

## Crossing Over

### Thirty Years on the Wrong Side of the English Channel

28

[ D E R E K B L Y T H ]

#### › Play

*Groot Bijgaarden Station*  
2 January 2010

It was the coldest winter for thirty years. Eurostar trains were seizing up in the Channel Tunnel, brought to a standstill by the new Ice Age. I was standing on a station platform next to an industrial estate outside Brussels waiting for the 18.57 train from Aalst. What am I doing here? I asked myself. How did it come to this?

#### « Rewind

*De Vingerhoed, Utrecht*  
18 September 1979

First impressions are lodged in the mind for evermore when you move to a new country. I remember the solid black bicycles, the yellow signs, the insistent tram bells. I remember the sky that seemed to go on forever.

I arrived, like James Boswell, in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Boswell left Britain in 1763 on a ship from Harwich to acquire a Dutch legal education in the Netherlands. I left on a Stena ferry from the same port to escape the right-wing politics of Margaret Thatcher, who had become Prime Minister on 4 May.

Utrecht in those days seemed like Utopia compared to the crumbling island monarchy I had left behind. The bright yellow trains with their cute yellow noses ran on time. The spacious libraries had more English books than the ones back home. The country seemed rationally organised compared to the mess I had left behind. And the language was full of amusing oddities, like the *vingerhoed* (finger hat) that was their word for a thimble and the *handschoen* (hand shoe) that translated quite logically into a glove.

Quite soon I had settled into a life that revolved around cycling, sitting in warm cafes and studying "Dutch for Beginners". Of course, it wasn't all rosy. I would soon be confronted with the difficulties of finding a place to live in the world's most overcrowded country. Not to mention the complexities of speaking a language in which the verb normally at the end of the sentence placed is.

Utrecht.



• **Pause**

*Geneva*

*14 February 1980*

What on earth brought me to Utrecht? I'd like to say it was the paintings of Vermeer, which I first discovered in a Phaidon art book in Edinburgh Public Library. But that would be a little too neat. I think the true explanation is that I moved to the Netherlands because it was on the other side of the English Channel. I had jumped ship and, though I didn't realise it then, would remain an exile for the next thirty years and more.

Yet Mrs Thatcher's booming voice carried across the North Sea. I still remember that speech she made in Dublin on November 29, 1979, while I was settling into an apartment in a Utrecht suburb. 'I want my money back,' she demanded, hitting the table with her handbag. 'I must be absolutely clear about this.' Oh, how I wished at that moment that I had been born Dutch.

Yet I was finding it hard to fit into this perfect society. During those early weeks, I wandered the streets like Boswell. 'My heart sank to think of living in such a place,' wrote my unhappy Scottish compatriot. I felt the same, much of the time. The Netherlands was such an open and yet such a closed society. It was like visiting an art gallery where you were allowed to look but not to touch.

Boswell finally found a woman to offer some consolation. 'I have met a Dutch woman,' he noted in his diary. I, too, fell for Belle de Zuylen. I read *De Noble* in Utrecht, and bought the first volume of her letters, in French, in a bookshop in

Geneva. It was also in Geneva where, wandering through the Musée des Beaux-Arts, I first saw Maurice Quentin de La Tour's Portrait of Belle de Zuylen, aged 25. For all of ten minutes, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

» **Fast forward**

*Maastricht*

*30 April, 1982*

I was living in Maastricht when Thatcher went to war with Argentina. From the peaceful Low Countries this looked like an act of imperial madness, a return to the Victorian age. I was shocked to see the people of Britain waving enthusiastically as Royal Navy warships sailed from Portsmouth, bound for the other side of the world. Each day, I walked to the newsagent in Grote Straat to pick up yesterday's copy of *The Guardian*. Each day, the news got worse. At home, people of my age, or a few years younger, were beginning to realise that they could be called up to fight. I had not imagined that we could do such a thing.

