

The Establishment of the Orange Monarchy in 1813-1815

A National Myth

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Every day hundreds of passers-by, cyclists, trams and cars pass the imposing nineteenth-century monument on the stately Den Haag square, 'Plein 1813'. Most of these passers-by are probably unaware of its significance as a memorial to the restoration of Dutch independence after the fall of the Napoleonic Empire and the establishment of the Orange monarchy in 1813-1815. The relative obscurity of the monument – before the national commemoration of the bicentennial in 2013-2015, in any case – illustrates the fact that these events have been forgotten by the great majority of the Dutch population.

The relative obscurity of the monument cannot be attributed to its form. Due to its impressive size the monument towers high above the square. On top there is the figure of a maiden, representing the Dutch nation. In her hands she holds the seven arrows of the seven provinces of the old Republic. Beside her sits the Dutch lion symbolising resurgent courage. Beneath her feet lie the broken chains of French tyranny. On the city side we find the statue of William I (1772-1843), swearing the oath on the constitution. On the seaward side stand the statues of the triumvirate that formed the interim government in November 1813, Van Hogendorp, Van der Duyn van Maasdamp and Van Limburg Stirum. The founding principles of the Dutch state, religion (*biblia*) and history (*historia*) are represented on either side. The collapse of Napoleonic rule and the arrival of the Prince of Orange on the beach at Scheveningen, welcomed by the cheering population, are depicted heroically in relief.

The monument was intended, as stated, to be a reminder of annexation by the Napoleonic Empire and the establishment of the Orange monarchy in the Netherlands. A short summary of these events goes as follows: in November 1813 Napoleonic rule in the Dutch provinces, which had been annexed to the Napoleonic Empire in 1810, collapsed after the defeat of the imperial armies by an international coalition near Leipzig on 16-19 October 1813. French officials started to flee the country and a power vacuum threatened. The Rotterdammer and former regent, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp (1762-1834), who had not held any important posts since the Batavian revolution in 1795, but had forged plans for the restoration of an independent Netherlands, seized his opportunity and on 21 November he proclaimed himself, in the name of the Prince of Orange, together with Van der Duyn van Maasdamp and van Limburg Stirum as the country's



Monument 1813, The Hague

interim government. Van Hogendorp's independent behaviour came to an end when the Prince of Orange himself, returning from England, where he had been exiled from the Continent for years, landed on the beach at Scheveningen on 3 November 1813.

At first the Prince of Orange appeared to be hesitant about taking the lead in setting up the new state formed under the protection and patronage of Great Britain. As his position had not yet been established, William was initially given the rather vague title of 'Sovereign Monarch'. A constitutional commission was set up by the Prince under the chairmanship of the inevitable Van Hogendorp. On 29 March 1814 the constitution was approved by a 'Meeting of Notables', personally selected by William and his close associates, who had come from every corner of the land to the *Nieuwe Kerk* (New Church) in Amsterdam. A day later William I took the oath on the brand new constitution, giving his rule a legitimate basis. On 2 May that year he opened the sitting of the Estates-General, the national parliament of the Northern Netherlands.

The formation of the young kingdom ended with the merging of the Northern and Southern Netherlands, which had gone their separate ways after the Revolt in the sixteenth century. In August 1814 the Prince was given interim authority over the Austrian Netherlands. With the approval of the European powers, William assumed the title of King on 16 March 1815, just as the new state came under threat from Napoleon's unexpected one hundred day return to France from exile on Elba. The defeat of the Napoleonic armies near Waterloo on 18 July, however, secured the survival of the young kingdom. On 21 September of that year William I made his ceremonial entrance into Brussels as King of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a state which, as we know, would not last fifteen years.



Monument 1813, The Hague.
Detail. The triumvirate that
formed the interim govern-
ment on 20 November 1813

Like all monuments, the monument on Plein 1813 says more about the time when it was erected, around 1860, than about the time that the edifice was supposed to commemorate. Fierce political strife preceded the erection of the monument, including even death threats against Minister-President Thorbecke. Besides being a symbol of the political strife round 1860, this monument also represents a more durable phenomenon in Dutch history – the national myth of '1813'. According to this myth the establishment of the Orange monarchy was the result of a national struggle for independence in which the population of the Netherlands united to drive out the foreign tyrant and his servants under the leadership of the returning 'father', William I, a descendant of *pater patriae* William the Silent (1533-1584). The classic national image of '1813' is of a new beginning and a national 'liberation' and 'deliverance' after a dark period of occupation. This image was created immediately after 1813 by contemporary historians like Van der Palm, Boscha and Konijnenburg with the aim of legitimising the establishment of William I's regime by presenting the new state as a return to the traditions of the fatherland and creating a sharp contrast between the tyrannical Napoleonic rule and the freedom-loving, patriotic government of the Orange monarch.

