

Death in a Cathedral

A Dog of Flanders



© Twentieth Century
Fox Film Corporation,
1960.

How many literature-lovers still remember the oeuvre of Marie Louise de la Ramée? Yet, writing under the pseudonym 'Ouida', this author created an English-language novel which recounts what without exaggeration can be hailed as the best-known story about Flanders and the Flemings. *A Dog of Flanders* was published in 1872 and became a bestseller. To date, millions of copies have been sold, and in Japan alone there have been some 500 reprints.

The main character in *A Dog of Flanders* is an orphan boy called Nello. He is initially taken in by his grandfather, a poor dairy farmer. Each day, they go to Antwerp together to sell milk to the wealthy burghers. One day, however, his grandfather dies and Nello is abandoned by virtually everyone. Only one faithful friend remains, his dog Patrasche. Yet Nello refuses to be discouraged. He is very talented in drawing and enters a drawing competition which offers a substantial monetary prize. Sadly, he fails to win the contest. In desperation, he goes to the city one last time with Patrasche. On Christmas Eve he dies from his hardships, in Antwerp Cathedral, lying in front of Pieter Paul Rubens' famous depiction of *The Descent from the Cross*, with Patrasche in his arms.

Japan, in particular, still seems to be completely enchanted by this story with its strong theme of being alone in the world. Each year, the Cathedral of Our Lady

draws huge numbers of visitors from Japan who are prepared to undertake the long flight in order to visit the place where Nello lost his life. The characters from *A Dog of Flanders* appear to form part of the collective memory in the land of the rising sun, partly because of a popular animation series which was first broadcast on Japanese television in 1975 and which has been re-broadcast every year since then. Apparently, the sad ending is very appealing to the average Japanese person. With a little imagination, Nello can be seen as a sort of Samurai who, until his last breath and against his better judgment, fights against his undeserved fate and dies a courageous death.

But Japan is not the only country where *A Dog of Flanders* is well known. There have been several occasions when the United States, in particular, has also been charmed by the story of Nello and Patrasche. Hollywood produced no fewer than five films of the story, the first appearing as early as 1914. The reviews of this film by Howell Hansel reveal something of a puzzle. Evidently there were two versions, one with a happy ending and one in which Nello died in the snow just outside the Cathedral. This second version would also turn out to be the only one in which Nello and Patrasche came to a bad ending. The fact that Hollywood dislikes death and hardship was also clear in the second film portrayal. In this 1924 version, directed by Victor Schertzinger, Nello and Patrasche are adopted by a wealthy painter; and of course they live happily ever afterwards. The main character was played by the talented Jackie Coogan, only ten years old at the time but already one of the biggest stars in Hollywood. Yet another film version of the story appeared before the Second World War, this time directed by Edward Slowman, and according to aficionados one of the many uninspired products to come out of the Hollywood film factory.

It was to be 1960 before the next film version appeared, directed by James B. Clark and showing Nello & Co. in colour for the first time. Part of the film was shot on location in the Low Countries, in Antwerp of course, but strangely enough also at a number of picturesque locations in the Netherlands. The cast contained a few Dutch actors, some of whom enjoyed

Facsimile of picture which appeared in the first print of *A Dog of Flanders*
© Cambridge University Library.



a certain fame. The last (for the time being) version filmed in America appeared in 1999. For a while, it seemed as if this film, directed by Kevin Brodi, would remain faithful to the book. However, shortly after his death in the Cathedral, we see Nello in heaven where his prematurely dead mother and his grandfather are sitting waiting for him. A member of the jury for the great drawing contest informs Nello that he was really the deserving winner of the competition. Moreover, from his place high up in heaven, Nello is able to watch over his own funeral and it comes as no surprise that everyone attending had found him a very likeable boy. The desire of filmmakers to tailor films to the expectations of American audiences appears indefatigable; because it turns out, of course, that everything had just been a bad dream - what else had the viewer expected? So it is quickly back to the earthly existence, where we see how Nello wakes up in the Cathedral, with all the characters standing around him in a circle. It is the perfect moment for a group hug, and a good moment for the closing credits to start rolling across the screen.

What about the story in the Low Countries themselves? It is almost as if there is some kind of strange curse there on stories that give them a presence in the outside world. Ask the average Dutchman to describe the plot of *The Flying Dutchman* and he is likely to sigh and shrug his shoulders. And apart from a few bar owners near the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, virtually no one in Flanders has ever heard of Nello and Patrasche. It is not that attempts have never been made to bring the boy and his dog to life. Well-versed comic strip aficionados will know that Album 201 from the *Spike and Suzy* series, which is widely read in Flanders, was inspired entirely by *A Dog of Flanders*. In Hoboken, near Antwerp - and according to local wor-

thies the village where Nello grew up - there stands a small bronze statue erected especially for the pilgrims from Japan. And in 2007, Didier Volckaert and An Van Dienderen made a fascinating TV documentary based on the story.

The Flemish publishing house Lannoo also recently jumped on the bandwagon with *A Dog of Flanders. Een nooit geziene kijk op Vlaanderen*^[1] (*A Dog of Flanders. Flanders seen as never before*). The 'pièce de résistance' in this book is the faithful translation of the very rare first edition of the novel. The original version and a translation by the contemporary Flemish writer Tom Naegels are printed alongside each other. Different collaborators focus among other things on the Japanese animation series and the Hollywood films, as well as on life in Flanders in 1870 and the turbulent life and tragic death of the writer herself. Highly original is the article about dogcarts in the Low Countries, and of course there is no avoiding the question of why the story arouses so little interest in Flanders itself. The book is also beautifully illustrated, using stills from the animation series and films, as well as pictures from the *Spike and Suzy* comic strips, for example.

Hans Vanacker
Translated by Julian Ross

NOTE

1. AN VAN DIENDEREN & DIDIER VOLCKAERT (EDS.), *A Dog of Flanders. Een nooit geziene kijk op Vlaanderen* (*A Dog of Flanders. Flanders seen as never before*), Tielt: Lannoo, 2010, 265 pp. ISBN 978 90 209 8852 9