» **Play**

*Baarnedesteeg 13, Amsterdam*

*10 July, 1983*

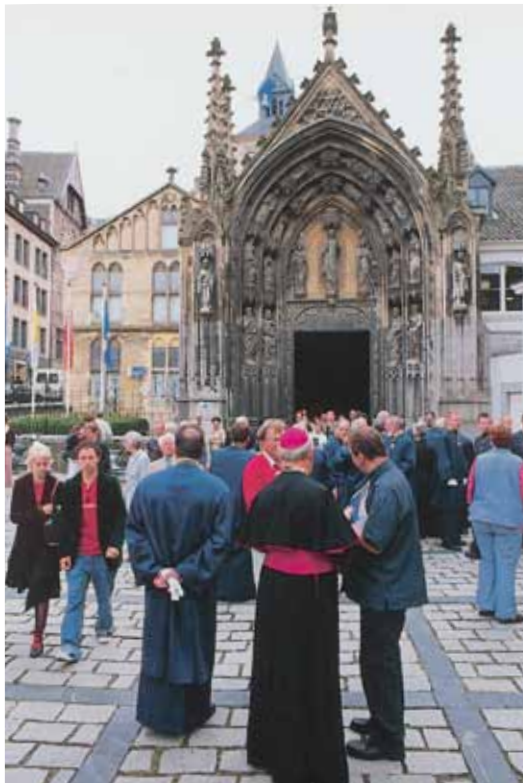
Maastricht finally seemed a bit dull and provincial. So I moved to Amsterdam and settled into an old apartment on the edge of the red light district. A short walk in one direction led to the mediaeval Sint Antonis city gate where Rembrandt painted Dr Tulp's anatomy lesson. A few steps in the other direction brought me to a glowing neon-lit canal where sex was sold behind heavy curtains.

The Nieuwmarkt in those days was a dingy area with hungry cats and nervy junkies and rusted bicycle parts. Yet I liked it. I liked the bookshops that smelled of damp and old coffee, and the distant bells of the Oude Kerk where Rembrandt's Saskia was buried under a blank grey stone. I liked the shops selling useful gadgets for mariners and the smoky café De Engelbewaarder where the dim interior seemed to have been imported from a seventeenth-century painting.

I liked the way that the Dutch got the small things just right, like the Nationaal Strippenkaart, a bus ticket that could be used everywhere in the country, and the Museumjaarkaart, which gave access to virtually every museum collection in the country. Once you had bought a *strippenkaart* and a *jaarkaart*, you could travel almost everywhere and visit any museum you wanted from the erudite Pipe Museum to the vast Rijksmuseum.

I liked the slow pace of Amsterdam, the gentle humour and the bicycles that rattled along the canals. I liked the way everyone owned a car, because it was seen as essential, but no one ever drove anywhere, because you would never find a parking place again. So parked cars slowly rusted on the canals, gradually buried under the dead leaves.

The Amsterdammers I knew were laid-back, a little world-weary, somewhat wind-blown. Everyone had read Anja Meulenbelt and disliked Ronald Reagan and voted PvdA. I noticed odd little signs of idealism, like a squat on the Wa-



Maastricht.

terlooplein with wooden birds on the roof and strange rusted structures where white electric cars were parked, apparently abandoned. I did once see one puttering along a canal, but in 1986 this utopian system was finally abandoned.

I read a lot of books in Amsterdam and gradually found out about some of the people that had lived near the Nieuwmarkt. I was particularly fond of Jan Jacobsz Swammerdam, who ran a chemist's shop at 18 Oude Schans in the early seventeenth century. Here he dabbled in science and amassed a cabinet of curiosities that included a unicorn, three Hottentot catapults, a mermaid's hand and a mechanical mouse.

His son, also Jan, built up a more scientific collection that embraced such items as the ear-drum of a walrus, a silkworm's testicles and the nostrils of a horse. On a visit here in 1668, Cosimo de Medici was so impressed with what he saw that he offered Swammerdam a position in Florence and the sum of 12,000 guilders for the entire collection, but the Dutch collector declined the offer.

Swammerdam wrote books on unusual subjects. I particularly liked the sound of "A Treatise on the History of Bees", which contained 60 extremely detailed drawings as well as a calculation of the number of eggs in a queen bee's ovaries. Nor was he afraid of taking risks in the pursuit of knowledge and in one experiment he ate larvae to observe the taste. The raw larvae struck him as "very disagreeable" and tasting of "rusty bacon," whereas boiled larvae "have a more agreeable taste, but if one continues chewing them, the former taste prevails again."

Amsterdam.



While studying the mayfly, Swammerdam met the Flemish mystic Antoinette Bourignon to discuss religion. She described the mayfly as a “little beast which lives only a single day, and throughout that time endures many miseries”. The meeting profoundly influenced Swammerdam, and in 1675 he produced his classic work on the mayfly entitled *Ephemeris vitae*, or “Life of the Ephemera”, which became famous for its extremely detailed illustrations. Swammerdam, like the mayfly, did not live long. He died of malaria in 1680, aged just 43, and his entire collection was sold off. He bequeathed his unpublished writings to a friend, who failed to publish them, and they lay forgotten for almost half a century. In 1727 Herman Boerhaave of Leiden University discovered Swammerdam’s extraordinary collection of drawings and descriptions of animals and published them as *Bybel der Natuure*, or ‘The Bible of Nature’, in two handsome volumes.

