

## Discovering the Dutch







EMMELINE BESAMUSCA & JAAP VERHEUL (EDS)

**DISCOVERING  
THE DUTCH**

*On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*

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## Introduction

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 the reader 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 *pannekoeken*, 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 ice-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 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 a 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 “polder model.” In spite of the rural images of windmills and tulips, the Randstad Holland 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. Traditions of tolerance and religious multiformity, which have remained recognizable Dutch society in the following centuries, are often perceived as legacies of this “Golden Age.” 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 was a dramatic defining moment in the twentieth century as Dutch society experienced the atrocities of war and genocide and faced dilemmas of living under occupation by a totalitarian regime. These dramatic events have had a lasting impact on public culture and debates surrounding governmental powers, discrimination, and international interventions, shaping them even to the present day. Many traditions and certainties in social order and personal lives became contested during another watershed period, the period of transition, modernization, and social liberation we call the sixties. Among the legacies of this progressive revolution were the changing perspectives, practices, and legal norms regulating euthanasia and drug policy that made the Netherlands a byword of unregulated permissiveness in the world, but also show signs of a more conservative drive toward regulation, control, and decency.

The section on art and culture takes the reader on a journey through various cultural expressions and traditions that contribute to the formation of Dutch identity. The Dutch language developed from its West Germanic roots in the early Middle Ages and has now become a distinct language with over 24 million speakers worldwide. World-renowned artifacts and artists helped to establish the Dutch as a culturally significant nation on the global stage. The provocative question the reader may keep in mind, however, is to which extent expressions of arts and culture reflect specific Dutch origins or connections, or rather should be seen as localized contributions to a global circulation of movements, influences, and ideas. It is an intriguing process, for instance, by which some of the famous Dutch painters became canonized as “typically Dutch,” as the examples of Rembrandt and Van Gogh illustrate. Even Dutch literature, seen by some as the ultimate expression of self-expression and self-



reflection, diversified into a creative explosion of multicultural voices that rediscovered—and unsettled—narratives of Dutch identity within a global context of migration for new readers. The Dutch approach to feminism and feminist activism should also be read as contributions to the global debate. The medium of Dutch television, which brought the world into the living room, 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.

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 quality of education, which in turn has been shaped by the aspirations and developments of the society it serves. Many impassioned discussions about Dutch identity have been sparked by increasing immigration, issues of integration, 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 its legal culture as it coped with widely divergent challenges of populism, climate change, and organized crime. 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, several common themes reappear throughout the volume. Some, e.g. “pillarization,” tolerance, and the “polder model,” go right to the heart of the Dutch social fabric. Others, e.g. 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.

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, objects, and phenomena that are sparked throughout the book. Some topics also appear in the historical Canon of the Netherlands, which has been revised in 2020, 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 insights 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**

WILJAN VAN DEN AKKER

I'm traveling 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 it. They're 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 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—and as long as we keep telling ourselves that our customs are normal, that they belong specifically 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 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, 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 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 small identity.

“Dutchness” is a very ambiguous term, like “Frenchness” or “Germanness.” As soon as you try to grasp it, it fades away. If 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 noticed me reading a German history of Dutch literature and 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 a next life, I will become a salesman. Of wooden legs.



# SOCIETY







## Citizens, Coalitions, and the Crown

EMMELINE BESAMUSCA

The Netherlands is often described as a country of paradoxes. Born in the sixteenth century as a republic within a world almost exclusively dominated by monarchies, it is now one of the few constitutional monarchies left in a world in which the republican form of government is the rule rather than the exception. As a unitary state, the national level forms the core of the Dutch polity. The national political stage, however, does not particularly contribute to a sense of political unity, as it is highly fragmented. The sheer number and diversity of political parties and movements boggles the mind even of the most invested local insider.

With turnout rates for national elections averaging almost 80 percent, a substantial portion of the Dutch electorate seems to consider it important to have their voice heard. It may seem paradoxical then that actual government formation can lead to outcomes which seem to escape direct public influence, as it is subject to protracted negotiations between political parties. Furthermore, the prime minister and his cabinet ministers are not elected, but nominated in painstaking coalition building, and officially appointed by the king, as are the heads of the provincial governments and the city mayors.

Dutch representative democracy thus seems to be determined by a delicate balance between citizens' participation in political elections, governance by coalitions, and appointed executives. Amid this paradoxical interplay of political forces, the hereditary monarch serves as a symbol of unity and continuity of the nation.

