

The Dutch Canon Debate. Reflections of an American

JAMES C. KENNEDY

Writing the National History Standards for the American school curriculum was no easy thing, as historian Gary Nash and other contributors to the projects experienced in the mid-1990s. The spouse of the current vice president, Lynne Cheney, who as previous head of the National Endowment for the Humanities once had overseen the project, lambasted the Standards publicly for its deficiencies in the weeks leading up to its publication in late 1994. She decried the results for its overabundance of arcane information on ancient world civilizations, its failure to give the proper weight to Western civilization, and for its neglect of well-known American figures like George Washington in favor of less deserving figures. The United States Senate agreed, with 99 senators (out of 100) supporting a resolution on 18 January 1995 that urged the National History Standards not be adopted in schools. The Senate further resolved that funding for future projects be restricted to those which ‘have a decent respect for the contribution of western civilization, and United States history, ideas, and institutions, to the increase of freedom and prosperity around the world.’¹ In particular, it was the failure of the National Standards to directly name George Washington as the first president that generated Senator Slade Gorton’s scorn and anger. Was it ‘George Washington or Bart Simpson’, Gorton, the resolution’s sponsor, rhetorically queried of his colleagues in the Senate, who is a ‘more important part of our Nation’s history for our children to study?’

Not to be deterred, Nash and his fellow editors struck back in a 318-page rebuttal, supported by and large by the ranks of their historian-colleagues.² In the end, the opposition by the Senate prompted modest revisions in the National Standards, which were released in 1996. Since then, many teachers at secondary and primary schools have used the Standards for their own teaching plans, often in conjunction with state and local curricula. Since the mid-1990s, the Standards for U.S. and world history have generated relatively little additional controversy. Indeed, what initially struck some historians as the weakest point of the Standards was not its controversial or wrongheaded take on history, but the project’s ponderous inclusion of too much material and the failure to offer accessible, synthetic overviews of the past.³

¹ S. Res. 66, 104th Congress, 1st Session; http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=104_cong_bills&docid=f:sr66ats.txt.pdf.

² The major contours of the debate are summarized by, among others, S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts. Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2001) 3-4.

³ See as examples of this critique on the American History and World History Standards respectively, D. M. Kennedy, ‘A Vexed and Troubled People’, and P. M. Stearns, ‘The World History Standards’, *The History Teacher*, XXVIII (May 1995) iii, 417-422, 441-448.

It seems inconceivable that the heated debate once swirling around the History Standards in the United States will soon be replicated in the Netherlands. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, that either chamber of the Dutch parliament will ever pass a near-unanimous resolution panning the work of the canon commission, or that conservative luminaries will take to the airwaves in droves to denounce the results. But of course the debate in the United States also shows that the current debate over the canon in the Netherlands has its parallel in America. Indeed, it is important to stress that the debate concerning the ‘canon’ in the Netherlands and the Standards in the United States stem from three important developments that are not only discernible in the two countries but across various countries, and not just in the West. The first, and most obvious, is the increased interest in ‘national identity’ in the post-Cold War period of globalization. The relation of the still vitally important nation-state in the face of economic and demographic globalization, and to the rise of other forms of solidarity, have made many people wonder anew what kind of history people ought to be reading, writing and teaching. The Netherlands, then, is no exception in this development, though the Dutch sometimes tend to see it as an exclusively national issue.

A second discrete but related development is the concern about declining academic standards. This concern is often coupled with a reaction against an educational vision, still very much present in many countries’ educational systems, that has stressed the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of knowing. Long before the current debates in the Netherlands about the canon there was the American discussion triggered by the critical report *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which lamented the state of education. It was a report that led directly to the launching of the National Standards Project in the early 1990s. In 1987, E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s influential *Cultural Literacy* argued that citizens required a basic knowledge of certain facts if they were to be successful in making their way in the world. Hirsch himself constructed a list of 5,000 terms, from all fields, that any American ought to know, including these proper nouns from the Q list: Qaddafi, Quaker, Quebec, and Quisling.⁴ Concerns, then, about the ‘dumbing down’ of students have been an important impulse behind an interest in a standard or canon. Nor are these concerns that are shared by cultural conservatives alone — though it might be said that American conservatives have laid a claim to the issue as their own to an extent that is not true in the Netherlands, at least not when it comes to knowing one’s national history.⁵