Source of embarrassment

It is striking that this image of '1813' persists even today. The official committee appointed by the Dutch Council of Ministers on 1 July 2011 to organise the commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of the events of 1813-1815 is following the classic concept too. On the committee's website (www.200jaarkoninkrijk.nl, as viewed on August 1, 2012) the establishment of the monarchy is also presented as a national liberation after a period of foreign domination. Following a period of dark tyranny William I brought national independence, Dutch freedom combined with the constitutional guarantee of human rights and burgeoning democracy. That the commemoration committee propagates this type of historic image is in itself very understandable. By presenting '1813' as a national independence struggle following grim foreign domination, the distant events of the early nineteenth century, which do not as such evoke strong images, can be dramatized for more Dutch and brought alive in the eyes of the inhabitants of the twenty-first century. The official representation of '1813' seems to echo the commemoration and conceptualization of the liberation after the Second World War, a memory that still has a big impact on Dutch conceptions of the past.

The existing national image of '1813', however, is founded on a myth. To start with, the characterisation of the regime preceding the 'liberation of 1813', the period of annexation to the Napoleonic Empire, between 1810 and 1813, as 'foreign occupation' is anachronistic. Many members of the Dutch administrative elite – right up to the highest level – had participated in the annexation government, partly out of pragmatism but also because they – like the head of the Imperial Court and foremost Dutch legal officer, Cornelis Felix van Maanen (1769-1846) – felt that in so doing they could carry out the much needed reform of the Dutch governmental and legal system. In contrast to the German domination of 1940-1945 the Napoleonic Empire wanted to integrate the local elites

of the annexed territories into the administration. Dutchmen could be found at every level of imperial rule, from the lowliest *Maire* to the State Council and the Senate in Paris, not just many former Batavian revolutionaries but moderate Orangists who had shown their loyalty to Emperor Napoleon after 1801 too. Although some of the Batavian revolutionaries, like Anton Reinhard Falck (1777-1843), had refused to work for the annexation government, many Dutch administrators agreed with Napoleon's position, that the former Dutch republic was simply too small to continue to exist independently and had therefore been added to the *Empire* out of 'compassion'. In 1810 the disappearance of the Netherlands as an independent political unit was a realistic future scenario. That the Netherlands is still alive and thriving as a nation state now has more to do with the French Emperor's strategic military mistakes than with the patriotic sentiments of the Dutch population - but that is not the subject of this article.

After 1813 the major role played by Dutch officials in the imperial government naturally became a source of embarrassment and the significant Dutch contribution to the annexation government was hushed up and explained away. After 1813, government during the annexation became, retrospectively, cruel foreign domination by the Corsican monster Napoleon ('the bloodthirsty predator' according to one Dutch pamphlet) and his fickle Frenchmen, ancient enemies of the Dutch. Insofar as Dutch notables had served Napoleon, they did it, according to their own apologias and Dutch historians, only because of their desire to alleviate, as far as possible, the brutal measures the 'French authorities' were inflicting on the troubled population of the Netherlands. The publicist Jacobus Scheltema wrote that prefects from the Southern Netherlands, such as Celles and de Stassart, 'honed and exacerbated the cruelty of the imperial regulations, rubbing salt and pepper into the open wounds, while prefects [from the Northern Netherlands] applied oil and balsam'. The whole period from the Batavian revolution to the annexation was excluded from Dutch history after 1813 and characterised in national historiography as the 'French period', as if it had no place in national historiography.



Monument 1813, The Hague. Detail. The landing of William I (30 November 1813) at Scheveningen beach, only a few metres from the place where he had left the country with his father eighteen years previously

Dynastic interests

Whether or not the main actors during the 'liberation of 1813' were motivated by love of the fatherland, as is so beautifully portrayed in the reliefs on the monument, is also questionable. The actions of the Prince and the Stadholders' family themselves can certainly not be called purely nationalistic in the period 1795-1813. On 26 November 1801 the Prince's father and last Stadholder, William V (1748-1806), who lived in exile, had, partly under pressure from his son, given up his rights to the Netherlands in return for the payment of damages because the return of the Stadholders' family no longer seemed to be a realistic prospect. Having bowed to Napoleon, William I was given the tiny German principality of Fulda to rule in 1802, though the Emperor took it from him again in 1806. The Prince then went to run his properties in Silesia and Posen as an ordinary country gentleman. His endeavours in the period 1795-1813 seem to have been aimed mainly at getting some territory to rule over somewhere - anywhere - in Europe. Thanks to his mother, Wilhelmina of Prussia, William realised that his best chances lay in Great Britain, and in the spring of 1813 he

