamlessly. This hospitality was typical of his encouragement of younger scholars.

The Kossmanns regularly produced a hugely demanding critical survey of Dutch and Flemish historiography, to which colleagues contributed in later years. Being published in French and English, it was of particular use to non-Dutch readers and so helped with the internationalisation of Dutch history studies.

London held a great many attractions for the Kossmanns, not least their contact with fellow historians, but increasingly they felt that their children should grow up in the Netherlands, and in 1966 Ernst accepted a chair at Groningen University, where he remained until his retirement in 1987.

In the same year he published a short survey of the history of "the Northern and the Southern Netherlands" from

the Romans to the present. This little gem of a book, jointly written with his wife for the Dutch-Flemish foundation Ons Erfdeel, was translated into English in 1989 as *The Low Countries* and has had a worldwide distribution in many languages. Kossmann took a great interest in the historical relations between the Netherlands and Flanders, but he saw the two as twins, and did not subscribe to the romantic idea of a Greater Netherlands, associated particularly with Pieter Geyl, and did not see the Low Countries as a natural whole united by a common language.

He leaves as his legacy a body of elegant scholarship, displaying his steely integrity.

He is survived by his wife and their daughter and two sons.

Ernst Kossmann, Dutch historian, was born on January 31, 1922.

He died on November 8, 2003, aged 81.

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