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Book Review

A Review of Netherlands History

1650: bevochten eendracht
Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies (with the collaboration of Wiep van Bunge and Natascha Veldhorst)
The Hague: SDU, 1999.

1800: blauwdrukken voor een samenleving
Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt (with the collaboration of Eveline Koolhaas-Grosfeld)
The Hague: SDU, 2001.

1900: hoogtij van burgerlijke cultuur
Jan Bank and Maarten van Buuren (with the collaboration of Marianne Braun and Douwe Draaisma)
The Hague: SDU, 2000.

1950: welvaart in zwart-wit
Kees Schuyt and Ed Taverne (with the collaboration of Sandra van Voorst *et al*.)
The Hague: SDU, 2000.

Rekenschap: 1650–2000
Frans Grijzenhout and Douwe Fokkema (eds)
The Hague: SDU, 2001.

The five volumes that constitute the 'IJkpunt' series are the culmination of what has been, without a doubt, 'the most ambitious historical project of the last few decades' in The Netherlands.[1] Suggested in 1988 by the Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, and launched in 1991, the project was in large part a reaction to the quickening pace of European integration. Even as it acknowledged the thoroughly European character of The Netherlands and the countless ties that bound the country to the lands that were now its partners, it reflected a renewed interest among the Dutch in the historical identity of The Netherlands – in what was distinctive, even unique, about their country. What role had The Netherlands

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played in Europe's past, and what role might it play in future? What did The Netherlands have, arising from its past, to contribute to the new Europe? And what would happen to the distinctly Dutch aspects of its cultural heritage if Europe were to integrate culturally as much as economically? With such questions in the immediate background, the Dutch Organization for Scholarly Research (NOW) threw the full weight of its support behind 'Dutch Culture in European Context', financing it to the princely sum of 10 million guilders, a 'mega-project' that resulted in the publication of more than 20 monographs, intended as preparatory studies, and finally these five massive volumes of synthesis. It has been a national project of self-reflection, a historical exploration of Dutchness.

As a history of The Netherlands, the 'IJkpunt' series has several highly distinctive features, one of which is referred to by the series title itself. Translated literally, 'IJkpunt' means a point at which something is checked against a standard measure; more loosely, it might be rendered as a cross-section, a slice, or a sounding. Instead of telling the history of The Netherlands as a narrative, tracing the flow of change over time, the series offers snapshots of Dutch culture in four years: 1650, 1800, 1900, and 1950. To be sure, these are thick slices: the authors of the four volumes in question do not limit their purview to a 12-month period, but rather take each IJkpunt as an opportunity to examine a period of several decades. Forces and processes of change are by no means ignored. Still, these four volumes are essentially synchronic, offering pictures of Dutch culture in four discrete periods. Quite obviously, though, they invite comparison, and the fifth volume takes up the invitation, ranging from 1650 to the present in its consideration of certain themes. It is an original and bold design.

Why those four years? The project's steering committee offers various justifications, but ultimately the roundness of their numbers seems to have been their most powerful appeal: their very arbitrariness made them seem suitable points for a 'scientific' kind of historical sampling. Of course, to be consistent, the series should have included volumes for 1700, 1750 and 1850, so that the intervals between snapshots were even. The lacunae are regrettable, but they do not undermine the existing volumes, as they would if the series were meant to tell a continuous tale. Devoting the fourth volume to the most recent round number, 1950, was an obvious choice. Setting the project's initial point at 1650, by contrast, was neither obvious nor a good decision. The principal reason for doing so was that just two years earlier, by the Peace of Westphalia, the United Provinces gained full recognition as an independent country. Furthermore, the Peace is conventionally held to have 'laid the basis for the modern system of European states' – a development the steering committee relates explicitly to the formation in the 1950s of the European Community.[2] In other words, the committee opted for the first suitable year after the creation of the modern Netherlands and of modern Europe (albeit in their 'early modern' forms). Here the project reveals its

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contemporary concerns and projects a historical vision based directly on them. Ironically, by eschewing eras before 1650, the project bypasses some golden opportunities to answer questions of immediate relevance to those concerns. What difference, for example, did the acquisition of statehood make to Dutch culture? What difference did the supplanting of earlier dynastic and imperial state systems by one based on a balance of power make to cultural relations between the United Provinces and other parts of Europe? By the same token, the choice of 1650 reveals the centrality of politics to the design of the IJkpunt series, which ostensibly is devoted to a study of culture.