### *The Orange Dynasty*

The Netherlands was a republic until the early nineteenth century. The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands surrendered to the French revolutionary armies in 1795 and was replaced by the Batavian Republic. In 1806 that republic made way for the Kingdom of Holland under Louis Bonaparte, the brother of Emperor Napoleon, until it was fully annexed by France in 1810. When the French occupation ended in 1813, European



powers—convinced that monarchies would secure the desired stability after the Napoleonic period—preferred the Netherlands as a monarchy. The monarchy was therefore not an entirely Dutch choice. The candidate for the Dutch throne seemed undisputed though: the son of the last stadtholder, who had fled to England upon the approach of the French armies, accepted the throne as King William I.

The House of Orange has been part of Dutch history from the beginning of statehood, when stadtholder Prince William of Orange-Nassau (1533-1584), fondly called “the Father of the Fatherland,” became the leader of the Dutch Revolt that ultimately resulted in the birth of a Dutch state. Here lie the origins of the so-called “Orange Myth,” which holds that the House of Orange-Nassau serves as a protector of freedom and acts in service of the people, a notion that still resonates in the public perception of the royal family today.<sup>1</sup>

The Dutch constitution stipulates that the throne is held by King William I (1772-1843) and his lawful successors, carefully outlining the hereditary line of succession. As the person fulfilling the function is defined by birth rather than by election or personal merit—notwithstanding a lifelong preparation for the inevitable—it stands to reason that the person should remain hidden behind the function. Yet, paradoxically, it is unavoidable that the person serving as king is a major factor in securing the public support on which the monarchy rests. Successive monarchs brought different personalities to the kingship and fulfilled the office in different ways. The unflinching and headstrong personality of Queen Wilhelmina (1880-1962), who formally ascended the throne when she became of age in 1898, served her well during the years of occupation in the Second World War, which she spent in London. She was a beacon of hope for many in occupied Netherlands, who would regularly listen to her voice in BBC-supported broadcasts of “Radio Orange.” In 1948, she abdicated (as has been the tradition among Dutch monarchs since), leaving the throne to her only daughter Juliana (1909-2004). Juliana sought to live a simple life and be “normal.” In an iconic picture, she is riding a bicycle, her purse strapped on the carrier. Her eldest daughter Beatrix (\*1938) transformed her position into a “job” after taking over in 1980. Regularly portrayed behind a desk in her “working palace,” Noordeinde in The Hague, she was known for her dedication and exceptional preparedness. Her eldest son Willem-Alexander (\*1967) was inaugurated on April 30, 2013, as the first Dutch king since 1890. The display of Orange enthusiasm around the country on that day reflected surveys at the time showing that around three-quarters of the population at the time liked to see the monarchy continued.

In balancing traditional, royal rituals with a modern, “human” presentation, King Willem-Alexander and his wife, Queen Máxima, try to

render a face to the monarchy for many Dutch to identify with. Yet, since his inauguration, support for the king and for the monarchy has been declining. In 2024, a little more than half of the population still liked to see the monarchy continued and Willem-Alexander's approval ratings had dropped to just below 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> First of all, the costs—by comparison higher than other European monarchies—are a recurring issue.<sup>3</sup> Why should the king receive a generous €6,8 million for fulfilling a symbolic role, and why should the monarchy cost no less than around €75 million?<sup>4</sup> It could be considered an investment: including members of the royal family in economic delegations abroad may open doors that would otherwise remain closed. A head of state who has been prepared for the position for half a lifetime may have its advantages too. But lifelong privileges can also disturb one's antenna for the lives of normal citizens, and a life in luxury could all too easily result in public criticism of personal behavior. For example, when the royal family was seen to take a fall break holiday to a private house in Greece just after a new COVID-19 travel ban was announced, public outrage erupted that a public apology could not entirely wash away.

Yet, the Orange family is solidly rooted in the Dutch collective memory, and on occasion a so-called “orange sentiment” (*het oranjevoel*) can be brought about. But the monarchy may also survive simply because it is not subject to political elections and political campaigning. Given a fragmenting political field and increasing numbers of small minority parties, groups, and movements, the neutrality of the king is perhaps one of its greatest assets, allowing all citizens to rally around the head of state in unison.

#### **KING'S DAY: CELEBRATING THE NATION**

One of the remarkable traditions that articulate the national identity of the Netherlands is King's Day. Although this national holiday is celebrated on April 27, the birthday of King Willem-Alexander, many people cheer not so much the king or the monarchy, but the nation itself. Notwithstanding the many differences that may divide the nation on any other day, King's Day seems to bring everyone together. All can join, whether in ostentatious orange clothes, floating in boats on canals, or just hanging out on a Spring day. The holiday is known for its open air concerts and massive parties held in city centers, as much as for the children's plays and community events across the country. On the eve of King's Day, some cities open up to so-called “*vrijmarkten*,” flea markets which bring out commercial instincts of people who sell home-made snacks or old knick-knacks from their attics, or rather hunt for cheap, second-hand treasures.