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Weak and Strong Nations in the Low Countries: National Historiography and its 'Others' in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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During the Second World War, the most prominent historians in the Netherlands and Belgium decided to start a close collaboration with the aim of publishing a large-scale history of the Low Countries, which was to become the reference work in this field for several decades. In the history of national history writing, the project had a somewhat ambiguous character. On the one hand, it was a product of the feverish quest for national roots which began to express itself during the Second World War in both countries (and made publishers bold enough to risk such an undertaking); on the other hand, the choice of 'the Low Countries' as a geographical circumscription was a result of these historians' wish to break the chains of traditional, 'state-nationalistic' historiography. As such, it seemed at first sight to legitimise the new transnational entity which came into being during this period in the form of Benelux.

The undertaking resulted in the prestigious *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, which was published in twelve volumes between 1949 and 1958. Without a doubt, it remained the most important history of the Low Countries until the publication of the second edition in the late 1970s. From the outset, it was clear that this was not a genuine Benelux historiography, as the territory of Luxembourg, which had been part of 'the Low Countries' for centuries, was not systematically integrated into the narrative. Only the second edition included a short chapter on Luxembourg, written by Albert Calmes.

Regardless of this omission, the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* was soon under attack for offering 'two parallel national histories' rather than one integrated history of a 'transnational context'. A closer analysis of this lengthy work suggests that the tendency to remain within the boundaries of traditional

national historiography pertained more to the Dutch than to the Belgian collaborators.¹

This conclusion might, at first sight, appear to be surprising. During the early decades of the independent existence of the Dutch and Belgian nations, it seemed that the telling of national histories would be much easier for Belgian than for Dutch historians. The enthusiasm that was aroused by the Belgian Revolution was translated into a fairly coherent master narrative on national history. In this narrative Belgian history was presented as one long struggle to protect the medieval liberties of the Flemish and Brabant cities against the subsequent foreign conquests to which the country was subjugated. The Belgian Revolution appeared in this view as the final battle, in which this secular history had come to an end.²

In the Netherlands the revolution of 1830 was a traumatic experience far more than an occasion for self-glorification. It, therefore, implied a thorough rereading of the national past. On the one hand, it freed the Dutch from the need to give historical meaning to the United Kingdom of the Netherlands as it had been created in 1815, and therefore enabled them to return to the seventeenth century, the golden age of the Dutch republic, as an historical point of reference. On the other hand, they needed to come to terms with the fact that the glory of that golden age had now vanished, and that the Netherlands had definitively reverted to the position of a small nation.³ This could result either in nostalgic reminiscences of seventeenth-century culture and society (combined with urges to restore this time of greatness) or in very critical enquiries into where it had all gone wrong. In particular, the confederalist state structure of the seventeenth century and the endless religious quarrels were blamed for the decline.⁴ It was

¹For the genesis of this project and for the critique it prompted, see J. Tollebeek, 'Uitgedaagd door historische gebondenheid: de belangstelling voor de (Noord-)Nederlandse geschiedenis in het Belgische onderwijs en onderzoek', in J. Tollebeek, *De ijkmeesters: opstellen over de geschiedschrijving in Nederland en België* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 17–35; M. Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden: nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938–1947* (Amsterdam, 2002), pp. 407–9.

²See J. Stengers, 'Le Mythe des dominations étrangères dans l'historiographie belge', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 59 (1981), 382–401; J. Tollebeek, 'Historical Representation and the Nation-state in Belgium, 1830–1850', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 59 (1998), 329–53; E. Peeters, *Het labyrint van het verleden: natie, vrijheid en geweld in de Belgische geschiedschrijving, 1787–1850* (Leuven, 2003). This last author, however, stresses that the enthusiasm of the Romantic historians barely veiled a deeper sense of unease about their own time.

³See P. B. M. Blaas, 'De prikkelbaarheid van een kleine natie met een groot verleden: Fruins en Bloks nationale geschiedschrijving', *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, 9 (1982), 271–303.

⁴See P. B. M. Blaas, 'Het karakter van het vaderland: vaderlandse geschiedenis tussen Wagenaar en Fruin (1780–1840)', *De burgerlijke eeuw: over eeuwwenden, liberale burgerij en geschiedschrijving* (Hilversum, 2000), pp. 365–89.

future of the country as an autonomous nation-state. There was not even a proto-nationalist current in the grand duchy. This was probably due to the political arrangement of the Congress of London of 1839. According to this, the ancient duchy was divided into two, one of which became a Belgian province, whereas the other became a semi-autonomous entity in union with the Netherlands: the King of the Netherlands was also Grand Duke of Luxembourg.

Hence, the grand duchy was detached from its ancient Southern Netherlandic set of references and set within an Orangeist framework. Even if none of the nineteenth-century Dutch monarchs showed much interest in Luxembourg, intellectuals such as Mathieu Lambert Schrobilgen and Jean Joris stayed within an Orangeism that retarded the development of an autonomous national historiography.⁶ The international crises of 1867 and 1870 bore witness to an awakening of a national awareness. It was only with the accession of a distinct branch of the Nassau dynasty in 1890, and the subsequent recognition of Luxembourg as an independent state, that historians partially liberated themselves from Orangeism. Within the discourse they developed on Luxembourgian national history, the theme of foreign domination became a classic element.

If the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg appears to be a separate case, it does nonetheless bear similarities to both Belgium – in terms of its Catholic roots and position straddling the linguistic frontier – and the Netherlands, in its dynastic ties and relatively late industrialisation. For this reason, it seems relevant to include Luxembourg within this comparative overview of the national historiography of 'the Low Countries'.

National histories and the confessional struggles of the nineteenth century

According to the generally accepted view, both Belgium and the Netherlands, in the course of the nineteenth century, were 'pillarised' – that is, divided along religious lines. A closer look, however, reveals that the character of the clerical-political struggle was totally different in the two countries. In the Netherlands, society had been characterised since the seventeenth century by a true religious diversity in which a highly heterogeneous (and to a certain degree secularised) Protestant majority lived with a large Catholic minority. The different religious groups strove for political and social recognition, but could never hope to become the sole political force dominating the Dutch

⁶C. Huberty, 'La Vie politique du XIXe siècle dans l'historiographie: bilan et perspectives', unpublished paper presented at the Premières Assises de l'historiographie luxembourgeoise, 10 December 2005.

state. Among the political and intellectual elites of the different groups, the quest for consensus and harmony overruled the religious battles.

Belgium, on the contrary, did not have a tradition of religious plurality, and therefore the process of 'pillarisation' was not so much the result of a search for balance between these groups. It was traditionally a homogeneously Catholic country, in which a struggle between two opposing ideals of state-building clashed directly: those who wanted to maintain the Catholic Church as a dominant political force were confronted with the advocates (often Catholic church-goers themselves) of a clear separation between church and state. Pillarisation in Belgium, therefore, was a political battle between clericals and anti-clericals rather than a segmentation between different religious groups.

In both Belgium and the Netherlands the 'culture wars' between the religious groups implied diverging interpretations of the national past,⁷ and prominent intellectuals within each were often historical narrators. For the representation of the national past, however, the aforementioned structural difference between the social-religious cleavages was crucial. Even if religious diversity in the Netherlands was more important than in Belgium, the accounts these different groups gave of national history were much more complementary than those of clericals and anti-clericals in Belgium.

The Dutch Catholics did in some instances fundamentally challenge the traditional Protestant account of historical facts. Thus, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they often referred to the episode of the 'martyrs of Gorcum', a group of monks crudely put to death by the so-called Watergeuzen (Protestant troops operating by water) in order to expose the excesses of the Dutch Revolt. Nevertheless, Dutch Catholics were not in favour of the sanctification of these martyrs in 1867, because they did not want to offend the Protestant majority.⁸ Rather than fundamentally trying to change the dominant vision of national history, Dutch Catholics either reinterpreted the traditional narrative or tried to extend its boundaries in such a way that Catholic elements could be included.⁹ Illustrative of this first strategy was the emphasis put by Catholic historians and intellectuals on the Erasmian rather than Protestant ideals of the Netherlands' central national hero, William of Orange. By doing

⁷From this we exclude the writing of the history of their own emancipating movement, as exercised among all the social-religious groups that are described here.

⁸H. de Valk, 'Nationale of pauselijke helden? De heiligverklaring van de martelaren van Gorcum in 1867', *Trajecta*, 6 (1997), 139–55.

