

A Flemish-Centred Economic History of the Netherlands¹

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The once-in-a-generation chance to write a history of the Netherlands should not have been wasted on a Flemish-centred economic history, no matter how good it is. Blockmans's point of departure is mapping and understanding the internal dynamics of the Netherlands, originating in and concentrating on the south, i.e. Flanders. That entails a rather specific characterisation and delineation of the medieval Netherlands. The Prometheus *Geschiedenis* series calls for a well-balanced book that also discusses the northern, eastern and southern parts of present-day Netherlands and pays due attention to religion, art and culture. This review makes allowance for trends in national, trans-national and regional history and suggests alternative book plans.

That Wim Blockmans, the one and only author of the latest comprehensive history of the Netherlands in the Middle Ages, also contributed to the fourth volume (1980) of the (*Nieuwe*) *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (NAGN), the brainchild of 36 authors, is an intriguing piece of information.² As a brilliant young historian he had a good instinct for the trends in his profession and therefore rightly made a substantial contribution to the fifteen-volume history of the Netherlands at a time when such books were the prerogative of established representatives of the discipline of history. Looking back, the NAGN with its *Annales*-Braudelian approach was fully up-to-date due to the fact that the editors hired young blood who got a chance to air their newly established, sometimes radical, historical insights. The emphases of Blockmans's contributions have remained remarkably stable – his NAGN chapter 'Tussen crisis en welvaart, sociale veranderingen 1300-1500' [Between crisis and prosperity, social changes, 1300-1500], written together with Walter Prevenier, constitutes the main argument of the impressive volume here

under review. Inevitably, this causes us to wonder what exactly has happened in the field of Medieval Dutch history during recent decennia. When judging only on the basis of *Metropolen aan de zee*³, the conclusion is not much, which of course is not true given the blossoming of Dutch and Flemish Medieval Studies since 1980.

Alternative bookplans

Since that time Blockmans has worked diligently and straightforwardly, fulfilling his promise faithfully, and with this volume erecting a veritable monument to his generation of medievalists that is richly furnished with new historical facts delved up from the archives and libraries by his numerous talented pupils. In itself, writing and finishing the present book is an honourable and successful enterprise, but I have the ungrateful as well as ungracious task of investigating the issue of whether the second volume in the comprehensive Prometheus *Geschiedenis van Nederland* series could, or even should, have been done differently. The answer to that question is yes. My remarks stem from the firm conviction that the once-in-a-lifetime chance to write such a survey should not have been wasted on such a Flemish-centred economic history, no matter how good it might be. Such a series calls for a well-balanced book that also discusses the northern, eastern and southern parts of present-day Netherlands and pays due attention to religion, art and culture.

Making allowances for trends in national, transnational and regional history results in alternative book plans. Blockmans's point of departure is mapping and understanding the internal dynamics of the Netherlands originating in and concentrating on the south, i.e. Flanders, and that entails rather specific characterisation and delineation of the medieval Netherlands. Some readers therefore will be surprised that Artois, a region that most of us would not be able to locate, receives three times as much attention as Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe put together. The little map of core regions on page 22 speaks volumes for the chosen path: the map is truncated above Kampen, and so the present-day Netherlands is depicted without its northern provinces. Blockmans not only neglects large parts of present-day Netherlands, he also has blind spots where culture and religion, and to some

1 I would like to thank my colleagues in the Groningen History Department who acted as a sounding board for this review.

2 D.P. Blok et al. (eds.), *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (15 vols; Bussum 1977-1983); Blockmans contributed to volume IV.