Finally, historians, partly through further professionalization and specialization, have undergone a long process of reflection about their relation to the nation and the world, asking of themselves to whom, beyond their fellow professionals, they owe a responsibility. Indeed, the involvement of historians in the National Standards corrected the long-languid interest in school curricula among American historians; the last systematic curricular proposal from professional historians prior to their recent involvement had stemmed from 1932. Similarly in the Netherlands there is a greater

⁴ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston, 1987) 198.

⁵ That the importance of rediscovering national history should come from proponents with ties to the ‘Old Left’ is striking; J. Marijnissen, *Waar historie buis houdt* (Amsterdam, 2005); J. Palm, *De vergeten geschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam, 2005).

sense for the political and moral responsibilities of the historian in the domains beyond the academic world exemplified, perhaps, in the recent efforts for educational reform by Piet de Rooy and others. That does not mean that all historians in either the Netherlands or the United States have come to believe in the need for national standards – far from it – but that they are, as a whole, perhaps more willing than before to engage with a wider public on a project like the National Standards, or the canon.

Nevertheless, I am struck, as an American who personally experienced the intense conflict of the mid-1990s more by the differences in the debate between my native country and this one. The first thing that I observe, not very surprisingly, is the relatively sedate tone of the debate, which fits well into an academic culture, and certainly that of Dutch historians, where debate is an occasional event rather than the essence of academic endeavor. More interesting, I think, is the fairly traditional conceptualization of the Dutch national canon, which presumes that there is, more or less, a self-contained nation with a distinctive history and cultural heritage (*erfgoed*), with which its citizens ought to be familiar, for a range of reasons, social, educational or political. Though most proponents of a canon understand that reasonable people will disagree about what should and should not be included, they seem confident that there is a body of material on which one can, reasonably easily, consensus. In this respect, they look, perhaps, more like the critics of the National Standards than the designers of the standards themselves. Not by being effusive patriots, or by being uncritical defenders of Western Civilization, or by proponents of Dutch national identity, but in their confidence that there is a more or less self-evident national history, with a more or less self-evident national heritage.

The relatively traditional stance of the Dutch may come of a surprise, given that American culture has its ready-made ‘canon’ of well-known symbols and concepts, and that American historiography itself is quite parochial, often unable to transcend well-worn national narratives.⁶ If ever there was a canon-minded nation, it would seem to be the United States, rather than the Netherlands. Indeed, the United States Citizenship Exam generates questions that might be said to have a kind of canonical status, such as:

Who was Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Why did the Pilgrims come to America? Who helped the Pilgrims in America?

Who was the main writer of the Declaration of Independence? What are some of the basic beliefs of the Declaration of Independence?

There can be little doubt that historically Americans, concerned with the proper education and control of immigrants, have created canons of historical knowledge in ways that long anticipated current efforts at ‘inburgering’ and the creation of a national canon. And like the current efforts at creating a common culture, such impulses derived in part from an anxiety about newcomers and a perceived need to dictate to them the

⁶ See F. Weil, ‘Do American Historical Narratives Travel?’ and ‘The Exhaustion of Enclosures: A Critique of Internationalization’, in: Th. Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002) 317-342, 367-380.