⁹This view is corroborated by the recent biography of one of the most important nineteenth-century Catholic historians of the Netherlands, W. F. J. Nuyens: A. van der Zeijden, *Katholieke identiteit en historisch bewustzijn: W.F.J. Nuyens (1823–1894) en zijn 'nationale' geschiedschrijving* (Hilversum, 2002).

so, they felt entitled to participate fully, in 1933, in the great national celebrations surrounding the commemoration of William's 400th birthday.¹⁰ Another instance of this strategy can be found in the efforts by Catholic intellectuals to direct the focus towards the conversion to Catholicism of the Netherlands' outstanding seventeenth-century poet, Joost van den Vondel.¹¹

The second strategy mainly consisted of refocusing attention from the seventeenth century to the Middle Ages.¹² This, however, implied less a rejection of the Dutch nation as such than a rereading of its origins. The promotion of St Willibrord, the early medieval evangeliser of the Low Countries (and, therefore, a pre-Reformation figure), as a national hero was a clear manifestation of this 'widening' of the national historical narrative.¹³ This extension of the national narrative was sympathetically received by Protestant historians (such as Johan Huizinga) even before the Second World War, and after the war gained full academic acceptance in the view of those historians who considered the bishopric of Utrecht (founded by Willibrord) as the prefiguration of the (northern) Netherlands.¹⁴ On the other hand, the history professors appointed in 1922 at the newly founded Catholic University of Nijmegen turned out not to be active promoters of this medievalisation of the national past. One among them, J. D. M. Cornelissen, even dedicated important contributions to central icons of the liberal Protestant master narrative, such as Rembrandt and Johan De Witt.¹⁵

Even more than the Catholics, the so-called orthodox Protestants based their critique of the liberal Protestant model on a specific view of national history. In the work of their founding father, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer,

¹⁰P. B. M. Blaas, 'Tussen twee herdenkingsjaren (1884–1933): het beeld van Willem van Oranje in de wetenschappelijke geschiedschrijving rond 1900', in E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier and A. E. M. Janssen (eds), *Willem van Oranje in de historie: vier eeuwen beeldvorming en geschiedschrijving* (Utrecht, 1984), pp. 137–60.

¹¹See most recently M.-T. Leuker, *Künstler als Helden und Heilige: nationale und konfessionelle Mythologie im Werk J.A. Alberdingk Thijms (1820–1889) und seiner Zeitgenossen* (Münster, 2001).

¹²P. Raedts, 'Katholieken op zoek naar een Nederlandse identiteit, 1814–1898', *Bijdragen en de Mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, 107 (1992), 713–725; P. Raedts, 'Tussen Rome en Den Haag: de integratie van de Nederlandse katholieken in kerk en staat', in H. te Velde and F. Verhage (eds), *De eenheid en de delen: zuilvorming, onderwijs en natievorming in Nederland 1850–1900* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 29–44.

¹³Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden*, pp. 67–8.

¹⁴See, among others, B. H. Slicher van Bath, 'Herschreven historie' [written 1945], *Herschreven Historie: schetsen en studiën op het gebied van der middeleeuwse geschiedenis* (Leiden, 1949), pp. 1–14, and, more elaborately, Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford, 1995).

¹⁵J. D. M. Cornelissen, *Rembrandt: de eendracht van het land. Een historische studie* (Nijmegen, 1941); J. D. M. Cornelissen, *Johan de Witt en de vrijheid: rede uitgesproken op den 22sten dies natalis der R.K. universiteit te Nijmegen op 17 Oct. 1945* (Nijmegen, 1945).

historical research and political action were inextricably intertwined. Whereas the Catholic view of Dutch history had to be seen as an attempt to divert attention from the golden age, Groen's 'anti-revolutionary' view consisted, on the contrary, of an over-accentuation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the history of the nation. Structurally, therefore, it fitted well in the predominant master narrative. In Groen's interpretation, however, the Dutch glory of the seventeenth century was much less a triumph of tolerance and freedom than one of Calvinism. The success of the Dutch Revolt was described as proof that the Netherlands was a chosen nation, and Groen's sympathies lay unequivocally with those who had understood this fundamental truth: the Orange stadtholders and the Calvinist party. The so-called Statist party, on the contrary, was considered to have betrayed the national cause.

However antithetical this view was to the dominant master narrative, the bridges between them were never entirely burnt. Once more, reconciliation between them appeared to be possible through a common positive assessment of William of Orange. His biography allowed him to be considered as both a Calvinist revolutionary and an Erasmian reconciler, which enabled different religious groups to value him as the 'Father of the Fatherland'. The academically outstanding biography written in 1933 on the occasion of William's 400th anniversary, by the prominent Calvinist historian A. A. van Schelven, seemed to complete this process of reconciliation.¹⁶ During that same period, however, orthodox Protestant and Catholic historians grew closer to each other in their struggle against what they considered to be the 'secularisation' of national history by liberal historians. Thus the dual antithesis between Protestant and Catholic, on the one hand, and between confessional and secularised, on the other, seemed to neutralise each other, and to facilitate the triumph of a pacifying interpretation of national history. This became particularly clear during the early days of the Second World War, when historians from the different groups tried to bolster the national mood by writing popularising national histories.¹⁷

Even if the dreams that were cherished by many historians during the war to 'de-pillarise' national historiography were not realised after the Second World War, the religious cleavages did not threaten the national master narrative.¹⁸

¹⁶A. A. van Schelven, *Willem van Oranje: een boek ter nagedachtenis van idealen en teleurstellingen* (Amsterdam, 1933).

¹⁷A good example is *Nederland, erfdeel en taak*, written in 1940 by the liberal historian Pieter Geyl, the orthodox Protestant historian A.A. van Schelven, the Catholic philosopher and historian Frederik Sassen and the liberal Protestant theologian Hendrik Kraemer. See, on the genesis and content of this book, Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden*, pp. 74–5.

¹⁸See P. B. M. Blaas, 'Nederlandse geschiedschrijving na 1945', in W.W. Mijnhardt (ed.), *Kantelend geschiedbeeld: Nederlandse historiografie sinds 1945* (Utrecht/Amsterdam, 1983), pp. 9–47.

Histories written by Catholic and orthodox Protestant historians seemed to differ from those of their liberal counterparts only in terms of the attention they paid to the role of their own group in history. Only in the 1990s, with the accession of a new generation to the history chairs of Dutch universities, did even this difference seem to vanish.

In Belgium, on the contrary, the confessional tensions were soon translated into two separate master narratives of national history. The abovementioned account of the continuous struggle for freedom from foreign domination became a liberal, and therefore anti-clerical, monopoly. Since most of these foreign rulers had been Catholic monarchs, nineteenth-century Catholic historians were not keen to adopt this theme. The interpretation of the Dutch Revolt of the sixteenth century became one of the main battlefields where the Catholic and the liberal interpretations of the national past clashed.¹⁹ While for the liberals sixteenth-century Protestantism was one of the main manifestations of the Belgian sense of freedom, the Catholics blamed it for having uprooted the Catholic character of the Belgian people (the origins of which they retraced to the early evangelisation of the country in the first centuries after the fall of Rome).²⁰ Protagonists in this battle, such as William of Orange and Marnix of Saint-Aldegonde, were easily depicted as the devils in disguise.

The glorious rebirth of Catholic Belgium was situated by these Catholic historians during the reign of the Catholic Archdukes Albert and Isabella (1598–1621).²¹ They had reigned over a pseudo-autonomous satellite state, and had made the Southern Netherlands into an epicentre of the Counter-Reformation. The two centuries of (first Spanish, then Austrian) Habsburg rule were seen by Catholic historians less as a period of foreign domination than as an epoch of sincere Catholic life. The only foreign domination that was recognised as such by the Catholic historians was that of the French revolutionaries (1794–1814), and the only modern revolt they glorified was the armed resistance, in 1798, of large parts of the Belgian countryside against the secularising and centralising policies of the French. It was with much more unease that the liberals gave to that same *Boerenkrijg* a place in their narrative about the succession of struggles for freedom. Only in periods when Belgium was

¹⁹See, for example, U. Vermeulen, 'Katholieken en liberalen tegenover de Gentse Pacificatiefeesten (1876)', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, nieuwe reeks, 20 (1966), 167–85; H. Verschaffel, 'Marnix van Sint-Aldegonde, een symbool in de clerico-liberale strijd', *Spiegel Historiael*, 20 (1985), 190–95.

²⁰See, for example, L. Van der Essen, *Le Siècle des saints (625–739): étude sur les origines de la Belgique chrétienne* (Brussels, 1943).

