

Sleeping with the Enemy

The Netherlands and its Waters

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[M A A R T E N A S S C H E R]

Every living being has its natural enemies, with the result that many species can exist in competitive balance with each other. Mosquitoes have their swallows, dinosaurs their meteorites, liberals their socialists, writers their critics. The same is true for countries: Switzerland has its avalanches and Japan its earthquakes. Likewise, the Netherlands has its water. The country has steadily battled its way out of the water over the last thousand years and one day – although hopefully it will take a while yet – it will eventually disappear into it again. In the meantime, a community of people has gathered on this sodden ground that has turned their greatest enemy into their right to exist. They have compromised in innumerable ways with the menacing water and, time after time, it has been a matter of pride for them to make a virtue out of a flood, preferably as a preventive measure, even before the worst comes to the worst. Is there a discernible pattern in this? Has it endowed the Dutch with a particular mentality? Is there a link between the watery geography of the country and the psychology of its inhabitants?

You will have to work out for yourself how it is in other countries but if you think about the Netherlands, you will quickly realise that there is one national theme running through the whole geological, political and social history of our country: water. There are few periods or events in Dutch history in which water has not in some way or other played a supporting or even decisive role. From Roman times, when the Old Rhine formed the boundary of the territory taken by the Romans, up to and including the German occupation, which was forced on the Netherlands in 1940 with the bombardment of the port city of Rotterdam and brought to an end in 1944/1945 after months of fighting for the bridges over the rivers of Gelderland and North Brabant. There is also the Dutch East India Company and its trade with the East, the *Watergeuzen* at Den Briel and the Napoleonic armies who simply marched into our country over the frozen rivers in 1795.

In short, our national history is a history of water. Just as Italian history is hewn from marble, French history is woven into Gobelins and British history is built in bricks, so Dutch history is a scene painted in watercolours, with an arrow-straight horizon separating the grey water from the grey sky or – with a bit of luck – the grassy green polder from the clear blue sky.



Ten sorts of water

A country's national theme manifests itself in all sorts of varieties, forms and gradations, and for every individual variation there is a separate name. The French with their 368 types of cheese, the Belgians with their reputed 1,100 sorts of beer, the Scots with their endless assortment of whiskies. Can we regard the Netherlands' water in the same way? I think we can, although obviously not all sorts of liquid are unique to the Netherlands alone. But against the background of our flat, watery ground surface every type of water in the Netherlands has its own specific significance. Let us, for the sake of convenience, limit ourselves to 10 sorts of liquid.

Blankenberge, Belgium

Sweat

Everyone sweats, but it looks very much as if the Dutch do so more often than others, or at least more than other Europeans. A glance at the meteorological statistics shows that the inhabitants of Portugal or Cyprus, for example, have twice as much opportunity to sit in the sun or rest in its shadow as the Dutch. Whereas the sun shines 1,521 hours a year in the Netherlands, it shines a good





3,037 hours and 3,381 hours respectively in the other two countries. Despite an unemployment rate of 7.7%, people work hard in the Netherlands and a comparatively high percentage of women participate in the employment process too (65.4%). In more or less all the bigger cities compulsory closing on the Day of the Lord has been abolished now and – even more significant – the Dutch state deliberately discourages its subjects from all having a day off at the same time: the Netherlands has the lowest number of national holidays of all the countries in Western Europe. There are only 8, while in Greece there are officially 12 public holidays a year and in Spain even 14.

Tears

If it is true that countries derive their national self-awareness particularly from overcoming disasters, foreign oppression and other collective tragedies, one might regard tears as the ultimate liquid of nationality. Over the centuries, many of these tragedies in the Netherlands had to do with water (floods due to storm tides, breaches in the dikes or extreme weather), but enough mass misery has also been caused by acts of war, persecution, explosions and airplane accidents. Have the Netherlands wept more than other countries during their history, or had more reason too? I doubt it, but it is interesting to note, for example, that the disastrous flood of 1953 (1,538 dead) was considered from the beginning to be a punishment from God that must be accepted in silence (the Minister responsible addressed the Lower House: 'Who can deflect the hand of the Lord?') The Dutch are not a people that like public sorrow or mourning too much, just as, in general, they keep any tears of joy till they're safely inside their own houses. Apart from football supporters, that is, but apparently they are beyond any laws.

