

## Editorial Column

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After two special issues on new approaches in Netherlandic art history, for which we would like to thank Christine P. Sellin from the American Association for Netherlandic Studies (AANS) heartily for her meticulous guest-editing, this first issue of Dutch Crossing in 2012 is a 'regular' issue without an over-coupling theme. This is not to say that no connections could be made between the individual contributions, quite on the contrary:

René Vermeir (Ghent) opens the issue by revisiting the fundamental question of how Spanish the 'Spanish Netherlands' really were, after the secession of the rebellious United Provinces. His analysis rebukes widespread clichés about Habsburg usurpation and occupation in the South, and illustrates how these stereotypes were established at the beginning of the nineteenth century, both in the scholarly and popular domain, before in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Belgian national historiography revived these legends in order to legitimise the existence of the young nation. The image that emerges from his analysis is much more nuanced and stresses the large degree of autonomy, that the Habsburg authorities granted the 'Spanish' Netherlands, at least in domestic affairs.

That the Dutch Revolt was a communicative event, to a large degree facilitated by the new information and communication technology of print, is a well established fact. While the propaganda of the Princes of Orange, and especially of William the Silent, has received much attention, Sarah Verhaegen (Florence) devotes her attention to the Nassau family, a less prestigious German branch of the House of Orange, and investigates their self-representation and relations with the Prince-Stadholders. The importance of the written word – both in manuscript form and as printed text – in conveying status, honour and prestige becomes evident, leading to more general conclusions about 'media politics', the manner in which the early modern European nobility employed paper communication to assert their status across linguistic, political and religious borders.

From a history-of-ideas point of view Ruben Buys (Rotterdam) sheds light on the philosophy of the Dutch proponent of tolerance and free thought Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert (1522–1590), who advocated rationalistic perspective on man and morals, based on the possibility of attaining ethical perfection through rational knowledge and constant moral training. After a short overview of Coornhert's life and work, and the anthropological foundations of his rationalistic perspective, the outlines of Coornhert's ethics are examined, including key notions such as ignorance, the passions, evil habits, free will and Coornhert's interpretation of original sin, all supporting reason, that powerful 'spark of Divine Light' that God gave humankind to obtain truth and perfection, as the most powerful concept.

Frederik Dhondt (Ghent) devotes his attention to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Austrian Netherlands and examines an exchange of dispatches between two prominent British foreign policy makers, Charles Townshend and Horace Walpole, wherein the former proposed a partition of the Southern Netherlands. In the immediate aftermath of the 1725 Ripperda treaty, in which Austrian Habsburgs and Spanish Bourbons surprisingly came together in a potential new universal monarchy, Townshend, in whose assessment Habsburg, and not France, presented the main menace to European stability, saw opportunities to diminish Emperor Charles VI through conquest of his positions in the Low Countries. Although the plan was never put into practice, the arguments put forward by both men reveal crucial long-term thinking patterns. Townshend adapted his aggressive plans to the prevailing ideational dominance of balance-of-power-thinking after the 1713 Peace of Utrecht.

Philo Bregstein (Amsterdam/Paris), finally, brings a Dutch writer back to life, who far from being forgotten, has traditionally been interpreted quite one-dimensionally. Jacques Presser (1899–1970), best known as for his magnum opus *Ondergang*, the first comprehensive account of the Holocaust in the Netherlands (1950–65), in English published under the title *Ashes in the Wind* (1968), not only contributed historical writings but also literary works that so far have been frequently overlooked, despite the fact that several of them not only deal with life in hiding during the German occupation, but actually

were written while in hiding, which makes them remarkable in themselves. Bregstein, who knew Presser personally, and has produced a film about him,<sup>i</sup> revisits both Presser's literary and historical writings, that belatedly also have been recognised as methodologically innovative, and manages to recreate a more balanced and nuanced picture of the man, the perception of whose writings has a history of itself and a profound effect in on successive phases of the commemoration of the Holocaust in Dutch and international society.

What remains is to draw the attention of our readers to the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Association for Low Countries Studies in the United Kingdom and Ireland that will take place from 3–5 April 2012 at the University of Sheffield. As cities have played a crucial role in the history of the Low Countries as places of encounter, exchange, protest and revolution, this year's 2012 conference theme will be 'Low Countries, Big Cities'. It is the aim of this three-day conference to explore the cities of the Low Countries along and across cultural, linguistic and historical lines.

Let me conclude this editorial column by expressing our gratitude to Lisa Johnstone who has been the managing editor of *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies* at Maney for the past four years, including the critical transformation period in 2008/09. The increasing success the journal enjoyed ever since, visible not only in the increase of worldwide distribution and the healthy stream of manuscripts but also in the award of an Honourable Mention in the 2009 Journal Awards of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals are to a not small extent due to her indefatigable efforts and energy.

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<sup>i</sup> Philo Bregstein (1970), *The past that lives*, 16 mm, 65 min. <<http://www.presserfilm.com/>>