²¹See, for example, D. Diagre, 'Aartshertog Albrecht, modelheerser of engel des doods?', in A. Morelli (ed.), *De grote mythen van België, Wallonië en Vlaanderen* (Brussels, 1996), pp. 107–18.

threatened anew by French imperialism, notably during the reign of Napoleon III, did this reticence truly vanish.²²

The liberal constitution of 1830 appeared in this Catholic picture not as the ultimate climax of the struggle for freedom, but only as an instrument to safeguard the Catholic 'national character' of Belgium against the Protestant despotism of William I. Much more than these constitutional rules (which, according to Catholics, were misused by the liberals to secularise Belgium), however, Catholics trusted the 'good monarchs', in the past and in the present, as guarantors of the Catholic integrity of the country.²³

During the first decades of the twentieth century, this gap between the Catholic and the liberal vision of the national past was partly overcome, at least at the level of academic historiography. The 'scientification' of historiography was carried out by both liberal and Catholic historians, who found common ground in their quest for historical objectivity. Whereas the professor of national history in the French-speaking part of the Catholic University of Leuven, Charles Terlinden, stuck until after the Second War to his Catholic and fiercely monarchical view of the national past, his counterpart in the Dutch-speaking part, Léon Van der Essen, was a great admirer of the liberal Pirenne (who himself was a pupil of the ultramontane Catholic historian Godefroid Kurth). Even then, however, their respective views on national history remained largely coloured by their confessional backgrounds. Van der Essen's *magnum opus*, for which he was honoured with a laudatory foreword by Pirenne himself, dealt with Alexander Farnese, the military and political leader who was responsible for the fact that the Southern Netherlands had remained under the wings of Spain's Catholic monarch.²⁴

During the second half of the twentieth century even this difference disappeared, although in the choice of topics the difference between historians of the Catholic universities (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve) on the one hand, and those of the state universities (Ghent, Liege) and of the 'liberal' universities (Brussels) on the other, remains important today. This evolution, however, was not only due to the diminished importance of the religious quarrels, but also to the fact that Belgian historians lost their appetite for national history. This in turn can be explained by the challenges which class and ethnicity as conceptual structuring devices for history mounted against national history.

²²L. François, *De Boerenkrijg: twee eeuwen feit en fictie* (Leuven, 1998).

²³See, among others, M. Beyen, 'Belgium: A Nation that Failed to Become Ethnic', in L. Eriksonas and L. Müller (eds), *Statehood before and beyond Ethnicity: Minor States in Northern and Eastern Europe* (Brussels, 2005), pp. 341–52.

²⁴L. Van der Essen, *Alexandre Farnèse, prince de Parme, gouverneur général des Pays-Bas (1545–1592)*, 5 vols (Brussels, 1933–7).

As for the importance of Catholicism, the situation in Luxembourg was quite similar to that in Belgium, but the discursive power of the Catholic Church had been and still is far stronger. The anti-clerical movements had far more problems to produce an independent and audible narrative. In Luxembourg, even laicistic historians consider Catholicism as an essential component of national identity. The importance of Catholicism was often stressed as a positive force in the context of nation-building.²⁵ The religious minorities (Protestants and Jews) never tried (or failed) to offer a different version of history, their communities being far too small. Neither were anti-clerical movements such as the liberals or the socialists strong enough to enforce a competitive model. Even if Luxembourgian society is largely secularised today, there is still no coherent 'History of Luxembourg' with a critical apprehension of the role of the Catholic Church.²⁶

Materialism and idealism: class as a variable threat

Just as the character of the confessional battles differed strongly in the three countries, the same can be said about the social struggle. Since Belgium was touched earlier and more fundamentally by large-scale industrialisation, and since this industrialisation was more strongly situated in heavy industry, socialism took shape at an earlier date, too. Being rooted in the experience of industrial labour (even if the first promoters of socialist ideals were bourgeois intellectuals rather than proletarians) made it very receptive to Marxist influences. This openness to Marxism was even enhanced by the fact that socialism in Belgium had to take its place in the existing antithesis between clericals and anti-clericals. Almost automatically, the socialist movement was embraced by the anti-clerical 'pillar'. Within this anti-clerical pillar, even among progressive liberal intellectuals, Marxism became a respectable line of thought.

In the Netherlands, on the contrary, the socialist movement was not only weaker (it would send its first representatives to Parliament only during the First World War), but it was also much less influenced by Marxism, or even by a strong class consciousness. If grassroots militancy by industrial factory workers did exist, Dutch socialism was dominated by intellectuals enamoured

²⁵*Nos Cahiers*, 12/1 (1991): thematic edition dedicated to the relation between Catholicism and Luxembourg, with articles among others by P. Dostert, P. Margue and G. Trausch. *Nos Cahiers* is a Catholic cultural journal. Future studies will have to answer the question of whether the Catholic Church was not partly a counter-power to the nation-state in the nineteenth century. The above-mentioned conclusions are in any case much more valid for the twentieth than for the nineteenth century.

²⁶After 1945 Luxembourgian historiography was largely dominated by generations of historians who can be more or less related to the Catholic milieu.

by the dream of reforming the whole of society without taking class consciousness as a starting point. Religious utopianism rather than fierce anticlericalism dominated the discourse of these intellectuals.

The implications of this difference for the way in which national historiography was conceptualised were immense. For one thing, Belgian socialist intellectuals before the First World War challenged Belgian national history radically by stressing that the Belgian Revolution of 1830, while originally born from a proletarian revolt, had been 'stolen' by the bourgeoisie. Among Flemish socialists, many of whom cherished Greater Dutch affinities, the Belgian uprising was even presented as a mistake from the start.²⁷ Even if this socialist revisionism with regard to the Belgian Revolution became less prominent after the First World War – when the Socialist party had been accepted into the political system of the country – it would nevertheless recur frequently throughout the twentieth century.²⁸ Dutch socialists before the First World War felt uneasy in their nation, too, but they never had an equally strong historical motif to legitimise their reticence. Moreover, they were too weak ever to threaten that Dutch nation.

The same can be said for Luxembourg. The leftist intellectuals did not have an historical event which they could use as a starting point for an alternative narrative. The *Klëppelkrich* (1798), a religious and agrarian uprising during the first years of the French republican regime, was profoundly counter-revolutionary, and the social disturbances of 1917–21 were only marginally exploited to build a new discourse over Luxembourgian history. The republican movement, which gained strength at the end of the First World War in the industrial south, did not survive the national and monarchical revival in the 1930s, which culminated in the centenary of the Congress of London, in 1939.²⁹ In the 1960s the communist historian Jean Kill tried to offer a coherent Marxist history of Luxembourg, stressing the importance of social history. However, he remained too strongly bound by the classical Luxembourgian master narrative to be considered really innovative.³⁰ The more

²⁷M. Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland: de vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WOI* (Tielt, 2005), pp. 275–81.

²⁸Notably in the work of M. Bologne, *La Révolution prolétarienne de 1830* (Brussels, 1930), which would even be republished in 1980.

²⁹C. Wey, 'Le Centenaire de l'Indépendance et sa commémoration en 1939', *Hémecht*, 41 (1989), pp. 29–53.

³⁰J. Kill's book, *1000jähriges Luxemburg: woher? – wohin? Ein Beitrag zum besseren Verständnis der Geschichte des Luxemburger Landes* (Luxembourg, 1963), creates its structures by using the classic elements of Luxembourgian historiography, such as the foundation myth or the theme of foreign dominations (*Fremdherrschaften*), etc.

recent publications by Denis Scuto have not yet provided a comprehensive vision of the country's history.³¹

More important than the role of these partisan views on national history was the fact that Marxist influences penetrated Belgian historiography much more easily than the Dutch and Luxembourgian counterparts. This can be illustrated by comparing the aforementioned great syntheses of national history, those of P. J. Blok and Henri Pirenne. Whereas the former seemed to pay only secondary attention to economic factors, for the latter the origins of Belgium were closely linked to its role as the commercial crossroads of Europe. Even if this was a strong case for the antiquity of Belgium, the existence of the nation was not presented as an axiomatic fact but as the cultural and political result of contingent economic factors. Pirenne's view was less influenced by the Marxist view of historical materialism than by the economic history of the 'Catheder socialist' Gustav Schmoller. Nonetheless, the openness it created towards Marxist patterns of explanation would remain considerable among Pirenne's pupils of the 'Ghent school', which was strongly oriented to the French *Annales* (largely unknown in the Netherlands).³² Because of their quest for economic and social explanations, they were little inclined to write national histories. This did not prevent Pirenne's direct spiritual 'children' (such as François-Louis Ganshof and Hans Van Werveke) from collaborating on different projects of national history (see below). It would be his most prominent spiritual heir, Jan Dhondt, who, in the 1960s, undertook one of the most radical attacks on the concept of national history as such.³³ By doing so, this overtly Marxist historian paradoxically drew the logical conclusion from the premises that had been at the basis of Pirenne's triumphalist national history. In the interpretation of the Belgian Revolution, Dhondt's heritage is visible even today: one of his most famous pupils, the influential Brussels historian Els Witte, proposes a class-based approach to that revolution, whereas the more 'idealistic' Leuven historians tend to stress its proto-nationalist basis and the fervour of cultural nationalism that erupted in its immediate wake.³⁴

In this respect, the difference with the Dutch historian Jan Romein is very striking. Although very controversial because of his communist affiliation, he

³¹D. Scuto, *Sous le signe de la grande grève de mars 1921* (Esch-sur-Alzette, 1990).

