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The Netherlands





Note for the Revised Edition

It is a pleasure to present an updated and enlarged edition of *Discovering the Dutch*. In comparison with the 2010 edition we have made a number of changes that we expect will increase the usefulness of this book for readers around the world.

All existing chapters have been updated to match advances in the relevant scholarly discussions. Some chapters, especially those that describe recent political, constitutional or policy developments, required substantial updating. The political landscape of the Netherlands has undergone remarkable transformations in recent years: a king assumed the throne in 2013, a number of welfare state arrangements had to be adjusted to the realities and expectations of today's society, and other developments and changes over the past few years required alterations in the text of several chapters, too. Responding to the feedback we received from our students and many international readers, we have added four new chapters that in various ways highlight the complex interconnections of Dutch culture and society with the wider world. We hope that the addition of these chapters will add a useful global dimension to the book.

What has remained unchanged in this new edition is the enthusiasm with which all authors and the editors have tried to present their inside perspective to the outside world. We hope that the new itinerary will open up fresh trails and pathways to discover the Dutch.

EMMELINE BESAMUSCA AND JAAP VERHEUL



Introduction

by EMMELINE BESAMUSCA and JAAP VERHEUL

This volume is intended as a helpful guide for anyone interested in exploring the culture and society of the Netherlands. Like any dedicated tour guide, it builds on inside knowledge and native familiarity. All chapters are written by experts in their field who bring their personal perspectives, enthusiasms and some local color to their topics. Rather than offering exhaustive, data-filled overviews, they engage in conversations with the reader about what they feel is essential to an understanding of the Netherlands. They may even politely try to persuade their readers of a few convictions and insights.

While building on inside knowledge, this volume anticipates the outside perspectives and expectations of new audiences as well. Some traditions, structures or cultural institutions that are simply taken for granted by the locals beg for explanation to newcomers and outside observers. More importantly, such a comparative perspective is essential to put the Netherlands on the global mental map. This volume, then, can best be understood as a helpful dialogue between knowledgeable connoisseurs and those on their way to becoming one.

It is tempting to start the journey with a conversation about Dutch identity. Global popular culture is full of references to articles or habits considered “typically Dutch.” For some foreigners, essential “Dutchness” is expressed in the omnipresence of bicycles, either the nameless thousands that are stacked near railway stations or the elegant transport bikes urban parents have acquired to transport their offspring to day care centers. Those interested in foodways may think of the many varieties of licorice known as *drop*, the addictive *stroopwafels* and *pannenkoeken*, or the nutritious *stamppotten* with mashed potatoes served in winter. To sports enthusiasts, the Netherlands may invoke the image of fans at international sports events who invariably manifest themselves in playful orange outfits, suggesting a sense of colorful and exuberant patriotism. Those with an eye for art may visualize the Netherlands as seen in the urban skating scenes painted by Hendrick Avercamp or the neatly arranged interiors of Johannes Vermeer. Others may compare the Dutch landscape to the squares and lines of Piet Mondrian and Gerrit Rietveld, constructed as it seems by the methodical Dutch engineers who are said to have carved their country out of the sea. These observers may look for the origins of unique Dutch traits in the collective struggle against the water which regulated not only geography, but society as well. Others point at the Dutch social tradition of *gezelligheid* that is expressed in the circular seating at birthday parties, the festivities around the yearly arrival of Sinterklaas or the persistent urban myth that the Dutch always keep their curtains open so that the neighbors can check the order and cleanliness of their household. More critically minded observers may associate the particular character of Dutch social behavior with provincialism, penny-pinching materialism or even blunt rudeness, as may be apparent from the absence of a service-oriented attitude in shops and restaurants, or from candid directness in business meetings.

Yet Dutch national identity cannot be captured in such anthropological observations or examples of folklore and tradition, even if they offer a rich source for emotional identification – or differentiation. Nor can a demarcation be drawn around “Dutchness” that represents it as a sheltering haven against the modern forces of globalization, Europeanization, individualism or multiculturalism. If nothing else, the Netherlands is a highly modern, densely populated country that is interconnected with the world by a myriad of trade relationships, migratory movements, cultural exchanges, international networks, alliances and collaborations. As a result, Dutch national identity is not static, but rather the outcome of a continuous process of identification, negotiation and exploration. Yet this incessant interaction does not make Dutch culture and society indefinable and inaccessible. On the contrary, this book hopes to show some of the many routes that open up vistas of the vibrant distinctiveness – and familiarity – of Dutch society.

