

BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE DUTCH

"The People of Holland may be divided into several Classes: The Clowns or Boors (as they call them), who cultivate the Land. The Mariners or Schippers, who supply their Ships and Inland-Boats, The Merchants or Traders, who fill their Towns. The Renteneers, or men that live in all their chief Cities upon the Rents or Interest of Estates formerly acquired in the Families. And the Gentlemen and Officers of the Armies."

So wrote Sir William Temple, Britain's ambassador to The Hague from 1668 to 1670, in his lively and highly opinionated **Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands** (1673; Oxford, 1972). Although Temple penned a 17th-century "map of state and government," his views of Dutch society have enduring interest.

"All appetites and Passions seem to run lower and cooler here, than in other Countreys," he noted. "Tempers are not aieri enough for Joy, or any unusual strains of pleasant Humour; nor warm enough for Love."

Current general works on the Netherlands, such as Frank E. Huggett's comprehensive **Modern Netherlands** (Praeger, 1971), are usually more dispassionate. Because of its location on the North Sea, the Netherlands was destined to become an early commercial and trading leader. But its political future was less clear.

Indeed, the Low Countries—the region that now encompasses Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands—remained a patchwork of principalities until the mid-15th century, when the ducal House of Burgundy brought them together in a single realm. Through marriage, the Burgundian lands passed to the Hapsburg family. In 1549, Spain's Charles I (1500–58) incorporated all 17 provinces into the Holy Roman Empire's Burgundian District.

Problems began after Charles's son, Philip II, acceded to the throne in 1555. Philip believed—as Bernard H. M. Vlekke writes in **Evolution of the Dutch Nation** (Roy, 1945)—that "the Spanish monarchy as well as the Catholic Church represented Absolute Truth." In the Netherlands, he levied a general sales tax, promoted Spanish noblemen to high offices, and persecuted Protestants.

Eventually, the Netherlanders rebelled against what they saw as a distant, "popish" government, intent on suppressing their liberties. Led by aristocrats, merchants, and churchmen, the uprising—as Charles Wilson stresses in his concise **Dutch Republic** (McGraw-Hill, 1968)—"was not a single movement, [but] *congeries* of revolts by different classes and groups with many, often conflicting motives." Nevertheless, the rebellion soon evolved into the Netherlands' Eighty Years' War against Spain. The rebels triumphed in the territories that lay above the Rhine, Maas, and Waal rivers—roughly dividing the provinces into an independent Dutch republic in the north and the Spanish Netherlands (which would become Belgium) in the south. The seven northern provinces (Holland, Zeeland, Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel, Gelderland, and Utrecht) that would eventually join in the Union of Utrecht (1579) pledged to remain "sovereign allies."

Even before the Eighty Years' War ended in 1648, an economically vigorous Dutch society had begun to emerge. "It was an age rich in material gold and in the cultural treasures [of] art and science," writes Adriaan Barnouw in "The Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age"—one of 27 essays by Dutch and American scholars appearing in **The Netherlands** (Univ. of Calif., 1943), edited by Bartholomew Landheer.

To the Golden Age belong rationalist

philosopher Benedict de Spinoza, poet and dramatist Joost van den Vondel, Hugo Grotius, the father of modern international law, admiral Michiel Adriaanszoon de Ruyter, and painters Jan Vermeer, Frans Hals, Jan Steen, and Rembrandt van Rijn.

Prosperity touched not only Holland's aristocrats and wealthy merchants, but the professional classes as well. "Rembrandt and Frans Hals did not merely paint mayors and leading dignitaries," as Johan H. Huizinga notes in **Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century** (Ungar, 1968), "but also writing-masters, preachers, Jewish physicians, engravers, and goldsmiths."

The prosperous years could not last forever. The 18th century saw Holland's maritime dominance fade; Britain's navy prevailed almost everywhere. At home, an increasingly corrupt upper class, Hendrick Riemens observes in **The Netherlands** (Eagle, 1944), "was rapidly becoming a hereditary caste to which even great merchants with new fortunes were denied access."

In January 1795, a French republican army marched into Holland, where it encountered little resistance. Stadholder (governor) William V and his family fled to England as the French declared a new Batavian Republic. French rule survived until November 1813, when an uprising led by Amsterdam shipyard workers forced the French to withdraw to their homeland.

As Johan Goudsblom points out in **Dutch Society** (Random, 1967), the Industrial Revolution came late to the Netherlands. Holland, he says, was still a country whose "leading classes cultivated a disdain of 'progress.'" Only one

factory boasted more than 1000 employees in 1850. But there was rapid progress in health and sanitation. Between 1850 and 1940, life expectancy at birth increased from 30 to 67 years.

Netherlanders made no progress of any kind during the Nazi occupation. Walter B. Maass's **Netherlands at War: 1940-1945** (Abelard-Schuman, 1970) recounts the invasion. Allard Martens's **Silent War** (Allard Martens, 1961) and Werner Warmbrunn's **Dutch under German Occupation, 1940-1945** (Stanford, 1963) chronicle the Dutch experience. Among other acts of "symbolic resistance," Dutch patriots wore pins bearing a picture of the queen, and greeted friends with the word *Ozo*—for *Oranje zal Overwinnen* (Orange Shall Conquer).

Several good books describe postwar life. Like Sir William Temple, the authors are intrigued by the Dutch personality. In **The Dutch Plural Society** (Oxford, 1973), Christopher Bagley is struck by "the degree to which social life is the subject of orderliness and regulation." **The Dutch Puzzle** (Boucher, 1966) by the Duke de Baena, a Spaniard, ruminates on how the Dutch can be, at once, both thrifty and generous, both "passionately fond of freedom" and "terrified of personal liberty."

There is no question that Netherlands society still allows ordinary people to live in dignity. "If I were an old man of slender means and no longer of much energy," writes Anthony Bailey in **The Light in Holland** (Knopf, 1970), "Holland I know is the country in which I would be treated with respect while I sat on a canal bank and fished and dreamed and watched the boats go by."