³²W. Prevenier, 'L'Ecole des "Annales" et l'historiographie néerlandaise', *Septentrion*, 7 (1978), 47–54.

³³J. Dhondt, 'Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines' (1966), *Machten en mensen: de belangrijkste studies van Jan Dhondt over de geschiedenis van de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Gent, 1976), pp. 63–119. See in this respect also Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden*, p. 404.

³⁴On that difference, see M. Beyen, 'Een onafwendbaar toeval: de Belgisch-patriottische geschiedschrijving over de Belgische Revolutie', in P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel (eds), *De erfenis van 1830* (Louvain, 2006), pp. 75–89.

nevertheless became more and more interested during the 1930s in national history. Shortly before the Second World War he published, with his wife, Annie Romein, a four-volume series of short biographies of those whom he deemed the most important persons from Dutch history (*Erflaters van onze beschaving*). This would result during the Second World War in several pamphlets in which he tried to retrace the Dutch national 'soul' through history.³⁵ With this idealistic quest, he seemed far removed from a Marxist approach, and came very close to the grand narrative as it had been coined by historians such as Fruin, Blok and Huizinga. Marxist historians in the Netherlands who did not engage in writing national histories seemed to distance themselves from the historical establishment of their country. That was the case with Romein's Amsterdam colleague in economic history Nicolaas Posthumus. Although he gained an international reputation for his studies in the field of economic history and for his International Institute for Social History (created in 1935), he always remained somehow an outsider to the Dutch historical guild.³⁶

Even in 1959 the Utrecht historian J. C. Boogman felt compelled to complain about the dominance of the national (or even patriotic) perspective in Dutch historiography, at the cost of, among other things, more internationally and economically oriented approaches to history.³⁷ However, a change was already starting to take place, and in the 1960s Dutch historiography diverged from the 'national and pillarised' perspective by which it had been dominated for more than half a century.³⁸ Even so, the weight of class as a structuring principle appears always to have remained lighter in the Netherlands than in Belgium, whereas cultural explanations of history have been far more important. A striking illustration of this difference can be found in the popularity in the Netherlands of the concept of 'political culture' as an organising principle for national history.³⁹ In Belgium the introduction of this concept

³⁵See on Romein, among others, A. Otto, *Het Ruisen van de Tijd: over de Theoretische Geschiedenis van Jan Romein* (Amsterdam, 1998).

³⁶On Posthumus, see L. Noordegraaf, 'Nicolaas Wilhelmus Posthumus (1880–1960): van gloeiend marxist tot entrepreneur', in: J.C.H. Blom (ed.), *Een brandpunt van geleerdheid in de hoofdstad: de Universiteit van Amsterdam rond 1900 in 15 portretten* (Hilversum/Amsterdam, 1992), pp. 287–312. On the genesis of the International Institute for Social History, see: M. Hunink, *De papieren van de revolutie: het Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, 1935–1947* (Amsterdam, 1986).

³⁷J. C. Boogman, *Vaderlandse geschiedenis (na de middeleeuwen) in hedendaags perspectief: enige kanttekeningen en beschouwingen* (Groningen, 1959).

³⁸Blaas, 'Nederlandse geschiedschrijving na 1945'. More specifically for the rise of economic history, see W. J. Wieringa, 'De ontplooiing van economische en sociale geschiedenis in Nederland', in H. Baudet and H. van der Meulen (eds), *Kernproblemen der economische geschiedenis* (Groningen, 1978), pp. 349–55.

³⁹Most notably in R. Aerts, H. de Liagre Böhl, P. de Rooy and H. te Velde, *Land van kleine gebaren: een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland, 1780–1990* (Nijmegen, 1999).

has been impeded by the attachment of historians to social and economical concepts such as 'interest' and 'class'.

The litmus test of the nation: language and ethnicity

The one competing concept, however, that seriously threatened Belgian national history writing, while strengthening its Dutch and Luxembourgian counterparts, was that of ethnicity, taken as a concept referring to origin in a (more or less) biological sense. Since in the nineteenth century the importance of language as a marker of ethnicity became more important than ever, and ethnicity itself came to be seen as a criterion for defining a nation, writing a national history of a bilingual country such as Belgium became a highly problematic affair.⁴⁰ This was all the more true since the Belgian elites, deeply influenced by French centralism, clearly opted for unilingually French systems of justice, politics and higher education. The language of the Flemish, who constituted half of the Belgian population, was thus pushed back into the private sphere. Throughout the nineteenth century, several attempts were made by Belgian historians to deny that Belgian bilingualism was based on an ethnic dichotomy. For most of the nineteenth-century historians, such as Henri Moke, who wrote his *Histoire de Belgique* in the 1850s, it was evident that the ancestors of the Belgians were predominantly of Germanic stock. This genealogy fitted above all in the liberal narrative of a secular Belgian struggle for freedom, since the Germanic tribes had been, since the humanists, associated with the spirit of liberty.

By the 1860s, however, this assertion became ever more difficult to sustain. On the basis of his research into physical anthropology, the Brussels historian Léon Vanderkindere concluded that the Dutch-speaking Flemings descended, largely speaking, from Germanic tribes, whereas the French-speaking Walloons were of Celtic origin.⁴¹ Although the progressive and francophone Vanderkindere was sympathetic to the aspirations of the Flemish movement, his scientific results were certainly not driven by the desire to create a schism within Belgium. If anything, Vanderkindere was a fierce Belgian nationalist for whom ethnic diversity was a trademark which made Belgium different from France, the country that was considered a threat by many Belgians during this period.

Vanderkindere's thesis with regard to Belgian ethnic origins would later be corroborated not only by other physical anthropologists, such as Emile Houzé, but

⁴⁰See, for most of this paragraph, M. Beyen, 'Natural-born Nations? National Historiography in Belgium and the Netherlands between a "Tribal" and a Social-cultural Paradigm', *Storia della Storiografia*, 38 (2000), 17–22.

⁴¹See K. Wils, 'Tussen metafysica en antropometrie: het rasbegrip bij Léon Vanderkindere', in M. Beyen and G. Vanpaemel (eds), *Rasechte wetenschap? Het rasbegrip tussen wetenschap en politiek vóór de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Leuven/Apeldoorn, 1998), pp. 81–99.

also by the Liège historian Godefroid Kurth, who tried to explain this ethnic difference historically. According to him, at the time of the Germanic migrations, a large forest (the so-called Charbon Forest) would have been situated at more or less the precise site of the actual linguistic border. This forest would have prevented the Germanic tribes from migrating *en masse* further south.

For Kurth's pupil Henri Pirenne the bi-ethnicity of Belgium was not something to be proved, but a simple fact. The whole challenge of his *Histoire de Belgique* was to prove that Belgium, in spite of this ethnic duality, was an historical nation. The evidence that he put forward to underpin his thesis was at one and the same time economic *and* cultural: as the central marketplace of north-western Europe, Belgium had since the Middle Ages become the crossroads of Latin and Germanic cultural influences and, therefore, the crossroads of Europe. This interpretation of national history was so successful that it definitively put an end to the nineteenth-century belief in the ethnic unity of Belgium – a belief that in the patriotic heyday of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had led to the belief in the existence of a distinct 'Belgian soul'.⁴² Only a fanatically patriotic historian such as Charles Terlinden would, until the Second World War, defend the thesis of the ethnic (Germanic) unity of Belgium. Ironically, he did so in an attempt to prevent the German occupiers from trying to divide the country on the basis of ethnic borders.⁴³

The tragedy of Pirenne's national history was that, while trying to strengthen Belgian patriotism, it furthered the cause of the then radicalising Flemish, and to a lesser degree also that of Walloon nationalism. On the one hand, it corroborated the view that Belgium was ethnically divided (a view for which the Flemish nationalists had found evidence in the works of other Belgian patriots such as Vanderkindere and Kurth); on the other, it became, in the eyes of the Flamings, an icon for the finalistic (and therefore anachronistic) view of national history cherished by the Belgian patriots. When the Flamings, from the second decade of the twentieth century onwards, started constructing a Flemish national history on their own terms, this project was motivated in the first place as an attack on Pirenne.⁴⁴ For this, they found further ammunition in the Greater Dutch view of history (that is, the view which assumed a national affinity between all Dutch-speaking regions in the past) which found its main

⁴²J. Stengers, 'Avant Pirenne: les preuves de l'ancienneté de la nation belge', *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques de Belgique*, 6th ser., vol. 7 (1996), 551–72.