terms of their inclusion. At the same time, however, these terms of inclusion have been a battleground for a long time, generating a good deal of debate about what America ought to be about. In fact, it is precisely the fixation of American historians in their own history that has prompted them to develop narratives that attempt to correct the shortcomings of traditional processes of ‘canonization’ which are opposed, for example, for their treatment of race.⁷ In the Netherlands, in contrast, the current search for a canon stems largely from the sense that the Dutch have ‘missed’ the necessary instruction in Dutch culture — the sense, in a word, that there is no canon. In the United States, the concern about cultural literacy frequently has been overshadowed by the debate whether the traditional understanding of history, with ‘all of the familiar white, male movers and shakers’ (to use Joyce Appleby’s oft-cited quotation) has been sufficiently contextualized and challenged by other narratives.⁸ In a word, the ‘no canon’ debate has been superseded by a ‘wrong canon’ debate. Since the 1960s, there has been a visibly strong revisionist impulse that has consciously rejected the old narratives and sought more ‘inclusive’ ones, of which Nash of the National Standards is an important proponent.⁹ Although this revisionist, consciously multiculturalist agenda has found broad support within the historical profession and the teaching establishment, it has found much less support among the general population, and it has generated a sharp conservative counterattack on the ‘liberal’ standards. The battle over the standards, then, has concerned the critical question of ‘whose history?’ a question present, but much less on the forefront of the Dutch discussion.¹⁰

The suspicions and conflicts that necessarily rise from this critical question is hardly unique to the United States — countries with similar histories like Australia and Canada have demonstrated their own ability to generate ‘history wars’ along similar lines.¹¹ But these kinds of debates, understandably, have mostly missed the Netherlands, given the (still) relatively weak cultural position of ethnic minorities, and the decline of confessional or social-democratic groups who in the past did generate alternate historical interpretations of the nation. This obviously has ramifications for the contours of the discussion over the canon in the Netherlands, from the composition of the canon commission (not one ‘person of color’) to the criteria for inclusion, which tends to emphasize the familiar, rather than an emphatic choice for inclusion of hitherto

⁷ R. D. G. Kelley, Referee Report to Joel Williamson’s ‘Wounds Not Scars: Lynching, the National Conscience and the American Historian,’ *Journal of American History* (March 1997) 1260.

⁸ J. Appleby, ‘The National Standards: A US history perspective,’ from H-List@uicvm.uic.edu on 10 November, 1994, available at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45/001.html>.

⁹ This did not mean that Nash was castigated only by conservatives for the National Standards; on at least one occasion he was also harshly accused of omitting African American authors; S. Weintraub, ‘What’s This New Crap? What’s Wrong with the Old Crap?’, in: P. N. Stearns, P. Seixas, S. Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History. National and International Perspectives* (New York, 2000) 180-181.

¹⁰ L. Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York, 2002).

¹¹ For Australia, see M. Lyons, P. Russell, eds., *Australia’s History. Themes and debates* (Sydney, 2005); and S. Macintyre, A. Clark, *The History Wars* (2nd ed.; Melbourne, 2004).

obscure material that would, for example, highlight the contributions of marginalized groups. Indeed, the *relative* absence of ideological conflict over what can and cannot be included as *'erfgoed'* makes the very use of the term 'canon' possible in the Dutch context, a laden concept that would have made the controversy over the 'standards' in the United States even heavier than it was.

Other differences in the character of the American and Dutch historical professions may also help in understanding the different stance of these respective historians in the debate. Although the historians of the United States are legion in America, the country also produces thousands and thousands of historians whose specialization is in a non-Western field. In particular, world history plays an important part in the staffing and curriculum in American colleges and universities, and many American graduate students specializing in American or European history find it prudent to build up a secondary specialization (as American doctoral programs require) in Asia, Africa or Latin America. Furthermore, multicontinental approaches to American history have really taken off on the last decade (since the National Standards appeared). For these reasons, most American historians, probably, would more immediately resonate with Karel Davids's proposed approach to the Dutch past, which stresses the Dutch interaction with the world, than the more focused version of national history offered up in *Kortweg Nederland*.¹² This is not to say that Dutch historians are all of one opinion about what belongs in the canon, but the relative weakness of transnational and global history-writing in the Netherlands may have played a role in defining — and limiting — the contours of the current canon discussion.

