

What *The Ostend Story* has done above all is to demonstrate how sensitively-commented bibliography can prove remarkably revealing when incorporated in the contemporary history of important socio-political events – then as now.

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Anna E.C. Simoni, *The Ostend Story. Early Tales of the Great Siege and the mediating role of Henrick van Haestens.*

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## A Legacy of Elegant Scholarship

### Professor Ernst Kossmann Remembered

Ernst Heinrich Kossmann (1922–2003) was one of the most outstanding Dutch historians of the post-war era, in a field where – with men like De Jong, Presser, Schöffer, and more recently Jan de Vries, Simon Schama and Jonathan Israel – there is no shortage of excellent scholars. He was also a central figure in Anglo-Dutch relations, both while he taught Dutch history at University College London in the early sixties and for many years afterwards.

Kossmann grew up before the war in Rotterdam, where his father was director of the municipal library. His was a close-knit and highly cultured family, in whose life music, books and *Bildung* were of central importance. With his twin brother Alfred, who went on to become an important poet and novelist, he attended the Gymnasium Erasmianum. In 1943 the twins were arrested and spent two years doing forced labour in Germany near Strasbourg, where – as Ernst recounted in his autobiography – the work was hard, but he also learned French and hung around in pubs and cinemas. After the war he went to Leiden to study history, not least for the insight it might offer into the origins of the catastrophe through which his generation had lived. In 1954 he gained his doctorate with a study in French on the voluminous pamphlet literature spawned by the *Fronde* opposition to Cardinal Mazarin in mid-seventeenth-century France.

Thus, when he came to London in 1957, as Reader in Dutch History at UCL, Kossmann was not a historian of the Low Countries. But he made his mark straight away, and in 1962 was offered the Chair in Dutch History, which he accepted with a splendid inaugural lecture, *In Praise of the Dutch Republic: Some Seventeenth-Century Attitudes* (1963).

During his years in London he worked tirelessly to provide a forum for scholars of Dutch history. To this end, he first of all introduced a new Special Subject at UCL on the Dutch Revolt, which was also the subject of the chapter he wrote for the *New Cambridge Modern History* (vol. 5, 1961). This attracted growing numbers of students, some of whom recall a rather shy teacher, forever fiddling with his pipe while he talked. They benefited from his rigorous but stimulating teaching, his humour, and also his hospitality. He and his wife Jo, a medieval historian in her own right, welcomed students and visiting scholars to their flat in West Hampstead in a very relaxed and Dutch environment, where the scholarly and the domestic mingled seamlessly.

Kossmann also revived the somewhat languishing Seminar in Low Countries History at the Institute of Historical Research, and reinvigorated the important Dutch collection in the Institute's library. Under his supervision several British postgraduates – Renee Gerson, Rosemary Jones, Chris Emery, Lesley Price, Alastair Duke – embarked on research on a range of Dutch subjects. And, together with John Bromley, Kossmann organised a series of conferences on *Britain and The Netherlands*, the first of which was held in Oxford in 1959. In all, they published five volumes of conference proceedings between 1960 and 1975.

Meanwhile, the Kossmanns regularly produced a hugely demanding critical survey of Dutch and Flemish historiography. From 1953 to 1965 this appeared annually in the *Revue du Nord*. In later years the members of the London seminar became involved in the reviewing work, and the surveys were published in English in *Acta Historiae Neerlandica*, later *The Low Countries History Yearbook*, until 1981. For over 25 years these critical surveys were of particular value to non-Dutch readers.

London held a great many attractions, not least their contact with fellow historians such as Gombrich, Momigliano, Cobban, Wilson and Boxer. But

increasingly the Kossmanns were feeling that their children should grow up in the Netherlands, and in 1966 he accepted the Chair in Modern Dutch History at Groningen University, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. During these decades his wide-ranging scholarly publications continued to flow, and his home continued to tempt friends and scholars to make the journey to the North-Eastern Netherlands.

Kossmann's reputation as a historian rests, first of all, on his work on political theory and thought in the Dutch Republic. His short monograph of 1960 was a classic, a ground-breaking study of the important but largely disregarded writings of political thinkers like De la Court, Vander Muelen and Ulrich Huber. In 1974 this was followed by his *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands*, an extremely valuable collection of pamphlets justifying the Dutch Revolt between 1565 and 1588, for which he wrote a long introductory essay that is justly considered a masterpiece. In translation we now have his *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic. Three Studies* (2000), which shows us Kossmann as an *Ideehistoriker* in the best tradition of Friedrich Meinecke, while at the same time offering a very Dutch, sober-minded and critical examination of the historical documents and the republican ideas they contain. The realism and scepticism of Kossmann's approach also meant, however, that he kept his distance from the newer intellectual history of Skinner, Pocock and the Cambridge School, with their emphasis on language, rhetorical analysis and philosophical traditions.