⁴³Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden*, pp. 125–6.

⁴⁴In general on this construction of a Flemish vision of history, see L. Vos, 'Reconstructions of the Past in Belgium and Flanders', in B. Coppieters and M. Huyseune (eds), *Secession, History and the Social Sciences* (Brussels, 2002), pp. 179–206.

academic advocate during the interwar years in the flamboyant Utrecht historian Pieter Geyl.⁴⁵

The construction of a Flemish national history was further aided by the fact that in the patriotic version of Belgian history – and notably in the works of Pirenne – the history of the County of Flanders and the Duchy of Brabant (the two principalities containing the core of modern Flanders) received the lion's share of attention. Many of the events and historical figures central to the patriotic version of history – such as the battle of the Golden Spurs and the popular leader Jacob of Artevelde – were easily fitted into the new Flemish national master narrative. Even the global theme of the succession of foreign domination (see above) was seamlessly recuperated by the Flemish nationalists. The only alteration they had to make was to add one more oppressor to the series: the Belgian state.⁴⁶

Academic historians in Flanders reacted rather ambivalently to this. On the one hand, the most prominent among them were either pupils (such as Van Werveke and Ganshof in Ghent) or admirers (such as Van der Essen in Leuven) of Pirenne and showed enormous loyalty to their master. Participation in direct attacks on his vision of national history was, therefore, not to be expected. On the other hand, they showed very little inclination to defend his thesis. Several reasons can be given for this. First of all, as noted before, they were more interested in transnational social and economic evolutions than in the genesis of a national culture. They also actively participated in a process of emancipating Dutch-speaking culture in Flanders (and notably in the Dutchifying of Flemish universities), a process opposed by Pirenne. For these historians, it was unthinkable to be fully associated with an historical vision that, while recognising the ethnic diversity of Belgium, stressed its cultural and political unity.

The answer to the dilemma was a multi-layered national loyalty: these historians participated, as indicated earlier, in different projects of national

⁴⁵On this Greater Dutch vision of history, see P. B. M. Blaas, 'De visie van de Groot-Nederlandse historiografen: aanleiding tot een nieuwe historiografie?', in J. Craeybeckx, F. Daeleman and F.G. Scheelings (eds), *'1585: Op gescheiden wegen ...': handelingen van het colloquium over de scheiding der Nederlanden, gehouden op 22–23 november 1985, te Brussel* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 197–218; L. Wils, 'De zogenaamde Groot-Nederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland: historische opstellen, gebundeld en aangeboden aan de schrijver bij het bereiken van zijn emeritaat aan de K.U. Leuven* (Leuven, 1994), pp. 384–482.

⁴⁶See, for this whole process, J. Tollebeek, 'De Guldensporenslag: de cultus van 1302 en de Vlaamse strijd', in A. Morelli (ed.), *De grote mythen uit de geschiedenis van België, Vlaanderen en Wallonië* (Berchem, 1996), pp. 191–202; S. Rottiers, 'Jacob van Artevelde, de Belgische Willem Tell?', in Morelli, *De grote mythen*, pp. 77–93; M. Beyen, *Held voor alle werk: de vele gedaanten van Tijl Uilenspiegel* (Antwerpen/Baarn, 1998).

history (without initiating these projects themselves), even if the projects were intended to promote contesting national loyalties. They also participated in Flemish nationalist as well as the Greater Dutch and the Belgian patriot historiography.⁴⁷ The 'Burgundian' view on Belgian history, the basis of the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, was in essence an attempt to combine these different angles within one flexible view of national history. By stressing that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century process of state-building contained the germs of a nation encompassing the whole of the Low Countries, these historians (among whom Van der Essen was the driving force) did not mutilate but extend the Belgian patriot interpretation. But in many respects, Pirenne had already done this himself.⁴⁸

After the Second World War, Flemish historians would, to some degree, continue to hold this undecided position in the field of national historiography. Belgian history for them remained the natural object of their researches, but they very rarely engaged in synthetic views of national history as such. Equally few, however, were their attempts to undermine the Belgian perspective by presenting an alternative, Flemish vision of history. The fact that no course on Belgian or Flemish history was part of the history curricula of the Flemish universities undoubtedly contributed to this retreat from the domain of national history. After 1946 courses on Belgian history were replaced in both Leuven and Ghent by courses on the history of the Low Countries.⁴⁹ The 'Burgundian' view of history had become the 'official' way of writing national history in Flanders. The popularity of this was due less to the fact that it satisfied the needs of the newly created Benelux (which could hardly be named a new nation) than to its safe character: it allowed Flemish historians *not* to choose between a Belgian patriotic and a Flamingant interpretation of their national history. If the Belgian patriotic interpretation had become obsolete, the Flamingant one had rather become suspect since the collaboration of large parts of the Flemish movement during the Second World War. Significantly, the first large-scale postwar 'history of Flanders' was written in 1972 by Robert Van Roosbroeck, a historian who had been a prominent member (and probably co-founder) of the Flemish SS, and who therefore lived in exile in the Netherlands. The continuity between this three-volume *Geschiedenis van Vlaanderen* and the five-volume work of the same title published in the 1930s under the supervision

⁴⁷See on this, M. Beyen, "Een werk waarop ieder Vlaming fier kan zijn?" Het boek *100 Grote Vlamingen* als praalafade van het Vlaams-nationale geschiedenisbouwwerk', in J. Tollebeek, G. Verbeek and T. Verschaffel (eds), *De lectuur van het verleden: opstellen over de geschiedenis aangeboden aan Reginald de Schryver* (Leuven, 1998), pp. 411–40; Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden*, pp. 395–404.

⁴⁸J. Tollebeek, 'Geyl en Van der Essen', *Ex officina*, 3 (1986) 139–51.

⁴⁹Tollebeek, 'Uitgedaagd door historische gebondenheid'.

of the same Van Roosbroeck, was striking. This time, however, for obvious reasons there was no collaboration with prominent Flemish academic historians.

This lack of engagement with truly national historiography did not, however, prevented most of these Flemish academic historians from actively participating in Flamingant cultural organisations and collaborating in Flamingant historical initiatives, such as the *Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging* (1974–75). Overt statements against the Flamingant historiography were, until recently, made only by the Leuven historian Lode Wils, most notably in his *Van Clovis tot Happart*, a general overview of nation-building in the Low Countries, which first appeared in 1991 and recently reappeared under the title *Van Clovis tot Di Rupo*. From a much more deconstructivist point of view, the Ghent historian and journalist Marc Reynebeau came to an even more radical *démasqué* of Flemish nationalist historiography in his *Het klauwen van de Leeuw: Vlaamse identiteit van de 12de tot de 21ste eeuw* (1995). As a consequence of this growing disapproval with the militant manner of writing the history of Flanders, the urge was felt to write a new, thoroughly revisionist encyclopaedia of the Flemish movement. When this *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging* appeared in 1998, it revealed the rather detached and ‘constructivist’ way in which Flemish academics were involved in the process of writing national history. This same constructivist perspective, together with the resurrection of an extreme right-wing Flemish nationalism, has contributed to the fact that some Flemish historians have recently found their way back, first to the history of Belgian patriotism, and later to that of Belgium itself.⁵⁰

Since the francophone Belgians, generally speaking, maintained a stronger loyalty to the Belgian state than did their Dutch-speaking compatriots, Pirenne’s theses met with much less opposition among them. With a few exceptions, such as Charles Terlinden, they remained as far removed from every form of patriotic single-mindedness as Pirenne himself had done, but nonetheless Belgium for them remained the logical framework for writing national history. Unlike their Flemish counterparts, francophone universities have continued to teach courses on Belgian history, and francophone historians received the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* with much less enthusiasm than did their Dutch-speaking colleagues. Even if some of them did collaborate on the project, many found it curious that the short time-span during which the ‘17 Provinces’ had shown any unity was presented as the defining moment of national history.⁵¹ The doubts of

⁵⁰N. Beyens, ‘Van nieuwe Belgen en vaderlandsloze beeldenstormers’, in *Nieuwste Tijd: Kwartaalschrift voor eigentijdse geschiedenis*, 1 (2002), 71–86.

⁵¹Illustrative of this attitude was Jean Stengers, ‘A propos de deux ouvrages de l’histoire néerlandaise: le “Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse stam” de M. Geyl et l’“Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden”’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et de l’histoire*, 28 (1950), 309–21.