Finally, I wonder to what extent the place of Dutch and American academicians in their respective societies plays in the configuration of the canon debate. For a long time, American academicians often have chosen to live in a state of permanent alienation from the political centers of power, and politicians in turn have done little to close the gap with academy. The whole National Standards Project, though funded and encouraged by the government, was troubled from the beginning by mutual suspicions, suspicions that ultimately came to vituperative public expression in 1994. Distrust between the Dutch academy and the educational establishment in The Hague is by no means absent, of course. But academicians are better grounded within the institutional structures of Dutch political life. And I would be surprised if there was not a greater willingness of Dutch academicians to work out the project of a canon together with the political and educational establishment, a stance that will probably have the effect of making the project less charged with controversy than was true in the US.

What does the American discussion over the National Standards suggest about the direction the Dutch are taking in the development of their own canon? Advice is not easy to impart, given that — as outlined above — the countries are in key respects dissimilar. But several short observations may suffice. The first is to note that the tempest surrounding the Standards was, even in the polarized United States, of short

¹² K. Davids, *'Global History en de 'canon' van de Nederlandse geschiedenis'* (Amsterdam, 2005), available at <http://www.knaw.nl/publicaties/pdf/20051075.pdf>; J. Bank, G. van Es, P. de Rooy, *Kortweg Nederland*, to be found at <http://www.anno.nl/anno/anno/i001648.html>.

duration. Standards may generate intense discussion as they are developed and introduced, but they are much less interesting once they have been implemented. Much of the canon's value, then, will lie in the quality of discussion it provokes in the short term. That does not mean that a canon cannot contribute to a better history curriculum — I think that it probably, in a modest way, has in the United States. But I am skeptical of the ability of a canon to offer in the long run an authoritative vision of Dutch history. The problem with a canon is not that it will construct some narrow, coercive vision of Dutch history, as some fear, but that it will consist of a not very compelling compromise that easily can be dismissed or ignored. A more centralized Dutch educational system may be more successful than Nash and his colleagues were at developing and articulating an engaging interpretation of the past, but the chances in a pluralist society of generating a canon that commands everyone's attention and respect should not be overestimated.

Furthermore, I would concur with the transnationalist historians that the revival of Dutch historical consciousness that the canon seeks to encourage should be conducted with an eye to the ways in which the people of this country both influenced, and were influenced by, wider continental and global processes. Few would deny that this is a valuable approach, but I am not certain that the current efforts at building the canon, with its emphasis on *erfgoed* can sufficiently emphasize these concerns.¹³ National history should, moreover, beyond teaching what fits easily within the consensus, always have an eye for the unfamiliar, the unsettling, by which new and other voices are typically heard. Here, too, the question is whether the current canon project, as currently devised, can sufficiently address this concern. In this respect, a greater measure of theoretical self-consciousness concerning one's assumptions, which American historians have been forced to adopt in their more contested setting, might be useful here as scholars consider what belongs, and does not belong, within a canon.¹⁴

Perhaps, then, the best thing that a canon can do for Dutch history-writing is to generate more debate, and a deeper discussion of the Dutch past. As noted before, Dutch historians are not noted for their sense of debate, and perhaps a contested national canon is one way to move them in this direction. There is a good deal to be said for a basic cultural literacy, and canons can help. And there is a good deal to be said for an approach that makes, as the canon commission and the authors of *Kortweg Nederland* attempt, the national past accessible to a wider public whose ties to the past are often incidental and badly-informed. But more than that, the whole discussion around the canon may have its greatest value if it challenges Dutch and other historians of the Netherlands to offer broad new narratives about the Dutch past. Such narratives would challenge public memory, raise morally difficult questions from the past, and at the same time offer a compelling vision for a national history. Here, too, American historians might serve as examples; as David Hollinger has argued, many excellent

¹³ Cf. Davids, 'Global History,' 12-13.