Dew

The International Organisation for Dew Utilisation (or OPUR as it is known by its French acronym), is headquartered in Paris and has existed since 1999. The organisation tries to stimulate the use of dew in agriculture and the cultivation of all sorts of edible crops, in areas all over the world where there is a serious shortage of water. There is definitely no need for the organisation in the Netherlands. We do



Skipssea, UK

have dew, mainly in the spring, summer and early autumn, but dew in the Netherlands is a luxury phenomenon, Nature's delicate embellishment. Poets are the ones who are most aware of it: 'The dew hangs like pearls on branches and leaves' (J.H. Leopold), 'White and still hung the dew o'er the meadows' (J.A. der Mouw) and 'Two eyes and a woman's body / He lay, like her, stretched out on the dew' (Gorter). The rest of the population detests it. It is not without reason that the traditional early morning walk on Ascension Day, here in the Netherlands, is referred to as *dauwtrappen* or treading the dew. The poetic wetness is trampled energetically underfoot.

Holy water

These days there is a tendency to report on pretty well all subjects in terms of winning or losing. 'Dutch lead in leaving the church', wrote the church news website Kerknieuws.nl, on the publication of a report by Statistics Netherlands. At the start of the twenty-first century only one out of five people still goes to church, mosque or another house of prayer, whilst at the end of the nineteenth century 98% of people said they considered themselves to be religious. In the north of the country and in the Randstad there are now fewer believers than non-believers. In Catholic churches the holy water increasingly remains undisturbed and half of the still remaining Dutch RC Church buildings will have to be disposed of in the years to come. One church after another is being demolished, converted into shared business premises, an apartment complex or a concert hall. Is there anything to be done about it? The Taskforce on the Future of Church Buildings, which was founded in 2006, thinks there is, but it seems to me to be a case of 'One must let God's water flow over God's acre', to quote an old Dutch saying used as far back as the sixteenth century.

Groundwater

If you want to know how damp the Dutch soil is, you can stick your spade into the ground. Nine times out of ten - unless it is a bone dry summer or the soil is sandy - you will hear a slurping noise as you lever it backwards and forwards. Better still, take a bit of a distance and have a look at the whole of the Netherlands. The SMOS (Soil Moisture and Ocean Salinity) satellite was launched in 2009 for this purpose and has confirmed with observational data from space that the Netherlands is indeed the most sodden country in the whole of Europe. Countless types of water end up together in the Dutch soil: from above (rainwater), from the sides (river water) and even from below (groundwater). All that water needs to be regulated and must be able to be drawn on as a source of drinking water, for industrial use, irrigation, firefighting, etc. For that an enormous conglomeration of administrative bodies has been set up, district water boards, ministries, provinces, municipalities, waterworks and other institutions. If you want to know how the Netherlands functions administratively, you should disguise yourself as a drop of water and jump down out of a cloud, or slip in via the Rhine at Lobith. I guarantee you a rollercoaster ride past innumerable authorities, organisations and companies.

Swimming pools

According to the last count (2012) there are 1,537 swimming pools in the Netherlands. Two thirds of them completely or partially covered. Nearly half (45%) are open to the public. In the Netherlands there is a swimming pool for every 10,900 inhabitants. The average temperature of the water is 28 degrees Celsius. Two things can be deduced from these figures. First of all, that everything is documented in the Netherlands. Nothing escapes the notice of the statisticians. Secondly, that comparatively speaking the Netherlands has an awful lot

of public swimming pools. France has 2,898 for a much larger population, and the United Kingdom 4,674. So what does this mean? Apparently all those Dutch rivers, lakes and canals are too dirty or too dangerous to swim in, and the average Dutchman considers the North Sea, the IJsselmeer and the Waddenzee too cold. In terms of the national psychology the explanation could be that people in the Netherlands are so distrustful of the sea and all the rest of the public water that in all those swimming pools they want at least to teach their small children not to drown. The Netherlands at its best: as a water welfare state.

Neeltje Jans, the Netherlands



Lakes

There are around 4,000 polders in the Netherlands. That is land that has been constructed artificially, by draining, diking or development. Yet by no means all the lakes have been lost to impoldering. Assuming that the definition of a lake is an enclosed still water surface of minimum 50 hectares, there are still 2,500 lakes left in the Netherlands. The largest of them all, the IJsselmeer, was actually added in 1932 with the construction of the Afsluitdijk. But a great many, like the Schermeer and the Beemstermeer, were drained and disappeared in the early seventeenth century. In the West of the Netherlands, especially, whole areas were surrounded with dikes and a ring canal and the water was pumped off by hundreds of windmills, stretching as far as the eye could see. Afterwards, too, the windmills continued to pump, making sure that the ground that had been drained remained dry. That carried on until the invention of the steam pumping station which, in the years 1849-1852, made it possible to drain even the big Haarlemmermeer, ground on which Schiphol Airport was built in the twentieth century. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the Netherlands owes its seventeenth-century prosperity to two wooden machines: the sailing ship with which riches were brought home from the colonies in the East and West, and the windmills with which prosperous and fertile land was made and kept safe for habitation - for the peaceful and unostentatious enjoyment of that wealth.

