

Bob & Bobette (Suske & Wiske) comic strip series (from which he has in the interim already pulled out for budgetary reasons) – with guaranteed audience appeal? These are options it's never easy for a film-maker to choose between; on top of which there is yet another decision to be made, which you could call the *Dipenda*-dilemma: to make Flemish films in Flanders, or to make English-language films in the States (viz. *The Heartbreak Kid*). Choosing is never easy and, as Deruddere's celluloid heroes go to show, people often can't resist trying out the jackass route for starters.

ERIK MARTENS

Translated by Sonja Prescod.

History

A Night of Disaster in the South-West Netherlands 1 February 1953

People lived differently fifty years ago. Almost no one had television or a telephone. They listened to the radio, they read the newspaper, some wrote letters and many regularly exchanged bits of news in the shops, in cafés, on a bench in the park or at the village pump. The means of communication were far more limited than they are nowadays. And that could have important consequences. As on the night of 31 January 1953 when, in the well-organised Netherlands, thousands of people and tens of thousands of animals (horses, cows, sheep, pigs, dogs, cats, chickens, rabbits) were caught without warning by a spring tide accompanied by a severe and prolonged storm – a fatal combination. Such things only happen once in every three hundred years. 1853 people lost their lives in the icy waters, and hundreds spent many dreadful hours in attics, on the roofs of houses and barns, in trees or floating on driftwood. 72,000 people were evacuated and the damage to houses and buildings was enormous. On Schouwen-Duiveland an entire village, Capelle, disappeared under the waves; only two houses were spared. Of over one hundred inhabitants, forty-two lost their lives. Worst hit were the islands of Zeeland and South Holland. But the high winds and destructive waters also wreaked havoc in northwest Brabant, Texel and parts of Zeeland-Flanders. There too the dikes gave way. And across the North Sea the same storm also caused quite a number of casualties in southeast England.

On 31 January, the fifteenth birthday of Princess Beatrix, the radio had broadcast warnings of gales and high water, but there was no great sense of alarm. On Saturday evening, a few hours before the fatal event, a voice on the radio announced: *'A severe north-westerly storm is raging in the northern and western sectors of the North Sea. The depression is deepening and the storm is expected to continue throughout the night.'*

As a matter of fact, the sea- and river-dikes were too low and had not been properly maintained; but the peo-

ple did not know that. They thought they were safe behind them. But the layers of clay and the grass cover were in poor condition. Muskrats had dug innumerable holes in the dikes, making them less stable. After the Second World War dike, maintenance was not a priority; financial attention was concentrated almost entirely on defence and reconstruction. Furthermore, the inhabitants of the stricken areas were quite used to boiling seas and raging storms rattling their shutters and roof tiles during the winter months. In the evenings they would sit by their coal-fired stoves doing embroidery, reading, playing games or listening to the radio. After that it was bedtime.

But then came the flood.

The floods of 1953 gave rise to the ambitious Delta Plan: all dikes in the devastated areas were to be raised and strengthened, an enormous storm surge barrier was built in the Eastern Scheldt estuary and all inlets and sea gates were closed off. The only exception was the Western Scheldt. As the only access to the international port of Antwerp, it was allowed to remain open. It took over thirty years to complete the impressive Delta Works.