This volume organizes perspectives on Dutch culture and society into four different sections. The section on society explores the most characteristic institutions and arrangements of the Dutch state and body politic. As a constitutional monarchy with a long democratic tradition, its political culture was long characterized by an denominational segregation within society that is often described as “pillarization.” Although these fault lines have largely disappeared after the 1960s, they left marks in the political arena well into the twenty-first century. The Netherlands is also known for its internationally oriented economy which is organized around well-established welfare arrangements and a consensual political culture that is sometimes affectionately described and even promoted as a “poldermodel.” In spite of the rural images of windmills and tulips, the western *Randstad* is one of the most densely populated and cosmopolitan spots in the world. As this section shows, the Netherlands is distinctive from other Western nations, notwithstanding the homogenizing forces of modernization and globalization. The next section on history shows a Dutch past that is marked by a slow rise from the obscurity of a swampy river delta, a dramatic revolt against the Spanish empire, and a subsequent period of global enterprise, republican freedoms and stunning riches during the seventeenth century. Legacies of the Golden Age, such as traditions of tolerance and religious multiformity, continued to manifest themselves in the following centuries. The myriad of threads of culture and power that connected the Netherlands with its overseas territories in “the East” and “the West.” left a more controversial legacy of this period of mercantile wealth that is still visible and contested in present-day society.

The Second World War formed a dramatic defining moment in the twentieth century as Dutch society experienced the atrocities of war and genocide and faced dilemmas that influenced, and continue to influence, public culture and debates about governmental powers, discrimination, and international interventions to the present day. Following the complex historical thread of religion helps to explain why the Netherlands, in spite of its seemingly secular way of life, are routinely described as a “Calvinist” nation – even by devout Catholics or agnostics – with roots in strong religious identification and dissension.

The section on art and culture guides the reader on a tour of cultural expressions and traditions that support the Dutch in their claim to international fame as a cultural nation. It is an intriguing question, however, to which degree the works of some of the famous Dutch painters can be regarded “typical” of Dutch art, as the examples of Rembrandt and Van Gogh illustrate. The character of Dutch architecture, which has

traditionally been inspired by views on society and reflected social values, is changing now that building seems to be increasingly regarded in terms of real estate development. In the realm of literature the position and role of authors has been subject to cultural changes as well, as was experienced by Willem Frederik Hermans and Gerard Reve, two of the most influential writers in modern Dutch literature. The Dutch approach to emancipation and integration – seen by many as a distinct contribution to the global debate – is illustrated through an analysis of three feminist cultural artifacts which reflect Dutch feminist thought in three consecutive waves. The medium of Dutch television, that brought the world into the living rooms, called for a broadcasting system that reflected essential aspects of the Dutch cultural landscape. In reverse, Dutch produced (reality) television formats now entertain audiences around the globe. Another global connection is formed by the Dutch language, which developed from its West-Germanic roots in the early Middle Ages into a language with 23 million speakers around the world today.

The last section on contemporary issues explores public debates in Dutch society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A threat to Dutch existence, which consistently attracts foreign attention as well, is posed by the ubiquitous water that continuously requires protective measures and difficult choices. The intellectual horizon of the Netherlands – the Dutch mindset – is very much a product of the internationally acclaimed tradition of its higher education, which in turn has been shaped by the aspirations and historical developments of the society it serves.

Many impassioned discussions about Dutch identity have been sparked by issues of immigration and cultural and religious diversity, and their political and social consequences. Equally fundamental to an understanding of Dutch society have been the recurring public debates about ethical issues such as prostitution, abortion, drugs, and euthanasia. Some of these vital questions have been met at times with policy compromises that have confounded government, public, and foreign onlookers alike. The pervasive international outlook is also expressed in a foreign policy that is informed by both self-interest and idealism. All these challenges and achievements have shaped a particular Dutch culture and society and also determined the foreign perspectives on the Netherlands.

As all the chapters aim to illuminate the reader on issues related to Dutch culture and society, some common themes reappear throughout the volume. Some, such as “pillarization,” tolerance and the “poldermodel,” go right to the heart of the Dutch social fabric. Others, such as urbanization, the Golden Age and internationalization, are connected with the specific historical traditions of the Netherlands. Inevitably, such core concepts are discussed in connection with a variety of topics in this volume, and may appear in a different light as they are discussed and interpreted by the authors, as reality sometimes escapes uniform definitions and categories. This multifocal perspective on such shared themes only underlines the central position they necessarily should have in an understanding of Dutch culture and society.

All these chapters can be read in the successive order of a textbook, or one may decide to venture out on a free-flowing tour, as all chapters are written so they can be read independently. The reader is further encouraged to browse the many vignettes on canonical Dutch personae and phenomena that are sparked throughout the book. Some topics also appear in the historical canon that has been commissioned by the Dutch government in 2007, but many other vignette topics are related to contemporary

society. Although these miniature windows on Dutch culture and society are connected with themes of the chapters, they can also be followed as a separate trail.