The steering committee acted wisely as well as pragmatically when it allowed the authors of the respective volumes to define culture as they saw fit, while encouraging them to do so broadly. All four principal volumes cover literature, the visual arts, music, theatre, education, religion, and philosophy – Culture with a capital 'C'. But they also apply definitions of culture that offer entrees into a much broader set of phenomena. Frijhoff and Spies, the authors of *1650*, are most explicit about their theoretical framework (the authors of *1900* refer back to it). Inspired by anthropology, they identify culture as the set of activities through which human beings assign meaning to things. Their definition thus emphasizes symbolic codes, conventions, behavioural norms, identities, mentalities, and the personal experience of impersonal forces. Applying this definition, they can treat the Dutch economy, for example, by discussing 'entrepreneurship and risk-aversion', and war by describing a 'siege mentality'. Yet they often exceed the boundaries of even this broad definition. In fact, the IJkpunt series as a whole is characterized by a pervasive ambiguity about its intended scope. The steering committee has always insisted that the subject of the series is culture, nothing more or less. Yet it has also presented Jan Romein's history of Europe in the years around 1900, *The Watershed of Two Eras*, as its principal model. Romein's work was in fact an attempt at what the author called 'integral history', a comprehensive treatment of an era that emphasized precisely the interconnections between economy, society, politics and culture. In effect, the committee left the authors of the IJkpunt volumes to navigate between two ideals.

The resulting volumes vary considerably. If *1650* packages much that is economic, social, and political along with its cultural history, it does so elegantly and the results are coherent. It could serve excellently as a sophisticated introduction to the Dutch Golden Age. As such, it has some distinctive emphases, such as the role of war in shaping Dutch culture. *1800*, by contrast, tries to get political events and social structures out of the way in two prologues; from then on, it allows itself to be 'led by the discourse of the period'. It traces the processes by which public opinion was formed, and takes its chief themes from the content of public debate, as expressed chiefly in print. Naturally, much of that debate concerned the political and social questions of the day, such as the meaning of

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citizenship and nationhood. Still, *1800* remains resolutely focused on culture, broadly defined, even as it treats a period that witnessed extraordinary political upheaval. *1900* treats what is regarded in Dutch history as a second golden age, characterized by a self-confidence and 'constructivism' that contrasts sharply to the uncertainty and decadence discerned by scholars in the *fin-de-siècle* culture of other European lands. Here, the arts and sciences are not put off to the second half of the volume, as they are elsewhere, semi-segregated from other subjects. *1950* is different again. Written by a sociologist and an architectural historian, it takes 'macro-economic developments' as its starting point, giving extended, unmediated attention to such matters as population growth, industrialization, the rise of the welfare state, and the reshaping of the physical environment.

Political historians have found fault with the IJkpunt series for its relative neglect of their terrain. And it is true that the series gives far more attention to economic and social, as well as cultural, history than it does to political. Ultimately, though, the value of such synthetic books should not be measured by what they neglect, which inevitably is enormous, but by the ability of their authors to provide an overview that is not oversimplified, to combine richness of detail with coherence of pattern. On this score, all four volumes succeed remarkably well. Their success is due in part to another bold experiment on the part of the project's designers: to have each volume written jointly by a pair of scholars from different fields. These interdisciplinary duos were assisted by others, and all derived advantage from the preparatory monographs. Nevertheless, the IJkpunt series is quite different from the monumental second edition of the *General History of the Netherlands*, published between 1977 and 1983, and from the general histories of Dutch cities and provinces that have appeared more recently. These have been produced by large teams of scholars, each writing a chapter on their speciality. As a result, many of these works have all the charm and coherence of encyclopaedias. By contrast, the IJkpunt volumes are generally quite readable.

The final volume in the set, *1650–2000*, differs from the rest. It is an aggregation of essays, each by a different author, each exploring some long-term theme in Dutch history. Themes include the definition of The Netherlands as nation-state, its putative Calvinist character, the continual reshaping of the Dutch landscape, and the long shadow cast over Dutch history by the first Golden Age. Two topics largely neglected in the other volumes, the position of women in Dutch society and the Dutch colonial engagement, receive attention here. As the culmination of the entire project, this volume reflects back on the previous ones and relates their findings to one another. It also attempts to relate the Dutch past to the present, something historians are usually cautious about doing, and rightly so. The results are of very inconsistent quality. Speculation, bland overview, and modern self-perception mix with insight and acute analysis in the different essays in widely varying proportions.

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And where is the 'European context' in all this? It figures in the background as a general point of comparison. Compared with that of other European lands, Dutch culture is portrayed as having various distinctive traits, such as its tolerance and the high value it places on wide consultation in decision-making processes. Such traits clearly represent to the creators and sponsors of the IJkpunt series a heritage the Dutch can hopefully contribute to the European Union today and in future. This goal explains the importance attached to the forthcoming publication of the series in English translation by Palgrave-Macmillan and Van Gorcum presses, expected in the autumn of 2004.

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1. *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschidenis der Nederlanden* 117/4 (2002), p. 451.
2. *Rekenschap: 1650–2000*, p. 17.

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