

The Bicentennial 1813-1815

Historical Importance and Historiographical Reflection

On 26 September 2015 the last formal celebration marking the creation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands took place with as theme 'eenheid in verscheidenheid' in Amsterdam's Carré Theatre. It was the finale of six events that began with the commemoration of Prince William Frederick's (Willem Frederik) landing at Scheveningen on 30 November 2013, precisely 200 years after the actual event. (Not surprisingly, commemoration of the famous Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815, one of the chief nation-building feats of the nascent kingdom and long solemnly remembered in the Netherlands, was not a part of the festivities, not even as a joint venture with the Belgian royal house.) All in all, it was a rather low-key set of events that, as one poll revealed, escaped the notice of nearly half the Dutch population. The years 2013-2015 did, however, precipitate renewed discussion among Dutch historians about the significance of these years, and whether the creation of the Orangist regime should be seen as a break from the past, or as an embodiment of fundamental continuity. Or to add a level of complexity – a break, or continuity, with *which* past?

In the meantime, former parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, such as Belgium or Indonesia, let these commemorative years pass by unmarked by any corresponding ceremonial attention. To be sure, Belgium was not formally integrated into the kingdom until the late summer of 1815, and it was 1816 before Dutch authority returned to Java. Much more fundamentally, of course, the current regimes in both countries derive no legitimacy whatsoever from the Orangist regime established in those years. But how have historians of Indonesia and Belgium come to understand the significance of these years for their own country of expertise?

The editors of the *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* have asked three historians to reflect on the historical importance of 1813-1815 and in doing so to interact with existing historiographies in their fields. What emerges in these essays on Belgium, the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands are three decidedly different perspectives on the ruptures, restoration and continuities of the Orangist regime with what preceded and what followed it. In his essay on the Netherlands, Matthijs Lok compares attempts in the 1810s and 1820s to relate the return of Orange with history to more recent historiographical interpretations. Lok emphasizes the lack of consensus in determining a compelling link to the past in the early years of Orangist rule, including differences in how to judge the relationship between '1572' and '1813'. Putting the new kingdom on a legitimizing historical footing was made more difficult by the amalgamation of South and North, and the new king William I (Willem I) chose in effect to highlight only the most recent past (Waterloo) and forget more distant histories, including the not-so-distant Batavian and Napoleonic periods. This 'forgetting' of the French period was adopted by Dutch historians up to the 1980s, but Lok notes that this since has largely been

corrected with a clear-headed eye for the continuities between the Batavians and the new Orangist regime. At the same time, the author points to a number of unanswered questions about breaks and continuities, such as the lack of research on what broadly can be termed the Napoleonic period (1801-1813) and its impact on subsequent developments.

In her essay on the Dutch East Indies, Alicia Schrikker offers an appraisal of how to understand the 'old' and 'new' of the Dutch colonial regime on Java that followed the brief British administration of Sir Stamford Raffles. In one important aspect Schrikker tends to uphold the traditional emphasis on the 'new' character of the regime. Though she downplays the older emphasis on an ostensible competition between 'liberal' and 'conservative' visions of how to rule the Indies, she also argues that king William and his advisors, in their belief in a progress-oriented bureaucracy that would transform Java, did usher in a new political vision, even if this belief was at the same time deeply orientalist and, ultimately, illusory. At the same time, Schrikker carefully suggests on the basis of recent historiography that William's 'new' regime relied on practices that to a large degree stemmed from the Dutch East India Company, including use of its old patronage network, its codes of conduct and – through the creation of the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* and the cultivation system – its return to a mercantilist model with the support of Javanese landed elites. Schrikker also points to areas that require more research and which will probably underscore more continuities between the *ancien régime* and the new kingdom, such as the presumably persistent role of Chinese business leaders and Javanese nobility in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In contrast to these stories that tend to place the accent on continuity with an earlier period, Gita Deneckere's essay on Belgium emphatically argues for discontinuity. The periods being compared is not between William I's regime and the period of direct French (1795-1814) or Habsburg rule that preceded it, but the significance of the Orangist regime for what happened after 1830. In sharp contrast to the official Dutch story of '1813-1815' as essentially the origin of the modern democratic state, Deneckere's concludes that the constitutions of 1814-1815 cannot be regarded as 'modern' and could not serve as anything other than a negative model for Belgian revolutionaries, particularly in respect to the crucial issue of ministerial responsibility. The German prince and first king of the Belgians, Leopold I, was of a later generation than William and had lived for a long time in Britain, but privately found the far-going liberal constitution of the new country hard to swallow. But swallow it he did, and the Belgian constitution became in effect a repudiation of William's heritage. The question that requires more international research, Deneckere argues, is why the new liberalism emerging across the Low Countries led to repudiation of an essentially pre-modern monarchy in the South and not in the North, where, as noted above, continuity with 1815 has been the dominant theme. Only further research that transcends the national she says, will help answer this question.

Together these essays offer thought over how to think about this Bicentennial, and how the inception of the Kingdom of the Netherlands can be seen in reference to what became before, and after. The contributions offered here may not engage a readership the size of half the Dutch population, but it is a fitting way of continuing the discussion about what '1813-1815' meant, and why it matters.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

JAMES KENNEDY