



The Sorrows of Belgium

Introduction

On the surface one might assume Martin Conway's *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction 1944-1947* (Oxford 2012) is exactly what its title implies: a book about the difficult early post-war years in Belgium, and in part this book is exactly that. Conway does offer a detailed cross-sectional analysis of the post-war transition years, ending his story with the Communist departure from the Belgian government in 1947. This book does a lot more than that however, as it attempts to use Belgium to better understand how European state restorations after World War II in general took shape. In his book Conway confidently merges political, social and economic history that are often still detached schools of research. He brings together elements of institutional reform and the agenda of state elites, social class agency, the fluid dynamics of collective national and regional (or local) identities, changing political norms and cultural values, and the role of several key individuals such as the head of state and the prime minister.

Such a holistic approach is a rather un-Belgian one, unfortunately. Perhaps this partly explains why the book – although universally well-received – caused debate among some Belgian historians, for example in a debate session on 6th September 2012 at the Brussels based Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (CEGESOMA), where ten Belgian historians and two non-Belgian specialists (Peter Romijn from NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOG) and Robert Gerwarth from University College Dublin, who had previously worked with Conway on these issues) discussed the book with the author. Some Belgian specialists encountered problems accepting the label 'conservative' used by Conway to define Belgian society in 1945-1947, or to understand why he consciously leaves out the post-war purges (the so-called 'repression' in Belgium), or accepting that Conway uses 1947 as a terminus instead of 1950-1951 (the formal end of the Belgian Royal Question). This last point loomed over the debate in more than one sense, as the periodisation is closely tied to the inevitable question on when the cracks in the Belgian nation became ruptures that in the end were bound to cause the gradual disintegration of the national state. It seemed perhaps that Belgian historians could not help but frame this book in their own familiar traditional schemes or debates, although it has to be said Conway purposely wrote his book to challenge just those schemes. Nevertheless, it is clear that many of the book's main methodological or analytical points were meant to be

taken outside the Belgian space. This is why *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* decided it was relevant to do this by asking three different authors to reflect on the book from their own vantage points, with the intention of broadening the scope to a Dutch or European level. Martin Conway himself was asked to respond to the three different texts. Although *Belgo-Belge* debates remain visible to some extent, this discussion nevertheless does what Conway's book originally intended, which was to take this approach and its results to an international and transnational level.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

NICO WOUTERS