3 Wim Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100-1560* (*De geschiedenis van Nederland* [3]; Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2010, 749 pp., ISBN 978 90 351 2775 3).

extent agriculture, are concerned. In the main, culture and religion figure instrumentally, explaining the exercise of power, or even just to illustrate certain occurrences. Erasmus, for instance, besides a minimal reference to the *Praise of Folly*, is only briefly mentioned in the context of the court of the *Groote Raad van Mechelen*. Humanism, the intellectual movement to which he belonged, and which flourished extraordinarily early and profusely in the Netherlands, is completely ignored. Erasmus's shadowy presence sharply contrasts with that of chronicler Galbert of Bruges, who has twelve entries in the index, referring to nine pages of paraphrases to illustrate the murder of the Flemish count Charles the Good in 1127, and its consequences. The publisher is also to blame for this bias. The illustrations are sparse, often blurred and far too small, making the reader long for one of the precursors of this volume, the exquisitely illustrated *De Bourgondische Nederlanden* written by Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier in 1983 for the Belgian Davidsfonds.⁴ Last but not least, structures, impulses, agents and processes are favoured above men and women of flesh and blood with their thoughts and feelings. In this context, not surprisingly, women are almost nonexistent, only surfacing in times of dynastic crisis – the 'unstable Jacoba van Beieren' – or as Beguines. Before further substantiating these assertions, I would like to take a look at other countries and establish how in the last thirty years they have solved the problem of national history/histories.

In most of our neighbouring countries the encompassing national histories are more or less from the same period as the Dutch-Flemish AGN, the 1970s and 1980s. In more recent years historians have advocated a thematic approach, resulting in series such as the *Cambridge Social History of Britain* and the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*.⁵ In France the same pattern can be seen in the *Histoire de la France politique* (2000-) and the *Histoire culturelle de la France* (5 vols; 1997-1998), culminating in the five-volume *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (2006). In the Netherlands and Belgium scholars and publishers have restricted themselves to the history of painting and the history of literature, which gives quite a different approach due to the fact that there the work of art is the object of study.⁶ Since reunification German historians have struggled with 'Das Reich', but remain convinced of the

4 Walter Prevenier, Wim Blockmans and An Blockmans-Delva, *De Bourgondische Nederlanden* (Antwerp 1983). Translations in numerous languages followed.

5 Dutch exception: Karel Davids and Marjolein 't Hart, *De wereld en Nederland. Een sociale en economische geschiedenis van de laatste duizend jaar* (Amsterdam 2011).

6 *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* (Amsterdam 2006-), 6 vols have been published so far, and J. Tollebeek (ed.), *De schilderkunst der Lage Landen* (2 vols; Amsterdam 2006-2007).

vital importance of reassessing its value. The 2006 exhibition on the Holy Roman Empire in Magdeburg and Berlin with its monumental catalogue *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation 962 bis 1806* had its dubious points, but demonstrated at least that the Reich, often portrayed as weak, might actually have been a good example of functioning federalism, allowing the participating dominions enough autonomy to secure the rights and welfare of its individual inhabitants.⁷ This perspective might have been especially fruitful for the Netherlands, as until 1648 most of its regions were officially part of the Holy Roman Empire. In *Metropolen aan de Noordzee* that condition is downplayed since the King of France plays a far larger role in the book than the German Emperor. The former is often portrayed as a formidable contestant who often interfered successfully, whereas the latter usually let his princes have their way and only with difficulty managed to deny the Duke of Burgundy his royal crown.

Regional partiality

Although Blockmans claims to focus on interregional dynamics, many regions are neglected due to his preference for regions with what were then powerful economic capacities. This also runs counter to developments within the historical field elsewhere. In Britain the *New British History*, following Pocock's 1975 *cri de coeur* that there was more to Britain than the English Home Counties, proposed a conflation of their narratives into a truly integrated enterprise, including the outlying regions.⁸ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jacques Juillard did something similar for centralised France with their *Histoire de France des régions*, measuring the claims of regions such as Normandy, Brittany, Alsace and Savoy, and taking into account what this meant for the French identity.⁹

In this light the author's denunciation of Dutch regional histories, which according to him are far too inwardly oriented, seems a bit hasty.¹⁰ The praised history of Brabant is not the only one covering an area now in two countries, since various recent histories of regions on the present

7 Hans Ottomeyer et al. (eds.), *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation 962 bis 1806* (5 vols; Dresden 2006).

8 J.G.A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *Journal of Modern History* 4 (1975) 601-624.

9 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire de France des régions: La périphérie française des origines à nos jours* (Paris 2001).