left for the island state to work for the restoration of the Orange dynasty in the former Republic. It was then that it became clear that the Napoleonic Empire was less invincible than had hitherto been thought. As far as the later William I was concerned, dynastic interests prevailed over Dutch nationalist feelings. Obviously, though, after his accession to the throne in 1813-1815 the Prince did not want to be reminded of his – quite understandably – pragmatic behaviour in the period preceding his return to the Netherlands.

Large sections of the Dutch population seemed, then, to have more or less forgotten the stadholders' family in the early nineteenth century. The death of the last Stadholder, in 1806, passed largely unnoticed. The Orange sentiments of the 'ordinary folk' seem mainly to have been activated when the Napoleonic Empire, coming under increasing pressure as a result of its military defeats from 1812 onwards, began to take on a more and more repressive character. National sentiments certainly existed before 1813 and were reinforced by resist-



Monument 1813, The Hague

ance poetry such as J.F. Helmers's *De Hollandsche natie* (the Dutch nation; 1812) and the experience of annexation. Nonetheless, the revival of Dutch nationalism in the years 1813 to 1815 as expressed, for example, in the many pamphlets and poems written at the time in honour of the nation and the Orange dynasty, was certainly just as much a result as the cause of the events of 1813-1815.

Indeed, the attitude of the majority of the Dutch elite can definitely not be characterised as patriotic. For fear of a not entirely unrealistic military resurgence of the Empire, many members of the Dutch political and professional elite advocated a 'system of neutrality' in October and November 1813, whereby they took no sides, neither Napoleon's nor the Prince of Orange's. Some officials, such as Cornelis Felix van Maanen, only stopped reporting to the Minister of Justice in Paris after he had himself seen the Cossacks on the Malieveld in The Hague. The uncomfortable truth, from the perspective of the current commemoration, is that in general the Northern Netherlands' elite was more afraid of chaos and plundering by its own 'ordinary folk', as a result of the power

Monument 1813,
The Hague. Detail



vacuum that had developed after the departure of the French military, than it was of the 'foreign' annexation regime. When the revolution turned out to be irreversible, many officials attributed an important role in the 'national liberation' to themselves – with retrospective effect, of course.

A creation *ab ovo*

The portrayal in national historiography of 1813 as the start of the modern Dutch state and monarchy is incorrect too. In terms of his monarchy, William I was able to build, to a large extent, on the example of the first King of the Netherlands, Louis Napoleon (1778-1846), who had been appointed by his brother, Napoleon I, as the King of Holland from 1806 to 1810. In pamphlets after 1813 Louis was jeeringly referred to as the 'shadow King' of his brother Napoleon, but Louis was just as much the shadow King of William I. Louis made the monarchy acceptable to the citizens of the country, with its long republican tradition, by visiting the victims of national disasters such as flooding and gun powder explosions (and by having these visits recorded in many poems and pictures). After 1813, however, William I never mentioned the first King of Holland and Louis Napoleon was not given an official reception when he visited the country in 1840.

Furthermore, it is a myth that William built his state – in the words of the British Ambassador, Clancarty – *ab ovo* (from the egg, or from scratch). Very soon after his return William realised that he had more in common with the professional and centrist-leaning former Napoleonic civil servants (who had been mainly moderate revolutionaries during the period 1795-1798) than with the regents left over from the Old Republic. In the constitutional commission of 1814, powerful men such as Van Maanen, Elout and Roëll were able to influence Van Hogendorp's draft to suit the Napoleonic centrists. The archaic constitutional terminology from the republican period obscures the extent to which William I's state 'lay in a bed made by Napoleon'. By historicizing the institutions created in the period 1795-1813 the Batavian-Napoleonic heritage was 'nationalised'.