We would like to thank all of our colleagues who took up the challenge to share their insight into the culture and society of the Netherlands by connecting their academic expertise as scholars to their personal expertise as natives. We hope that, in offering their many perspectives and as many possible road plans to travel, this volume will offer the reader an enjoyable experience in discovering the Dutch.

Neither Wooden Legs nor Wooden Shoes: Elusive Encounters with Dutchness

by WILJAN VAN DEN AKKER

I'm travelling by train somewhere in the United States. It is my first trip to a country I believe I know because I have seen it on television ever since I was a child. I am completely absorbed in a new book that I've saved for what was going to be a long trip. The man sitting next to me carefully looks at the cover several times before asking me in a polite and soft voice what language I am reading. When I explain to him that my book is in Dutch, more specifically that it is a history of modern Dutch literature, he starts to smile: "Do the Dutch really have a literature of their own?"

I immediately realize that this encounter might end up being one of the amusing stories that one happily brings back home as a souvenir of the journey. A tale that fits quite well within the prejudices we share about identities: people not knowing their language or geography. That is to say: the *other* people. Not us, the Dutch, of course. The stranger on the train and I start a gentle conversation and the trip becomes so enjoyable that I don't even notice that the train has arrived. With a "Nice talking to you, nice meeting you," he vanishes into the crowd. And I realize that this ending to the story will also fit into the familiar picture later on. "They don't mean that. They are used to superficial conversation." Unlike us, in the Netherlands, where we have constant discussions with each other about Schopenhauer, Spinoza or Sartre while traveling by public transportation. Because we are never superficial. Shallowness is something for the others only.

National identities are like stories and, as with every story, always contain some truth. The only problem is how to find that part, the part that actually is true. One thing seems clear: the less we know about the others, the easier it becomes to define their identity. Perhaps we construct these myths of identities out of a fear of being alone or alienated. As long as we do not have to question our way of life – our rules, our habits, our laws – as long as we keep on telling ourselves that our customs are normal, that they belong especially to us or even to the natural order of things, we will be safe. The rules, habits and laws of the others seem strange, or even unnatural.

What does not fit into our frame of reference will be isolated, stored and recognized as different later on. It is remarkable that when traveling we say



that we yearn for difference, but cannot help looking for resemblances. The problem, however, is that most of these similarities hide themselves behind the mask of difference and can at best be recognized after a long period of very close observation. And vice versa: what seemed so different can end up being strikingly familiar.

The famous columnist and professor of Slavic literature, the late Karel van het Reve, once put it brilliantly. Suppose, he said, that you are leaving for work by bus in the morning. Someone with a wooden leg is struggling to get a seat. You look at him, feel sorry for the man and travel on. In the evening, traveling home by bus again, there is a woman with a wooden leg sitting in the back. What a coincidence, you tell your wife over dinner, two wooden legs in one day. If your marriage is good, she will smile, thinking: could there be a more interesting story to tell? Now suppose the same thing happens during a short visit to a foreign country. There is a good chance that you will tell everybody: “They have an awful lot of wooden legs over there!”

There is no such thing as a Dutch identity and yet there is. No, we are not the country where tulips bloom everywhere and where everyone wears wooden shoes. And yet there are more tulips here than in any other country and I have never seen an Italian wearing wooden shoes. But what defines this identity and who is defining?

How broad is this national identity? We joke about the Belgians, defining ourselves as being as different from them. But we feel like brothers and sisters once confronted with Asian colleagues. We even joke about some of our own fellow countrymen, defining an “us” that somehow excludes “them.” And are we in Utrecht not different from people living in Rotterdam? The circles tend to get smaller and smaller until, in the end, we are alone with our own and small identity.

“Dutchness” is a very ambiguous term, like “Frenchness” or “Germanness.” Once you try to grasp it, it will fade away. Once you deny it, it will present itself. It boggles the mind. But isn’t this what the mind is for? For trying to

understand ambiguities, for looking at the same thing from different angles, for constantly wondering? By traveling, either in real life, or by way of books?

Last year I was traveling by train in Germany. A man in his fifties, noticing me reading a Dutch history of German literature, adamantly tried to convince me that the Dutch language was a German dialect. I spent an entire hour trying to explain that he was mistaken. By the time we arrived in Cologne, I had to admit that my efforts had been fruitless. When the train stopped at the station, he said, shrugging his shoulders, that he disliked literature anyway and that there was only one true author: William Shakespeare. Did I know him? “Who, William Shakespeare? Never heard of him,” I replied and left, pledging to myself that if there is going to be a next life, I would become a salesman. Of wooden legs.