¹⁴ J. Appleby, 'The Power of History' [1997 Presidential Address, American Historical Association] at http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_History/jappleby.htm.

nation-centered histories have appeared in recent years, often strengthened by a global perspective.¹⁵ But these contributions are themselves less conceivable without the context of a continuing debate over ‘the American story’ and ongoing disagreement about how historians should frame the sweep of national history. It is my hope, then, that the discussion around the canon will not only improve the Dutch curriculum, or heighten public historical consciousness, but serve as an additional impulse to write more books of the kind that stimulate a deeper reflection about the vicissitudes of Dutch history.

¹⁵ D. Hollinger, ‘The Historian’s Use of the United States’, in: Bender, *Rethinking*, 385-394.

Recensies

ALGEMEEN

K. Goudriaan, J. van Moolenbroek, A. Tervoort, ed., *Education and learning in the Netherlands, 1400-1600. Essays in honour of Hilde de Ridder-Symoens* (Brill's studies in intellectual history CXXIII; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004, x + 374 blz., € 99,-, ISBN 90 04 13644 4).

Deze bundel opstellen is Hilde de Ridder-Symoens door haar collega's en vakgenoten aangeboden bij haar vertrek van de Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam naar de Universiteit van Gent in 2001. Ik tracht in het volgende de zestien essays kort te karakteriseren.

De eerste bijdrage, van de hand van Hildo van Engen, gaat over Jan van Galecop (c.1375-1428), die optrad als biechtvader en beschermer van vrouwenkloosters in het bisdom Utrecht. Galecop voelde zich verwant met de idealen van de moderne devotie. Zijn carrière verliep, ondanks zijn graden in de *artes* en de theologie, moeizaam. Antheun Janse schrijft over de academische carrières van Jacob van Wassenaar en zijn broers vanaf 1439. De heel langzame toename van deelname van de adellijke families aan academische studies, tenminste ten behoeve van een wereldlijke carrière, wordt geïllustreerd aan deze familie. Mario Damen tekent met een overdaad aan personalia de toenemende aantallen academisch gegradueerden (vooral in de rechten) in de juridische en bestuurlijke administraties van Holland en Zeeland in de Bourgondische periode in de vijftiende eeuw.

Door Madelon van Luijk worden vier *consilia* onderzocht, die op verzoek van de burgemeesters van Leiden, in de periode 1452-1462 zijn uitgebracht door de universiteiten van Keulen, Leuven en Parijs. Interessante conflicten en problemen, waarvoor deze juridische adviezen gevraagd werden, worden keurig gereconstrueerd, terwijl de *consilia* zelf niet bewaard zijn. Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld vraagt zich af of de dekens in een drietal dekenaten in het bisdom Luik met hun universitaire vorming niet 'overqualified' waren voor hun werk: het leiding geven aan de vele en vaak grote parochies van hun dekenaat en het onderhouden van contacten met de wereldlijke machthebbers. Ik denk van niet: het gaat niet zozeer om de opgedane vakkennis, maar wel om de vorming die zij gedurende hun *peregrinatio academica* hebben opgedaan; denk aan de essentiële dispuutcolleges en het jarenlang samenwonen in de collegia met magistris en studenten van allerlei herkomst en allooi.

Jaap van Moolenbroek legt uit waarom Wessel Gansfort het voorlezen uit Caesar van Heisterbach aan de monniken van Aduard niet alleen belachelijk, maar ook gevaarlijk vond. Dat doet hij goed en helder, maar zijn onbegrip voor de 'Aduarder academie' is des te pijnlijker omdat hier nu amper gelegenheid was enig tegenwicht te bieden tegen een overdaad aan prosopografica in de voorafgaande vijf stukken. Ad Tervoort heeft een gouden vondst gedaan in de archieven van Leiden: de testamenten van twee schoolmeesters (1500 en 1503-1504), waarin ze hun kostbare boeken per stuk aan deze en gene vermaken. Het blijkt uit hun geschriften dat ze veel moderner in hun geleerdheid waren dan de wat ouderwetse boeken die ze nalieten. Een groep humanisten uit Gouda en omgeving, door IJsewijn een *parvula academia Goudana* genoemd, is van jongere