Beyond the Dutch Golden Age, Kossmann also made important contributions to the history of political thought in the eighteenth century, with his study of the conservative thinker Elie Luzac, and in the nineteenth century, in his study of the liberal statesman and reformer Thorbecke, published in 1982. Ranging far and wide, Kossmann was perhaps the last historian who was at home in any period of modern Dutch history, as we can see in the standard work he published in 1978, *The Low Countries, 1780-1940*, first commissioned by Oxford University Press in 1960. In 1986 this was expanded into a two-volume work in Dutch which brought the account up to 1980.

This trailblazing double-portrait of the modern history of the Netherlands and Belgium is a model of comparative history writing, which brings out both



The early days of the Dutch Revolt: Dutch foot soldiers and German cavalry launching an attack on the

Spanish during the Battle of Heiligerlee (1568). Engraving by Frans Hogenberg.

the common themes and the many differences between the two neighbouring states. The book, at once scholarly and very readable, is full of well-chosen *aperçus* that challenge accepted views and open up new vistas for historical research. It was a set text for generations of students who benefited from Kossmann's quite brilliant capacity to synthesise historical debate. It was a much-valued companion to *The Literature of the Low Countries* (1978) by the then Professor of Dutch Language and Literature in the University of London, Reinder Meijer. Taken together, these two works cover the whole range of literature, culture, history and politics of the Netherlands and Belgium, and they leave an enduring legacy of solid scholarship that will not easily be surpassed. They stand out in a distinguished tradition of Dutch Studies in London, which began in 1919 with Pieter Geyl, and runs via Gustaaf Renier, Koen Swart and Jonathan Israel through to the new holder of the Chair, Benjamin Kaplan, who gave his inaugural lecture at UCL on the day after Kossmann's funeral.

Over the years, Kossmann also published a formidable number of essays – vignettes of prominent historians such as Meinecke, Werner Kaegi, Ranke,

Huizinga, Geyl and Renier, and critical examinations of cherished notions like 'the spirit of the age', 'toleration', 'national identity' and the 'Dutchness' of the Dutch nation. Erudite and judicious, and written in the detached, concise and ironic style which he developed in a conscious move away from the more artistic prose of Huizinga, these essays are the product of a very sceptical mind, which was fascinated by paradoxes and wary – as Geyl had been – of grand theories, such as the *Annales* school of Braudel and Febvre. In these lucid essays he truly was a historian's historian.

In 1987 Kossmann retired, but in the same year he published a short survey of the history of 'the Northern and the Southern Netherlands' from the Romans till the present. This little gem of a book, written jointly with his wife for the Flemish-Netherlands foundation Ons Erfdeel, was translated into English in 1989 as *The Low Countries* and has had a worldwide distribution in many languages. Like Geyl before him, Kossmann took a great interest in the historical relations between the Netherlands and Flanders. Unlike Geyl, however, Kossmann did not subscribe to the Romantic ideology of a Greater Netherlands, and he did not see the Low Countries as a natural, organic whole, united by a common language – but rather more as twins, very close but also very different, with different political and cultural identities, though intimately linked by innumerable bonds and interests.

Kossmann also remained active in Anglo-Dutch relations. He contributed a memorable article on toleration to volume 5 of this yearbook (TLC 1997 – he was also a member of the yearbook's Advisory Committee). And in April 1989, in his opening lecture to the London conference on 'The Low Countries and the World', he gave a profound discussion of the dilemmas and pitfalls, not to say the virtual impossibility of the task facing historians who want to write Dutch cultural history – while at the same time he was quietly confident about how they would tackle this daunting task.

On a personal level, what remains are the warmest of personal memories. The many former students and colleagues of Kossmann, whose collective tribute this obituary is, all testify to his warmth and the generosity with which he always encouraged younger scholars. This distinguished Dutch historian, who

died in Groningen in November 2003, was the acknowledged master of political and cultural history in the Low Countries. He was at the forefront of the internationalisation of Dutch history, and leaves a body of elegant scholarship which has at its heart a steely integrity. It will be the enduring and worthy legacy of this gracious and generous man.

Reinier Salverda

## **A European Isle**

### **Raoul van Caenegem's 'History of England'**

Most histories of England (and there are many) are collaborative affairs in which several historians contribute different volumes or chapters dealing with topics or periods in which they have specialised. There are few historians who have had the courage or even the ability to write a complete history of England on their own. It is a daunting task that requires not only an encyclopedic knowledge of the facts but also the ability to select those that are significant and provide the reader with a framework of understanding without losing the momentum of what is often, after all, a turbulent and dramatic 'story'.

However, one historian who has achieved just that is Professor Raoul van Caenegem, Emeritus Professor of Medieval History and of Legal History at Ghent University's Faculty of Letters and Faculty of Law respectively. His history of England, *Geschiedenis van Engeland*, was first published in 1982, and started with the prehistory of England, including among other things the significance of Stonehenge, and ended in 1980 with the accession of Margaret Thatcher. The fourth reprint of 2003 contains a supplementary 'epilogue' covering the last two decades of the twentieth century. Among other things it discusses the 'impact of the Iron Lady' and the significance of Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government, while also reminding the reader of the ups and downs affecting the Royal Family and the peace process in Northern Ireland.

So it is probably the most comprehensive single-volume history of England in print today, and not just in terms of its time-scale. Although politics and war-