This contains remarkable scientific descriptions, but also some odd ideas and digressions that reflect the seventeenth-century mind. Swammerdam told a story of a maidservant who tried to thread woodlice thinking they were pearls. He also offered a description of how to go fishing using cormorants, as well as instructions on the proper method of engraving pictures on sea shells.

• **Pause**

What is it about Amsterdam that makes people turn their attention to miniature things? Three centuries after Jan Swammerdam pored over the mayfly,

the American artist Donald Evans lived in Amsterdam creating tiny paintings in the form of postage stamps issued by imaginary countries. He loved cooking and invented countries based on Italian recipes he read in Elisabeth David cookbooks. There was the country of “Mangiare” (Eat), Castello Pisello” (Pea Castle), “Lago Divinorosso” (Lake of Red Wine) and the church of “S. Fagiolo in Olio” (St Haricot Bean in Oil).

Bruce Chatwin wrote an essay on Evans for the New York Review of Books. “I can’t think of another artist who expressed more succinctly and beautifully the best aspirations of those years: the flight from war and the machine; the asceticism; the nomadic restlessness; the yearning for sensual cloud-cuckoo-lands; the retreat from public into private obsessions, from the big and noisy to the small and still.”

Evans’ reclusive life ended suddenly on April 29, 1977, when he was trapped in a fire in his Amsterdam apartment. He was just 31 years old, and left behind almost nothing apart from 4,000 tiny paintings of places that never existed.

## • Record

The world changes. By the late 1980s, I was beginning to sense a transformation in the Netherlands. People were beginning to take Thatcher’s brutal capitalism seriously. Her hard line message that there was no alternative was creeping across the Channel to the debating chamber in Den Haag. Maybe we need to introduce Thatcherism to the Dutch, they were saying. It felt like a good time to leave. I found a job in Brussels.

## ↑ Play

*Brussels, Central Station*

*November 11, 1989*

Brussels looked grim on the day I arrived. I noticed the dark town houses with their net curtains permanently drawn, as if someone had recently died. I noticed the gloomy metro stations and the trams the colour of faded newspaper.

I didn’t really like Belgium at first. It wasn’t like the Netherlands. It wasn’t love at first sight. It seemed a sullen country, silently resentful, nursing some grievance.

Slowly, I began to get accustomed to the place. I began to discover the noisy street markets, the blend of languages like Italian and Arabic and something that might have been Hungarian. I liked the quiet melancholy of the cafes, which reminded me of the paintings of Spilliaert. I liked the way Belgian literature was always gloomy and Belgian films almost always included one scene set in grim industrial wasteland.

I think you can understand a country by listening to train announcements. In Britain, they broadcast messages in a loud authoritarian tone that makes you think that the Battle of Britain is still raging. In the Flemish area of Belgium, they have someone speaking quite softly and with just a hint of seduction, as if your train journey to Leuven might possibly be the start of an affair.

Oh, I don’t know what to think. Sometimes Belgium seems old-fashioned and a bit cynical. Other times, it is right up there with the world’s most progressive



countries. Sometimes it is a country of Catholic priests under investigation for sex scandals. Other times it is the first country in Europe to have a gay church.

I didn't realise it back in 1989, but a young politician called Guy Verhofstadt was beginning to have an impact in Belgium. Someone dubbed him "baby Thatcher" because he was young and apparently supported Mrs Thatcher's economic policies. It is probably just as well I wasn't reading the newspapers too closely at the time. He eventually became prime minister, but much later, after he had matured a bit and softened his liberalism.

- **Delete**

*Brussels*

*2 November, 2004*

On a sunny day in September, 2001, two planes brought down the Twin Towers in New York. The whole world shifted slightly in the aftershock. The Netherlands was deeply affected, more so perhaps than Belgium. Maybe the ancient ties with New Amsterdam made it more personal.

Strange things began to happen in the months that followed. I gradually became aware of Pim Fortuyn, a neatly-suited Rotterdam politician known for being both gay and anti-Muslim. I was only just beginning to understand his policies when I saw a news report showing his body lying in the street outside the Hilversum broadcasting centre, shot dead by an angry activist who afterwards explained that he was enraged at Fortuyn for 'using Muslims as scapegoats'.

I had come to see Belgium as surreal and the Netherlands as orderly. But nothing in Belgium could match what came next. On 2 November 2004, in the busy Linnaeusstraat in eastern Amsterdam, a 26-year-old Dutch Moroccan pulled out a gun and shot the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh as he cycled to his office.