Flemish historians have always lingered with regard to the 'national inspiration' of the Belgian Revolution but seem to have been nearly absent from the works of their francophone counterparts. In particular, the Brussels historian Jean Stengers has repeatedly tried to prove this in an extremely erudite and magisterial manner.⁵²

It is probably no coincidence that this same historian has been one of the first Belgian academics to tackle seriously the painful question of Belgium's colonial past. In his publications Stengers has always tried, by a painstakingly meticulous use of historical critique, to reject both the patriotic triumphalism about Belgium's colonial history and the debunking discourse in which Leopold II's involvement with Congo appears as a genocide.⁵³ Stengers' position has been defended by another francophone historian, Jean Vellut (of the University of Louvain-la-Neuve), who has become the leading expert in the field.⁵⁴ In Flanders, colonialism until recently has been nearly exclusively left to historians operating in the margins of the academic field.⁵⁵ If their position has been much more at the side of the debunkers, this probably once again reveals the weaker loyalty of Flemish historians to the Belgian state.

Within the francophone community, however, a Wallingant movement began to take shape in the last decades of the nineteenth century. If this movement only gained political momentum in its reaction to the claims of the Flemish movement, it nevertheless had its roots in a pre-existing Walloon regionalism. Before the First World War the large majority of the Walloon movement had already abandoned its hope for a unilingually francophone Belgium and opted for a federal solution, in which both linguistic communities would gain a high degree of autonomy (without therefore abandoning the ambition to retain a bilingual Flanders, while maintaining Wallonia as exclusively francophone). Although the anti-Belgian sentiments within it always remained marginal, Wallingant historians nevertheless strove for a correction of the allegedly

⁵²See, for example, J. Stengers, 'De Belgische Revolutie', in Anne Morelli (ed.), *De grote mythen van België, Vlaanderen en Wallonië* (Brussel, 1996), pp. 127–35; J. Stengers, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, 2 vols (Brussels, 2000–2). For a critique on Stengers, see Els Witte, 'Op zoek naar het natiegevoel in België: enkele kanttekeningen bij *Les Racines de la Belgique* van Jean Stengers', *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen* (2001), 176–87, and Beyen, 'Een onafwendbaar toeval'.

⁵³A compilation of Stengers's contributions on colonial history can be found in J. Stengers, *Congo: mythes et réalités. 100 ans d'histoire* (Gembloux, 1989).

⁵⁴This has become particularly visible in his curatorship of the exhibition 'Het geheugen van Congo: de koloniale tijd', which has been highly criticised (especially by Flemish critics) for being too sympathetic to Leopold. See J. Vellut (ed.), *Het geheugen van Congo: de koloniale tijd* (Tervuren, 2005).

⁵⁵Most notably by D. Vangroenweghe, *Rood rubber: Leopold II en zijn Congo* (Brussel, 1985).

'unitarian' view of history as constructed by Pirenne.⁵⁶ The character of this correction, however, was thoroughly different from the one attempted by their Flamingant colleagues. The latter tried, from the early decades of the twentieth century onwards, to perceive through the whole of the history of the Low Countries the traces of a Flemish nation (or at least a Flemish *folk*) – one that was older and therefore more authentic than the Belgian nation. Wallingant historians tried to compensate for Pirenne's overemphasis on the history of Brabant and Flanders by focusing on the importance the eastern and southeastern provinces had had (especially until the thirteenth century) in the culture and economy of the Low Countries.⁵⁷ As the young Liège historian Léon-Ernest Halkin remarked in 1939, the aim of such a strategy was not to shed light on some pre-existing Walloon nation, but only on Walloon people in the past. Unlike his Flamingant colleagues, Halkin saw the task of writing the history of Wallonia as a complement to, rather than as a substitute for, Pirenne.⁵⁸

The project of truly writing a national history of Wallonia – that is, of a region with distinct characteristics – only really started after the Second World War and resulted in works such as Lucien Marchal's *Histoire de Wallonie*, and above all in the multi-volume work *La Wallonie: le pays et les hommes* (1975–81). The academic search for a Walloon national history thus flourished at a time when in Flanders this had become an 'academically incorrect' business. This difference was due to the fact that, on the one hand, Wallingantism never had received the same radically anti-Belgian overtones as Flamingantism, and, on the other hand, Walloon nationalism, unlike its Flemish counterpart, had not been discredited during the Second World War. On the contrary, a stereotypical – though factually accurate – association between collaborationism and Flemish nationalism, on the one hand, and Resistance and Walloon 'regionalism', on the other, has come into being. This explains how, at the francophone University of Brussels, a course on the history of Wallonia and the Walloon movement could be run in 1979, and also why the political authorities of the Walloon region can overtly promote the search for a Walloon identity in the past.⁵⁹ One of the main instru-

⁵⁶See the rather partisan and anti-Pirennist article by P. Carlier, 'Pirenne, historien de la Wallonie?', in F. Bierlaire and J.-L. Kupper (eds), *Henri Pirenne: de la cité de Liège à la ville de Gand, Cahiers de Clio*, no. 86 (1986), 65–78; also see H. Hasquin, *Historiographie et politique: essai sur l'histoire de Belgique et de Wallonie*, 2nd edn (Charleroi, 1982).

⁵⁷Most elaborately in the work of the Pirenne admirer F. Rousseau, *La Meuse et le pays Mosan en Belgique: leur importance avant le 13^e siècle* (Brussels, 1930).

⁵⁸L.-E. Halkin, 'L'enseignement de l'histoire nationale en Wallonie', *Histoire et critique: notes à l'usage des élèves du Cours de Critique*, unpublished syllabus, 1939; in a somewhat altered form, this text also appeared as *La Wallonie devant l'histoire* (Brussels, 1939).

⁵⁹See, on these evolutions, C. Kesteloot, 'Ecrire l'histoire du Mouvement Wallon: une démarche historique et citoyenne?', *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, nos. 13–14 (2004), 17–44.

ments of this quest was the *Encyclopédie du mouvement Wallon*, an obviously partisan undertaking which nevertheless managed to attract the collaboration of many important francophone historians. The difference from the aforementioned *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, which appeared more or less at the same time, is striking. Whereas academic historians in Flanders seem to be mainly involved in the intellectual deconstruction of the Flemish nation (without denying its political existence), Walloon historians gladly participate in the construction of a Walloon nation.

Dutch national historiography, for its part, was largely unconcerned by the challenge of ethnicity. The main marker of ethnicity – language – appeared to be fairly unproblematic in the Dutch case. Certainly, some of the dialects spoken in the peripheral regions of the Netherlands differed from the standard language, which was mainly modelled on the Holland and Brabant idiom. Of these dialects, only Frisian managed to be recognised as a genuine language (and was officially accepted as such in the twentieth century). Together with the memory of a grand Frisian history, this Frisian tongue served as the basis for a separate Frisian identity, whose ethnic core had been underpinned since the early nineteenth century by archaeological and folkloric research.⁶⁰ However, the Frisian movement which tried to promote this identity never seriously threatened the construction of the Dutch national identity. Apart from the radically anti-Dutch and fascist tendencies that became manifest there during the interwar period, it largely remained a regionalist movement which tried to conserve a Frisian specificity *within* the Dutch nation.⁶¹ Even the search for a Frisian national past was mainly framed within the overall Dutch master narrative.⁶² Probably, there are two main reasons why the Frisian movement, unlike its Flemish counterpart, did not evolve into full-blown nationalism. On the one hand, there was the fact that Frisian-speakers never formed a majority or an economically crucial element within the Dutch population. Equally important, however, seems to have been the fact that the linguistic difference between Frisian and standard Dutch was much less than that between French and the Flemish dialects. Not only did this imply a mutual intelligibility between Dutch-speakers and Frisian-speakers (and, most often, the bilingualism of the latter), it also meant that the

⁶⁰See, among others, A. van der Woud, *De Bataafse hut: verschuivingen in het beeld van de geschiedenis, 1750–1850* (Amsterdam, 1990).

⁶¹See G. Jensma, 'The Frisian situation: ethnolinguistic nationalism in the Netherlands', unpublished paper presented at the workshop 'Ethnolinguistic nationalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries', Groningen, 19–20 May 2005. On the Frisian movement in the interwar period, see G. R. Zondergeld, *De Friese beweging in het tijdvak der twee wereldoorlogen* (Leeuwarden, 1978).

⁶²See, for example, L. Brouwer, *De archeologie van een houding: Nederlandse identiteit in de Friese Volksamanak* (Groningen, 1998).

language border could hardly be turned into an ethnic border. Whereas the gap between Germanic and Romance languages was, until well into the twentieth century, generally considered to mark the difference between nearly incommensurable 'national characters', the differences between the Germanic tongues betrayed only slight variants of the same ethnic stock.