Rain

In 2014 the Netherlands' problems are mainly luxury problems. Not civil war, famine or earthquakes. That, in the best Calvinist tradition, is something to be thankful for, but one of the most irritating luxury problems is cycling in the rain against the wind. Since it rains on average 8 percent of the time in the Netherlands (an average total of 847 mm per year) and there is almost always wind (on average 8 km per hour, even 20 km per hour at the coast) you get a good soaking on your bike several times a year. On the other hand, the uncertainty of the weather conditions in this part of the world (varying from a record cold of -27.4 degrees to a record heat of 38.6 degrees, and a record rainfall of 148 mm in one day as opposed to 36 consecutive days without rain) does provide something to talk about with fellow countrymen with whom you have nothing else in common, like people in shops, in a waiting room or on public transport. What are people supposed to talk about in Malta or Cyprus, where for eight long months the weather is pretty much the same every day? In the Netherlands, a higher power has taken care of that problem.

Sea

The sea, which gave the Dutch trading nation a sphere of activity that stretched right around the world in the seventeenth century, has also betrayed the inhabitants of the Low Countries again and again since time immemorial. Long is the list of storm floods that have wiped out whole villages and driven the water right up into the streets of Amsterdam. Sometimes I think that it is mainly the

surrounding sea, with all its accidents, shipwrecks and floods that has forced the Dutch to their knees, with all their sense of futility, before the almighty Calvinist God, since the start of the Golden Age. Only prayer and a combination of frugality and diligence could give them the hope that their predestined demise might be kept at bay for a while. Nowhere in the Netherlands can as many Protestant churches be found as along the coast of the North Sea and the banks of the former Zuiderzee, now the IJsselmeer. The Dutch Bible Belt still links the many port towns and fishing villages along the former Zuiderzee with the traditionally deeply religious province of Zeeland. In both places nothing but the dikes separate the roaring of the surf on the one side and the thunderous preaching of the Reformed Church minister on the other.

Rivers

When foreigners speak of the Netherlands as a land of water, they are referring primarily to the sea. But the majority of Dutchmen live nowhere near the sea and rarely go to it. The Netherlands is a country with an abundance of water because of the fact that two important European rivers, the Meuse and the Rhine, both flow through it. With the Scheldt, just south of the Dutch/Belgian border, these rivers and their innumerable tributaries are what make the Low Countries a delta. It is mainly thanks to the Meuse and the Rhine, which branches off into the Waal and the IJssel, that more than a sixth of Dutch territory consists of surface water. Most of the flooding that has affected the Netherlands over the past centuries was the result of rivers bursting their banks rather than the dikes being breached by the sea. The Netherlands' heroic struggle against the constantly threatening water is therefore not so much a war against a natural enemy from without as a never-remitting struggle against the most fundamental and ineradicable nature of the Dutch landscape itself. This inner struggle, this armed peace has given the Netherlands its taste for negotiation and compromise, and perhaps even its talent for a certain bluntness. Because usually there is no time to lose.

Uneasiness?

The Netherlands? You need only fly over it once by plane and you will understand the problem immediately, certainly if you are also aware that due to geological processes and ill-considered peat cutting about half of the land surface now lies below sea level. Just as his great-great-great grandfather first emerged from the waves of the North Sea and set foot on the beach at Scheveningen in 1813, to become King of the Netherlands two years later, our current monarch, Willem-Alexander, came to the throne from water management. That makes even the highest symbolic authority of our country subject to water, the one element that surrounds and flows through the entire surface of the Netherlands.

The Dutch definitely do not derive their sense of nationhood from the social, administrative or intellectual elite above them. Certainly not now, when populism, large-scale sporting events and an unprecedented dumbing-down of the media provide sensation day in day out and an unremitting stream of human interest. Perhaps – for instruction and enjoyment – the following question should be included sometime in one of the many public surveys carried out by those research bureaus that are always so well-informed about what concerns ‘the people’: ‘Which is greater: your respect for the authorities or your uneasiness about the rising sea level?’ You can guess the answer now: neither. ■

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