

## Leuven: a Badly Scarred City



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[ JOHANNA SPAEY ]

Leuven is a deceptive city. That is not apparent from the monumental gables and gleaming pavements. You can count the tramps here on the fingers of one hand, and we have to import the beggars from Eastern Europe since we don't have any very noticeable poverty of our own. But we do dissemble. We lie about the basis of our being. The monumental gables have almost unanimously been rather conceitedly and extravagantly rebuilt after being set fire to by the Germans at the beginning of the First World War. The pavements have been cleared of chewing-gum, but beneath them the blood of many wars, disputes and executions clings everywhere. Everyone thinks this is a city of intellectuals, the seat of Western wisdom, but deep within them the people of Leuven are weary soldiers just waiting until they have to go yet another round with the Vikings, French, Dutch, Austrians and, inevitably, Germans.

From the moment you arrive at the station Leuven immediately shows the scars of one of those lost battles. In 1914 almost the entire city went up in flames. In my second book, *Flight* (Vlucht), I write about a German soldier and a Flemish woman. He murders her family during those savage August days in 1914. That can be done in a couple of pages, but in reality, too, it only took a couple of hours to slaughter the citizens of Leuven. They were jumpy, those lads who had been sent away far from their *Heimat*. Most of them drunk from the booze they had been able to plunder easily in this brewery town. And furious because they were convinced that the Flemings were not sticking to the military code of honour and were using *franc-tireurs* or snipers. Civilians taking pot-shots at soldiers, that was unheard of. '*Der Zivil hat geschossen...*', claimed the Germans. Even though none of those civilian had invited these soldiers to invade their city, and even though it turned out afterwards that there had been no snipers, but that in the confusion of advancing and retreating troops the Germans had been firing on their own men.

Today on Martelarenplein there is a monument commemorating that time. As so often happens with monuments in Leuven, it has long been an object of loathing. When it was unveiled in 1925 the people of Leuven whispered that it was a disgrace. They found that phallic symbol offensive and also too angular and too realistic in terms of the prevailing norms for sculpture. It stood there for many years, covered in grime and piss, until a few years ago it was listed and

restored. Now it stands tall, white and golden, in front of the station, bearing the names of the citizens and soldiers who died then, while the traffic that once raced round the monument is diverted underground.

If we then walk along Bondegenotenlaan (formerly Statiestraat) and look up, we can see commemorative tiles set in each gable. 1914-1918. The modernist architects tore their hair out after the war when the affected citizens of Leuven opted to rebuild their houses in all kinds of grandiose neo-styles with the compensation they received for war damage. That is why the place has become such a hotchpotch. One advantage of the fire, though, is that it provided the opportunity for people to think more carefully about town-planning: they set a few things straight, got rid of what they no longer liked and built anew where necessary. One result of this was the building of a new city theatre that still offers the most important auditorium in the city.

Monument First World War.

Photo by Jacques Bloemen.





University Library.  
Photo by Jacques Bloemen.

### **Burning books**

If we take one of the streets leading off Bondgenotenlaan to the left we come into Ladeuzeplein, now pedestrianised, which is almost entirely taken up with the University Library. It still looks impressive, even now, in September, when it is surrounded on all sides by fairground attractions. This library has done more for the First World War image of 'Gallant Little Belgium' than anyone dreamed at the time.

The first central University Library was established in 1636 in the University buildings in the Naamsestraat. In 1914 the building went up in flames when the German soldiers set fire to the city, as we mentioned earlier. There was enormous world-wide indignation at this. That war consumed people was normal, but anyone who set fire to books was a downright barbarian.

Committees of support were set up in twenty-five countries under the leadership of Herbert Hoover, later President of the USA, and they raised over

half a million dollars towards the building of a new library and the acquisition of a collection of books and manuscripts. The American architect Whitney Warren took his inspiration from Renaissance and Baroque buildings in the Low Countries and the first stone was laid in 1921. Seven years later, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1928, the library had its official opening. The arrangement of the stacks and the reading-room was very modern for the time and at the last minute a venomous anti-German slogan on the gable was scrapped, although the rest of the building is full of war symbolism and loving patriotic references. For instance, the English unicorn denotes the victory of the Allies. In accordance with article 247 of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany for its part had to contribute thirteen million Marks towards the cost of books. Thus there was a two-fold supply of books, so that in 1939 the library had some nine hundred thousand volumes. Because the Germans still clung to the myth of the snipers long after the end of the war and believed that they had justly punished Leuven for that cowardly attack by civilians at the start of the Second World War, in May 1940, they could not resist turning their fire on the library again. Once more it was almost entirely destroyed by the flames. Today the library contains around one million volumes, though I must not omit to mention a striking split in one part of the collection. After a long tussle in the 1960s the University of Leuven became 'Flemish' and decanted the francophone students and professors to Louvain-la-Neuve. But what to do with that unique collection of books and manuscripts? In the case of certain periodicals that I needed to consult during my Assyrian studies the best solution people could come up with was to store them in even-numbered years in Leuven and in odd-numbered years in ... Louvain-la-Neuve.