Joseph Paelinck, *William I, King of the Netherlands* (1819).
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

What is also striking is the high degree of continuity in terms of the senior official apparatus between the 'cruel foreign annexation' and the liberated Netherlands. William I wielded his power over a kingdom of real political weathercocks, who had transformed themselves expertly from servants of the Empire to loyal officials of the fatherland between 1813 and 1815. In the period 1814-1830, for example, two thirds of the State Councillors in the Northern Netherlands had already held office during the Kingdom of Holland and half during the annexation. A similar pattern held for the ministers too. The administrative continuity with the Batavian and Napoleonic periods had major consequences for Dutch administrative practice after 1813. The establishment of the Orange monarchy was, in short, to a large extent the work of the Napoleonic administrative elite, though obviously there was little mention of this in the nationalist version of events. In my opinion, then, there is a scene missing from the monument on Plein 1813 – that of Cornelis Felix van Maanen as the impersonation of administrative 'weathercocks' (to use the language of his contemporaries) and their important role in the construction of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The international dimension

Another aspect of the distorted national memory of 1813 is obviously the denial of the international dimension of the events of 1813-1815. Although it cannot be denied that the headstrong behaviour of the triumvirate, or that of William I, influenced the outcome of the regime change in 1813-1815, the events of those years in the Netherlands must be put in perspective. Developments in the Dutch provinces during those years were only a sideshow compared to developments on the broader European scene. Without the arrival of the mounted Cossacks on the Malieveld in The Hague, William I could not have established his national monarchy. And the Prince's landing and the establishment of the state in the Northern Netherlands, in 1814, would have been no more than the first act of a process that would result in the founding of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a bi-lingual state with The Hague and Brussels as dual capitals. This 'amalgamation' was not only 'forced' on the country by the international powers, as the official rhetoric would have it, but was also very deliberately sought after by William I and company (including, initially, the father of the constitution, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp). Despite the national rhetoric, William I's endeavours were aimed primarily not at national but at dynastic interests. It was not the landing at Scheveningen, on 30 November 1813, but the Battle of Waterloo, on 16-18 July 1815, that was the most important national historical event of this United Kingdom. Only after the separation of the Kingdom, in the revolution of 1830, did the 'national memory' of 1813 acquire a purely Northern Netherlands colour and would William I's Benelux be referred to as a bizarre experiment, doomed to failure, in both Dutch and Belgian national history.

The official 2013 commemoration committee seems to want to add a new dimension to the already layered national myth of 1813. William I is also presented – on the commemoration website mentioned above, for example – as the bringer of parliamentary democracy and defender of the values of democratic pluralism. But William I would turn in his grave if he knew that two hundred years later he would be depicted as a democrat. William I's system was actually

aimed at restricting the influence of the people as much as possible and leaving the administration of the country to 'self-possessed' ('bedaard') gentlemen of standing, property and morally irreproachable behaviour. Indeed, the French terror had made it very clear to many contemporaries exactly where unbridled people's power could lead: to anarchy and bloody despotism.

To sum up, the national memory of '1813' as a national liberation from a brutal foreign tyrant and the start of modern Dutch political history and democracy is founded on a myth. In reality the transition was much more chaotic and messier, and the behaviour of the protagonists much more pragmatic and not what could be called heroic. The myth of the 'national liberation' was created by contemporary historians and publicists after the facts, in 1813-1815, with the aim of legitimising the new state of the Orange monarchs. That myth still exists and, as the website of the commemoration committee shows, is constantly being fed. That this version of events is incorrect, however, does not of course mean that the myth is by definition harmful. Every political establishment creates – deliberately or imperceptibly – its own 'historical regime' to justify its own existence and there is nothing wrong with that per se, as long as critical voices are not excluded. Conceptualization of the national liberation struggle against a foreign tyrant can also be very useful in arousing or keeping alive, in people who are not professionally involved with the period, a historic interest in relatively distant events. Successfully familiarizing a broader public with complex historical events from a distant past always requires simplification and thinking in strong contrasts. National memories that have been created, like those of 1813, may possibly even increase social cohesion in a society that feels threatened by either imagined or real social and political fragmentation. But if the Netherlands is really the full-grown democracy that it pretends to be, according to the commemoration committee, then there must also be historians who have the thankless and perhaps rather disagreeable task of researching national memories as far as possible outside the national context and ultimately subjecting them to the critical examination of scholarship as well. ■

NOTE

For a more detailed exposition and substantiation of this interpretation of the events of 1813-1815, please see my book *Windvanen. Napoleontische bestuurders in de Nederlandse en Franse Restauratie (1813-1820)* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker 2009; includes summary in English; EN title: Political weathervanes. Napoleonic officials under the Dutch and French Restoration monarchy (1813-1820)). *Windvanen* was defended as a doctoral thesis on 17 April 2009 at the University of Amsterdam. It can be consulted digitally via the catalogue of the University of Amsterdam (<http://dare.uva.nl/record/300419>).

During the memorial year 2013 various commemorative collections and other works on the period 1813-1815 will be published (including three new scientific royal biographies of William I, William II and William III).

FURTHER READING

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