10 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 13.

Dutch-German border have also looked eastwards and fully integrated eastern territories, influences and occurrences into their accounts, not confining themselves within administrative or state frontiers.¹¹ Economic and political historians might well be critical of Blockmans's 'core region' point of departure too, pointing towards Flanders and Brabant as the creators of Burgundy and its affluence, but that is not my field of expertise. Nevertheless, even with so much left out due to this preference, it should have been done differently. Even if you are forced to work with core regions and urban networks, many more could have been examined, certainly if culture and religion are allowed to contribute their weight as well. Examples with their own economic and cultural dynamics include Groningen and Drenthe with their close ties with East Frisia and Bentheim, Twente and the Achterhoek with Niederrhein and Westmünsterland, the interaction between the axis of Liège, Maastricht and Aachen, Cologne with Roermond, Venlo and Nijmegen, and of course the Hanseatic towns with their German and Baltic hinterlands. The Modern Devouts were much more popular east of Deventer and Zwolle than in Holland; it was from places such as Emmerich and Munster that they recruited many of their adherents. To me the whole centre-periphery concept seems inadequate for reproducing the comprehensive picture a varied history of the Netherlands requires.

In addition, the chosen line of approach involves finalistic reasoning towards what later became state boundaries. Even though Blockmans warns against this, his own 'prospectivism' has the same outcome. Paradoxically, the choice of core regions makes the narrative far more national than would have been the case with a broader focus. This is against recent transnational tendencies in history that demand a more international angle, or rather interregional in the true sense of the word, paying due respect to the characteristics of all the various regions and their respective interactions, but also taking external influences into consideration. In the run-up to the Second World War, Johan Huizinga held several lectures on 'How Holland became a nation'. In these he pointed out its delta situation, making clear that

11 For instance Guelders and Groningen: Johannes Stinner and Karl-Heinz Tekath (eds.), *Gelre, Geldern, Gelderland. Geschichte und Kultur des Herzogtums Geldern / Gelre, Geldern, Gelderland. Geschiedenis en cultuur van het hertogdom Gelre* (Geldern 2001). New edition: Meindert Evers

and Johannes Stinner (eds.), *Het hertogdom Gelre. Geschiedenis, kunst en cultuur tussen Maas, Rijn en IJssel* (Utrecht 2003). M.G.J. Duijvendak et al. (eds.), *Geschiedenis van Groningen. I Prehistorie en Middeleeuwen* (Zwolle 2008).

No other nation of Europe, by its geographical situation or by its history, has become so equally balanced in the midst of the three foremost nations of Western Europe: British, French and German. No other nation has been so open to cultural influences from three or more different sides. At all times Holland [meaning the Netherlands], while often having something to give to others herself, has eagerly taken in all that she could learn from her great neighbours.¹²

To my present-day ears this sounds far more beneficent than Blockmans's somewhat triumphalist:

een regio die op vrijwel ieder gebied tot de voorhoede behoorde en daar tot op heden bij gebleven is [...] Weliswaar vertoonden de Nederlanden in politiek opzicht een beeld van verbrokkeling en afhankelijkheid van externe vorsten, maar op economisch en ook op cultureel vlak gebeurde veel hier eerder en grootser dan elders [a region that was in the vanguard in nearly every field and has remained so to the present day [...] Despite its apparent political fragmentation and dependence on foreign princes, economically and culturally much occurred here earlier and more magnificently than elsewhere].¹³

***Metropolen aan de Noordzee* presents a consistent picture of the origins of the Flemish-Dutch spirit of enterprise, but in doing so regrettably prevents the non-economical and non-political assets of the whole Southern and Northern Netherlands and their European *Umwelt* receiving richly deserved light thrown on them.** ◀

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12 He wrote several fairly similar articles on this topic; see Johan Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken II* (Haarlem 1946) 95-332, especially 266-283, quotation on 282, the translation is by Huizinga himself.

13 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 21.

Lanceloot Blondeel, Port of Nieuwpoort, fifteenth century.
www.nieuwpoort-digitaal.be. ▶