The insight that ethnicity never was a hotly debated topic within Dutch identity-building has led many commentators to the conclusion that no ethnic view on history, and therefore no ethnic nationalism, existed in the Netherlands. The origins of the Dutch nation would invariably have been sought in (peaceful) state-building and the development of a culture with proper features. In our view, ethnic explanations were not absent from the interpretations of national history, but they formed a background for them which was so obvious that they scarcely had to be made explicit.⁶³

The idea that the Dutch originated from Germanic tribes (with a small Celtic substrate) has never been seriously put up for discussion, and has often formed the starting point for national histories (e.g. for Blok's *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Volk*). Only the question of which Germanic tribes could be considered to be the true ancestors of the Dutch prompted some debate. During the nineteenth century, it appeared that the old Batavian myth, which had underpinned historical self-understanding during the republic, could no longer meet the academic standards of its time or the identification needs of the modern kingdom of the Netherlands. The Batavian myth fitted well the Hollandic, largely Protestant, and liberal elites of that state, but was ill-equipped to facilitate the integration of religious minorities and the peripheral regions (such as Frisia) into the Dutch nation.

As an answer to these new scientific and political needs, the origins of the Dutch nation were sought, from the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the lucky symbiosis of three Germanic tribes: the Franks dominating the west, the Frisians forming the ethnic core of the north and the Saxons, who constituted the majority of the eastern regions. This theme was dominant in both academic historiography and popular representations of the national past until the Second World War. Later, it retreated to the background because it had become scientifically obsolete, politically discredited and dysfunctional. Ethnic interpretations of the past were no longer acceptable because of the possible associations with racism and Nazism, and they were no longer needed because the Dutch national identity was solid enough without an ethnic background.

⁶³See M. Beyen, 'Naties in gradaties: nationaal en historisch besef in België en Nederland', *Ons erfdeel* (2002), 233–41 which was a response to H. Roodenburg, 'A Self-effacing Nation: Religion, Ethnicity and the Nation-state in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Netherlands', in R. Bendix and H. Roodenburg (eds), *Managing Ethnicity: Perspectives from Folklore Studies, History and Anthropology* (Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 143–54.

During its heyday, however, the theme of the Franks, the Frisians and the Saxons – unmistakably an ethnic explanation of the national past – had played an important role in consolidating Dutch national identity at a time in which it was imperilled by pillarisation and modernisation.⁶⁴ And even if the motif of the Franks, the Frisians and the Saxons was more or less marginalised after the Second World War, it still remains the case that no real alternative has been formulated. In other words, if in the Dutch master narrative an important role is played by tolerance and openness, there is little room for ethnic diversity.⁶⁵

In Luxembourg the concept of ethnicity was always more riddled with ambiguities than in Belgium: although the population by and large spoke German dialects, it was dominated by Dutch monarchs and by French-speaking elites. The quest for an 'ethnic' reading of the Luxembourgian past seems to have been more successful. Therefore, ethnicity and language at first seemed resistant to producing 'sense' in the Luxembourgian context.

When the subject of ethnicity became relevant in the nation-building discourse of the second half of the nineteenth century, Luxembourgian historians were immediately confronted with a problem: had they tried to trace the ethnic origins of the Luxembourgers back to the local Celtic tribe of the Treveri, they would have created too close a connection to the neighbouring German city of Trier. Given the latter's frequent conflict with Luxembourg since medieval times and furthermore the hints at a possible 'Pan-German ancestry' for the Luxembourgers, the idea was not unproblematic. In addition Germany became more and more a synonym for 'the Other' in the nineteenth century, and as a result the Treveri were no longer a real option. At the beginning of the twentieth century the idea that Luxembourg was characterised by a mixture of different ethnicities emerged, thus giving birth to a new and better 'historic race'. In 1911 the very influential intellectual Nicolas Ries wrote: 'Owing to numerous and close relations between Gauls, Romans and Germans, three races and three religions, hostile to each other, clashed and merged on our soil, "in confinio barbarorum", and gave birth to the Luxembourgian people.'⁶⁶ This idea of an ethnic

⁶⁴See extensively on this topic: M. Beyen, 'A Tribal Trinity: The Rise and Fall of the Franks, the Frisians and the Saxons in the Historical Consciousness of the Netherlands since 1850', *European History Quarterly*, 30 (2000), 493–532; other references to the theme can be found in A. de Jong, *De dirigenten van de herinnering: musealisering en nationalisering van de volkscultuur, 1815–1940* (Nijmegen, 2001).

⁶⁵See M. Beyen, 'The Netherlands: An Ethnic Nation in spite of Itself', in P. Broomans et al., *My Beloved Mother tongue. Ethnocultural Nationalism in Small Nations. Inventories and Reflections* (Louvain, forthcoming).

⁶⁶'Par suite des relations nombreuses et intimes entre Gaulois, Romains et Germains, trois races et trois religions hostiles s'étaient heurtées et fusionnées sur notre sol, "in confinio barbarorum" et avaient donné naissance au peuple luxembourgeois': N. Ries, *Essai d'une psychologie du peuple luxembourgeois* (Diekirch, 1911), p. 19 and p. 35.

mixture bore a striking similarity to the concept of the Belgian 'soul', but turned out to be much more successful: it continues to play – less in an ethnic than a cultural sense – an important role in the self-definition of the Luxembourgers. In the context of the European Union, the metaphor of Luxembourg as an original Franco-German combination and/or a bridge between these two countries has proved to be powerful.

The success of this quest for an ethnic reading of the Luxembourgian past and present can be deduced from the growing importance of language in Luxembourg's national identity. Through a combined effort of the monarchs and the elites, *Letzebuergesch* became, from the late nineteenth century onwards, the main marker of Luxembourgian identity. Again, the difference with Belgium, where language became ever more the divisive factor, is striking. The main explanation probably has to be sought in the fact that in Luxembourg, the division between the two language communities does not coincide with the ideological division between left and right.

Accentuating the differences: gendered notions of national history

In none of the three countries was the nation as an organising concept of history seriously challenged by gender. And yet, here again, in the Belgian case gendered notions did contribute more than in the Netherlands and Luxembourg to the destabilisation of national history. More specifically, the dichotomy between a Catholic and a liberal view of history was doubled with a gender dichotomy. Whereas in the liberal narrative of struggle for freedom all the emphasis was on male virtues and male heroes, in the Catholic vision female monarchs appeared as the outstanding protectors of the Catholic faith, as those who created the peaceful circumstances in which the Belgian people could unfold their Catholic 'essence'. Among them, the most prominent places were taken by the Burgundian Duchess Mary,⁶⁷ the Archduchess Isabella⁶⁸ and the Austrian empress Maria Theresa.⁶⁹ This dichotomy is all the more striking because in the liberal 'pillar' women were respected more as intellectuals, and therefore also as historians. The national histories written by liberal women such as Isabelle Gatti de Gamond and Suzanne Tassier (the first female history professor), however, differed very little from the narratives of

⁶⁷See, for example, P. Van Ussel, *Maria van Bourgondië* (Leuven, 1944).

⁶⁸See, for example, C. Terlinden, *L'Archiduchesse Isabelle* (Brussels, 1943).

⁶⁹See, for a relatively recent example, J. Gérard, *Marie Thérèse: impératrice des Belges* (Brussels, 1987).

their male colleagues.⁷⁰ The latter not only wrote her doctoral dissertation on one of the canonical moments of the secular Belgian struggle for freedom, the Brabant revolution of 1789,⁷¹ but she also made efforts to construct the history of the 'thirty years' war' between 1914 and 1945 into one more episode of this struggle.⁷²

In the Netherlands more conscious efforts have been made to construct a 'feminist' approach to history (efforts which resulted in the creation, by the 1930s, of the International Archive for Women's History, as a spin-off from Posthumus's International Institute for Social History).⁷³ Even if they also implied an ongoing interest in the history of *Dutch* feminism, these attempts seem not to have considerably changed the way of writing national historiography. Johanna Naber, for example, one of the most prominent feminist historians, remained well within the boundaries of the Orangeist and liberal master narrative that dominated national historiography in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷⁴ This symbiosis between Orangeist and feminist views was probably made easier by the fact that throughout the twentieth century the Netherlands was ruled by queens rather than kings. It is not surprising that it was Queen Wilhelmina, who considered herself to be more male than the members of her War Cabinet, who was the first of the Dutch monarchs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to be honoured with a full-scale, two-volume biography.⁷⁵

Since the 1960s feminist historiography in the Netherlands has become more radical, and therefore it has left this Orangeist position. Its attacks on the male domination of the Dutch historical master narrative have at times been very outspoken.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether the national master narrative on

⁷⁰On the traditional and surprisingly 'male' character of the *Histoire de Belgique* of the feminist Gatti de Gamond, see K. Wils, 'Science, an Ally of Feminism?', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 77 (1999), 416–39.