Van Gogh fell to the ground and staggered across the street to a nearby building. The attacker advanced towards him and raised his gun. Van Gogh cried out: "We can still talk about it! Don't do it! Don't do it!" The plea for understanding had no effect. The attacker fired another shot and then slit Van Gogh's throat. He then left a note pinned to his chest with the knife and fled to the nearby Oosterpark.

The Dutch like to be unshockable, but these two murders appeared to knock them sideways. The last political assassination in the Netherlands was the murder of William of Orange in 1561. This was a country where the strongest political statement I can remember is when a newspaper called Reagan a 'nitwit'. It was a country where political opponents would be 'polderised' into agreement through endless dull discussions. It wasn't a country where you fired a gun at your political enemies.

The weirdness only got worse. At the time he was murdered, Theo van Gogh had just finished a film about the killing of Pim Fortuyn titled 06-05. But his killer had been enraged by another film – "Submission" – that Van Gogh produced earlier in 2004 in collaboration with the Somali refugee Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

The film told the story of a Muslim woman forced into an arranged marriage, abused by her husband and then brutally punished for adultery. It included scenes in which verses of the Koran were painted on the woman's naked body. The aim, Van Gogh said in an interview, was "to provoke discussion on the posi-

Brussels.



tion of enslaved Muslim women.” He could hardly have imagined that a film, any film, would cost his life.

Then there was his name. Van Gogh? What, like the artist? people asked, confused by the news story coming from peaceful Amsterdam. Theo was in fact related to Vincent’s brother, another Theo, who had supported Vincent while he struggled to succeed as an artist. The brother had a son whom he named Vincent. Van Gogh was in an asylum near St Rémy in Provence when he heard the news of young Vincent’s birth. He painted a work called “Branches with Almond Blossom” and sent it to Theo to hang above the couple’s bed.

Vincent had a son, yet another Theo, who was executed as a resistance fighter during the German Occupation of The Netherlands. Another son, Johan, worked for the Dutch secret service and it was his son, Theo, who was shot dead in an Amsterdam street.

A monument to the murdered filmmaker titled ‘The Scream’ was unveiled in the Oosterpark in 2007. I knew this park because I had walked through it on 22 October 1987, a day of violent storms, a few hours after my first daughter was born. I remember the midwife saying that it was like the end of the world, but I hoped for Anna’s sake it was the beginning.

More than any storm, the murder of Theo really seemed like the end of the world. How could something like that happen in a country I loved so much? How could everything change so totally? How could anyone ever again express an opinion, cycle through the streets, make a film?

That country of bright primary colours had suddenly turned dark. Where would it go from there?





Henry Le Boeuf Hall at  
the Centre for Fine Arts,  
Brussels.

» **Fast forward**

*Amsterdam, Rokin*

*14 April, 2008*

The last time I went back to Amsterdam, I found that much of the old city had gone. The Rijksmuseum was still closed and the centre had been ripped apart to lay down a new North-South metro line. The newspaper *De Volkskrant* had shrunk in size and the politician Geert Wilders had made a film attacking Muslims.

And then I read Ray Kluun's novel *Love Life*, which was the book everyone was talking about at the time. It is the story of a man who parties and sleeps with prostitutes while his girlfriend is dying of cancer. And it's largely a true story. It was a nasty book, I thought, the kind of novel that was being published in London and New York during the Thatcher-Reagan years.

I realised then that the Netherlands was no longer Utopia.

## ↑ Play

*Brussels, Central Station*

*1 September, 2010*

I stepped off the train one evening at Luxembourg Station in Brussels. This is a busy station next to the European Parliament. Trains arrive and depart all the time. People pour into Brussels in the morning and leave the city again at 6 pm. The city ebbs and flows.

No one stays for long, I realised. No one belongs. Not really. Not the way a Parisian belongs. Or a New Yorker. Everyone is a migrant here, crossing Europe in search of somewhere they can call home. People pause in Brussels, eat a good meal, have an interesting conversation, stand in the middle of Grand'Place, and then move on somewhere more solid.

Yet I feel fond of Brussels. It seems a hopeful place, despite the chaos. It has an ability to adapt, to bend with the rules, to listen. It accepts different people, different ideas, and tries to make everything work in the end. There's no fixed plan, no big idea, just a willingness to listen.

It's now more than 30 years since I arrived in the Low Countries. I've spent more than half my life here, yet it still doesn't feel exactly like home. I admire the art, the hospitals, the food. But I still can't fit in, even though Brussels is, as capital of Europe, *my* capital.

My final question, as we approach the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, is whether we are nearing the end of Utopia in the Low Countries. I sense that this region is in danger of losing those ideals like tolerance and optimism that first brought me here in 1979.

It feels like it might be time to move on again. And, if that is so, is there anywhere that is Utopia now? ■

## ^ Eject