## Beer and Beguines

To give our brains a bit of a rest we cross Herbert Hooverplein near the library and enter Sint-Donaas Park, where a remnant of the old city wall can still be seen. The tumble-down tower dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is one of the few in Leuven to have survived the destruction and the wars, though it has had to be heavily buttressed. In summer and winter alike this is a favourite place for couples in love, walkers and students who want to get away from their '*koten*' ('hutches' - slang for student rooms).

By means of Vlamingenstraat and Parkstraat we reach Naamsestraat and cross it diagonally. Then we walk steeply downhill and come to the Groot Begijnhof. High heels are not recommended on the uneven cobblestones, but suddenly the Saturday rush and the din of the fair have disappeared without trace. In front of the beguinage, ironically enough, a huge wedding limousine is waiting, but apart from that all is peace and tranquillity. Here and there a tourist wanders around, gazing open-mouthed at the beautifully restored houses, while the Dijle ripples by and gives no inkling that it once brought the Vikings who tried, but failed, to break into Leuven in 891.

While it is true that the beguines dedicated themselves to their heavenly bridegroom and left the temptations of the flesh behind, unlike true nuns they did not have to relinquish their money and possessions. Because they did not take any lifelong vows they could abandon their religious life at any time if they wished to marry or had some other worldly prospect in view. The last beguine died in 1988.

Beguinage.

Photo by Jacques Bloemen.



The Beguinage was saved from further deterioration and neglect and painstakingly restored by the University in the 1960s and '70s. Now it is mainly students and (visiting) professors who live there. True citizens of Leuven will also grumble about this from time to time because for a native of the city one's chance of being able to live there is slim in the extreme. The Beguinage is on Unesco's World Heritage list and even after repeated visits it remains a delight to the eye, and also to ears tormented by the racket of the city.

Leuven has always had a somewhat unusual relationship with women. In my first novel, *Death of a Soldier* (Dood van een soldaat, 2005, Manteau), I introduce a female general practitioner, something that was still a real rarity in 1919. Although born in Hageland, she had to go to the University of Brussels to study. Women students were admitted there from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Leuven kept its doors closed to 'porren' ('pokes' - slang for female students) until 1920. At that time there was a widespread idea that all that intellectual effort was bad for the reproductive organs and delicate nerves of women. Nowadays there are more women than men studying at the Catholic University of Leuven, but it was only in 2010 that Katlijn Malfliet was appointed as the first female Dean in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

If we leave the Beguinage by Schapenstraat, to our right we see the Sint-Antoniuskerk towering above us. Here, at least according to the Flemings, is buried the Greatest Belgian: Father Damiaan, born Jozef De Veuster (1840-1889). He worked and died in the leper colony on Hawaii and in his time had to fight many battles with the Church in order to continue his work among the lepers. In that period it was still thought that leprosy was a result of syphilis, which meant that the unfortunate Damiaan, who eventually died of the disease, was regularly accused of unchastity. Since then he has been declared a saint, but, as befalls every saint, his body is no longer in one piece: his right hand was taken from his grave and is now buried on Molokai. He remains the only non-American to have a statue in the Capitol in Washington.

If we continue along Schapenstraat and turn into Parijsstraat, to right and left we can see all kinds of factory outlets, exotic restaurants and coffee bars.



As a student city, Leuven has never been averse to second-hand goods or food more adventurous than chips with mayonnaise. Anyone in need of a fresh pint can cut through one of the narrow streets on the right and end up in the Oude Markt, *De Langste Toog ter Wereld* (The World's Longest Bar) where according to rumour the locally brewed Stella is piped straight from the brewery to the multiplicity of taps.

If we stay on Parijsstraat, then where it crosses Brusselsestraat we only have to look right to come face-to-face with Leuven's best-known picture postcard: the Grote Markt with the Town Hall and the Sint-Pieterskerk. Here you can satisfy the thirsty, the believers and the argumentative in one go.

Leuven's Town Hall is one of the few monumental buildings that were not set fire to during the First World War, though only because the Germans had their headquarters in it. Aerial photographs from that time show a city in ruins with one single untouched building. Since then the Mayor of Leuven, Louis Tobback, has moved his office to the new City Offices at the station, but the City Council still meets here and a great many people still get married there on a Saturday. In the old days if there was a disagreement they would often toss an aristocrat or a butcher out of the window, but nowadays the arguments are limited to the



Town Hall.