In 1953 I was sixteen years old and lived with my parents in Lamswaarde, a village in East Zeeland-Flanders. Hulst, 'the most Flemish town in the Netherlands', is nearby. Lamswaarde lies a stone's throw from the great Western Scheldt estuary, in the middle of a vast polder landscape and an endless expanse of sky. The skies are usually friendly, but sometimes they can be menacing. The salt marshes of Saeftinghe, retaken by the sea in the seventeenth century, are only a few kilometres away. In that beautiful and mysterious nature reserve, once-prosperous villages have lain for centuries beneath metres of thick mud. Lamswaarde is situated just behind a dike. It was built in the late Middle Ages by the Cistercian monks of Boudeloo when they were draining and reclaiming the area. Mainly elms and pollard willows grew on the Boudeloo Dike and one looked out over the Kruis Polder, which was the property of a few gentlemen farmers. Behind the sea dike – we referred to the Scheldt as *'the sea'* – flows the Western Scheldt, which was in many respects a paradise for the young. There we learned the dog paddle, caught vicious crabs in the salt marshes, and hunted for mussels and winkles on the basalt slabs and breakwaters. We lazed in the sun watching the great ships that passed frequently on their way to and from Antwerp. After the night of the storm I was intensely aware of the enormous contrast between that vast peaceful landscape and the violence of nature manifested in the primitive forces of wind and water. The waters of the Scheldt did not reach the village of Lamswaarde, but stopped at the dike which had been reinforced with sandbags. We had helped carry them there. On the afternoon of Sunday 1 February, driven by curiosity, I cycled over the wet mud still covering the Boudeloo Dike and the Kleine Dike to the points along *'the sea'* which had been worst hit. Terrifying stories had been circulating in the village. In the Kruis Polder I saw farms and houses still under water, and

Tens of thousands of animals were killed in the 1953 flood.



dozens of swollen animal carcasses floating in the filthy grey water. I saw household effects bobbing up and down or stuck in the mud: tables, chairs, cupboards. I remember seeing bicycles, carts and even joints of meat washed out of the brine-barrels in which they were stored – there were no fridges in those days.

With some difficulty, for the wind had remained high since the disaster, I reached the Scheldt Dike. The sloping sides, the black wooden posts and the concrete walls of the dike had proved unable to withstand the abnormal ferocity and height of the waves. In the immediate neighbourhood of Baalhoek I saw drifting fishing boats that had broken loose from their moorings. But by far the worst hit was the hamlet of Duivenhoek, which didn't even lie on the banks of the Scheldt. Everywhere there was water, muddy sludge, a howling wind and dozens of helpful, agitated people. In Duivenhoek the water had broken through the inner dike. Three houses built into the embankment had been swept away. In one of them four family members lost their lives, in another three: a young woman of thirty-three and her two young children of six and eight. I can still see the father walking around in a daze; his clothes were greyish brown and he was wearing muddy boots and a cap. The tidal surge had hit without warning while he and his neighbours were attempting to close the gaps in the dike. *'Hurry up and get dressed. I'll be back for you in a minute'*, he had called to his wife and children. In the little hamlet of Duivenhoek alone the survivors were left to mourn eight deaths. Duivenhoek or 'Doves Corner', it sounds so peaceful ... But in my East-Flemish dialect Duivenhoek is called Duvelsoek, 'Devil's Corner'. On 1 February 1953 that was a more appropriate name.

ANTON CLAESSENS

Translated by Chris Emery.

Tyndale's Testament

Who is the father of the English language? Chaucer, as is usually claimed? William Shakespeare? Or was it William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English? No other English writer has reached so many people as Tyndale. His work has had ten thousand times more readers than Chaucer, and the British Library describes his translation of the New Testament as *'the most important printed book in the English language'*. Which is why it was willing to spend over £1,000,000 on one of the two surviving complete copies. Most of the rest had either been burned or literally read to pieces.

Tyndale was born in about 1494, probably in Gloucestershire. He studied in Oxford and Cambridge and entered Holy Orders. At some point he resolved to translate the Bible into English and tried to obtain the support of the Bishop of London, but in vain. So he crossed to the continent and completed his translation of the New Testament in 1525. After a failed attempt to get it printed in Cologne, it was eventually published in 1526 in Worms. Later that year he left for Antwerp, which was relatively safe and where he hoped it would be easier to have his translations published. The city authorities there were comparatively tolerant, and so long as he enjoyed the protection of the English merchant community Antwerp would be less dangerous than elsewhere in Catholic Europe. Furthermore, translation of the Bible into the vernacular had given rise to feverish printing activity by about half a dozen Antwerp presses, most of which were concentrated in the same neighbourhood. When Tyndale arrived they had already published three different translations of the New Testament, based on versions by Erasmus and Luther and on the Vulgate. The first Dutch Bible had just been printed and the first French Bible was nearing completion.