⁷¹S. Tassier, *Les Démocrates belges: étude sur le Vonckisme et la Révolution Brabançonne* (Brussels, 1930).

⁷²S. Tassier, *Histoire de Guerre Mondiale: pour un musée de la Guerre Mondiale et un Office de Documentation contemporaine* (Brussels 1944). On her vain attempts to create this museum, see also Beyen, *Oorlog en Verleden*, pp. 251–4.

⁷³See J. Tollebeek, 'Voor elke liefde een instituut', *De ziel van de fabriek: over de arbeid van de historicus* (Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 15–22.

⁷⁴See M. Grever, *Strijd tegen de stilte: Johanna Naber (1859–1941) en de vrouwenstem in de geschiedenis* (Hilversum, 1994).

⁷⁵See C. Fasseur, *Wilhelmina: de jonge koningin* (Amsterdam, 1998), and *Wilhelmina: krijgsachtig in een vormeloze jas* (Amsterdam, 2001); see on this topic also M. Grever, 'Van Landsvader tot moeder des vaderlands: Oranje, Gender en Nederland', *Groniek: Onafhankelijk Gronings Historisch Studentenblad*, 36 (2002), 131–50.

⁷⁶Most notably so during a workshop in 2002 dedicated by feminist historians to the series 'Nederlandse beschaving in Europese context'. See M. Bosch, 'De IJkpunten geijkt ...: Evaluatie van het NWO-onderzoeksprogramma "Nederlandse cultuur in Europese context" uit het perspectief van vrouwengeschiedenis en genderstudies', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 29 (2003), 1–20.

Dutch history has been seriously altered by this feminist historiography. By focusing on the early Dutch feminists of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, they might involuntarily have strengthened the classic trope of the Netherlands as an open, tolerant and progressive country.⁷⁷ The attention they paid in 1998 to the national exhibition of women's labour, held 100 years before in The Hague, contributed to this sense. In their analyses of this event, feminist historians remained far away from any nationalistic discourse, but nevertheless interpreted the exhibition – which was organised on the occasion of Wilhelmina's accession to the throne – as a glorious moment for both the international women's movement and the Dutch nation.⁷⁸

In Luxembourg there has until now been no real development of a feminist historiography. Women historians are rare and failed to gain important institutional positions.⁷⁹ This is linked to the very late professionalisation of academic history writing. However, the way in which the national history of Luxembourg has been gendered does seem to confirm what has been written with regard to Belgium: within the traditional, mainly Catholic tales of the national past, women played an important role and are closely related to the dominant master narratives. Countess Ermesinde (1186–1247), as the creator of a Luxembourgian principality, and Charlotte (1896–1985), as the saviour of the nation, are representative of the two most important historical periods in the history of Luxembourg – the Middle Ages and the Second World War. The role that is ascribed to them resembles very much that of the good female monarchs within the Catholic Belgian narratives: they appear as good, caring mothers of the nation. Both figures are joined by the Virgin Mary, as the protector of the capital and the country, to form a central triptych in national historiography. In Belgium such an overt association with the Virgin Mary was much less evident, given the contested nature of Catholicism.

Conclusion

If there is one overall conclusion to be drawn, it should certainly be that the writing of national history was much more threatened by 'the Other' in Belgium than in the Netherlands and Luxembourg. A glance at the most recent attempts to write national histories in the three countries can only confirm this. In Luxembourg the most recent *Histoire du Luxembourg*⁸⁰ remains a classic narration

⁷⁷Notably, the 'rediscovery' of the most famous feminist of this first-wave feminism, Aletta Jacobs, can be seen in this respect. See the recent biography on her: M. Bosch, *Een onwrikbaar geloof in rechtvaardigheid: Aletta Jacobs, 1854–1929* (Amsterdam, 2005).

⁷⁸M. Grever and F. Dieteren (eds), *Een Vaderland voor vrouwen. A Fatherland for Women: The 1898 'Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid' in retrospect* (Amsterdam, 1998).

⁷⁹Exceptionally, in every sense: G. Goetzinger, A. Lorang, and R. Wagner (eds), *'Wenn nun wir Frauen auch das Wort ergreifen ...': 1880–1950: Frauen in Luxemburg* (Luxembourg, 1997).

⁸⁰G. Trausch (ed.), *Histoire du Luxembourg: le destin européen d'un 'petit pays'* (Toulouse, 2002).

of the national history without any hints that the writings of Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm or Pierre Nora had any influence. The importance granted to the Middle Ages, the very brief chapter dedicated to the early modern period, the 'European destiny' of the country are typical elements of a master narrative which has been relatively stable since the end of the Second World War.

In the Netherlands the prestigious five-volume series 'Nederlandse cultuur in Europese context' (the so-called *IJkpunten-reeks*) can be seen as a glorious return (though in a modernised guise) to a narrowly defined national history: that is to say, a national history starting with the birth of the republic at the end of the sixteenth century and, in spite of the title, largely denying the European context of Dutch history. Dutch historians, as we mentioned at the start, had never been very enthusiastic about the broadening of the perspective which had resulted in, among other things, the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, and the recent deconstruction of nationalism ironically offered them the opportunity to return to a more narrow interpretation of the national past. Since it was pointless, as deconstructivists showed, to look for nations before the nation-states came into being, why would Dutch historians feel the need to look for national origins before the end of the fifteenth century?⁸¹

In Belgium a similar evolution of national history writing can be observed: the last two decades have witnessed the return of the 'History of Belgium' as a (mostly non-academic) genre, a genre in which the origins of Belgium are situated in 1830, or, at the earliest, during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸² Unlike in the Netherlands, however, these new Belgian histories are deeply imbued with the postmodern, ironical stance that deconstructs the history of Belgium even while writing it. This stance was inherited from some essays dedicated in the 1980s to Belgian identity. In the most famous of these, *Het Belgisch Labyrint* (1989), the journalist and poet Geert Van Istendael explicitly associates Belgian identity with the construction of the European Union. Because of its biculturalism, and therefore its resistance to ethnic nationalism, Belgian identity should, according to Van Istendael, be a model for European identity-building. He thus comes remarkably close to the Pirenne thesis of Belgium as a European microcosm. At the same time, it is made clear that Brussels' central position in the process of European integration does not endanger Belgian national identity and national history writing.

⁸¹See M. Beyen's review article on this series: 'Nederlands wonderjaren: beschouwingen bij de reeks "Nederlandse cultuur in Europese context"', *Ons Erfdeel: Algemeen-Nederlands Tweemaandelijks Cultureel tijdschrift*, 45 (2002), 522–35.

⁸²For an academic variant of this tendency, see the multi-volume *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van Belgium/Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique*, an undertaking for which prominent Flemish and francophone historians took the initiative. It started to appear in 2005 and should be finished in 2007.

On the contrary, this central position can be interpreted as the fulfilment of a mission that in the patriotic discourse had always been assigned to Belgium.

Nonetheless, the revival of Belgian national history through this ironic and pro-European position might be very illusory. In *Een geschiedenis van België* Marc Reynebeau combines this postmodern deconstruction with a Marxist approach (which he has inherited from the Ghent school) in order to come to an inexorable *démasqué* of the Belgian state as a product of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.⁸³ The return to national historiography in Belgium thus seems to be everything but triumphant.

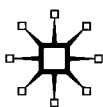
When looking for explanations for this striking difference between the Dutch and Luxembourgian national historiography, on the one hand, and their Belgian counterpart, on the other, we believe that the thesis of the 'belated' modernisation of the Netherlands and of Luxembourg can offer some help. In the Netherlands and Luxembourg, in spite or maybe because of their modest beginnings, the nation-state had the time gradually to mature without seriously being threatened by the modern, democratic political forces engendered by the French and the industrial revolutions. These states were more or less outside the European history scene. Belgium, on the contrary, stood in the middle of these European evolutions, as the First World War would make painfully clear. Modernising forces were present from 1830 onwards, and contributed to a deep and broad politicisation of the whole of society before a genuine national consciousness had been able to take root. 'The Other', therefore, became a multi-headed monster devouring the Belgian nation (and its capacity to write its own history) from within. Only the future knows whether it will be the 'Other from without' (Europe) that saves it. It would, in any case, be a fine example of Belgian irony.

⁸³M. Reynebeau, *Een geschiedenis van België* (Tielt, 2004).

Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories

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