Photo by Jacques Bloemen.

displays of verbal pyrotechnics for which Leuven's Mayor is renowned. Work on the building of the Town Hall began in 1439. The original plan for an L-shaped building with a bell-tower was changed while building was still in progress. The marshy ground persuaded the later architect to rein in his vanity and trade the 'higher-than-the-highest' principle for sculptural tours de force at a lower level. Thus the three small towers on each short side rise straight up, giving the Gothic Town Hall something of the appearance of a shrine. When restoration work started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the advice of the French writer Victor Hugo the empty niches were filled with sculptures of important figures from Leuven's history. Some of them have never been filled. It is doubtful whether the present Mayor will ever end up there, even though his party, the Social Democrat SP.a, continues to do well in every election.

Directly opposite the Town Hall, however, God is still on duty in the Sint-Pieterskerk. A church you can never get into a single picture and which has been tinkered with quite considerably over the years. An error in the construction and the swampy ground meant that it proved impossible to build the towers tall enough. During the First World War the roof was set alight by gunfire, and in the Second World War the church was bombed. Yet people still bravely keep repairing and maintaining it. And inside there is indeed something amazing to see, even though you have to pay for it: *The Last Supper*, a famous triptych by one of the most renowned of Flemish Primitives, the painter Dirk Bouts.

We walk up to the main entrance of the Sint-Pieterskerk and cross to the pedestrian part of Mechelsestraat. Here stands the statue of the humanist Erasmus, staring ahead with a somewhat irritated expression. The author of *In Praise of Folly* lived in the Low Countries from 1516 to 1521 as an advisor to Charles V, and during that time he also stayed in Leuven for a while.

If we walk along Mechelsestraat and on Vismarkt turn into Busleydengang, the first narrow alley on our right, we can see what remains of the Collegium Trilingue or Three-Language College that Erasmus founded in 1518 to fulfil the request of his late friend, the humanist Hieronymus Busleyden. It was the first college to teach the three sacred languages, Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and is one of the few surviving Renaissance buildings in Leuven. In those days there was no question of teaching my main languages, Akkadian and Sumerian, or the many other dead and living languages that people can now study at the University and speak with students and professors from every part of the world.

Erasmus.

Photo by Jacques Bloemen.



## No writers, but photographers

In a city where the university and intellectual life play such an important part you might also expect the muses to be kept busy providing all the artists with inspiration, but that is another disappointment. Many writers have spent their wild youth here, but few have stayed. And unlike the trading city of Antwerp, Leuven has no official city author or poet. In a somewhat wayward manner, every two years the Leuven arts festival Kulturama appoints a 'creative ambassador' who can then set up all sorts of projects in his or her own field. In 2006 for the first time Leuven lashed out on a 'City DJ', Jimmy de Wit. Two years later we got our own 'City Chef', Jeroen Meus, and since 2010 the photographer Marco Mertens has been hard at work inviting the people of Leuven via his website to share their best photographs with him, and also putting on his own



Museum M.  
Photo by Jacques Bloemen.

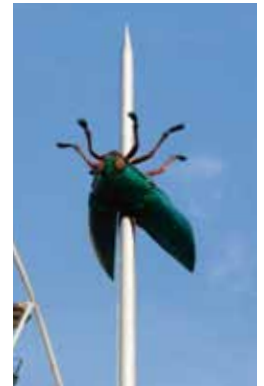
exhibitions. At present it is anybody's guess who will succeed him in 2012, but since the creative ambassadors have a voice in the selection of course there is already huge speculation.

Those who still have some interest in literature, though, can dive into Schrijnmakersstraat behind Erasmus and enjoy literature from all over the world, together with a cup of coffee, in the literary café De Dry Coppen.

If we leave the statue of Erasmus behind and walk through Jodenstraatje to Fochplein, we reach our final stop in Vanderkelenstraat. Literary life in Leuven may be on the back burner, but with the 'M' (for Museum) the city has now well and truly blown the dust off its run-down art collections and locales. In September 2009, on the site of the former public library and the municipal museum, the fabulous M opened its doors, bringing together ancient and modern art. It was designed by architect Stéphane Beel, who has spread six storeys over two existing and two new buildings.

For once the people of Leuven, who are not known for their broad-minded approach to architecture, kept their mouths shut – even when faced with this striking cubist design. The first temporary exhibition, on Rogier van der Weyden, immediately attracted huge numbers of visitors, making it very difficult to make a reservation, and the opening hours had to be extended. But the M's permanent collection of mediaeval to 19<sup>th</sup>-century art is also worth a look. These days, of course, a measure of cross-fertilisation is essential: so the museum promises to delve into the university cellars regularly or to play host to local young artists.

And so, via M we find ourselves back on Ladeuzeplein, where the Ferris wheel suddenly no longer looks out of place beside Jan Fabre's impaled iridescent beetle. This artwork is a gift from the university to the city on the occasion of its 575<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Needless to say, not a single citizen of Leuven knows that the work is called *'Totem'*. It is simply 'That Beetle' or 'That Insect'. And there is no doubting that, underground, the muttering about phallic symbols will rumble on until the whole city is aware of it. ■



Jan Fabre, *Totem*.  
Photo by Jacques Bloemen.

Translated by Sheila M. Dale