

## The Most Industrious of All Centuries

### New Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century

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[ M A R I T A M A T H I J S E N ]

Who thinks of the nineteenth century when they strike a match, seal an envelope or open a can of tomato puree? Yet every household is full of objects developed in the course of those one hundred years. It's true that since the introduction of electronic mail and piezo igniters for gas stoves we no longer use matches and envelopes every day, but let's go a step further. Imagine you're booking a trip to Ghana, inspired by the Lonely Planet travel guide, and you need to get vaccinated against yellow fever before you go. Do you realise that the first plane took off in 1890; that the first travel guide multinational, Baedeker, has been publishing its illustrated guide books since 1839; that vaccination against disease only became customary in the nineteenth century (after the smallpox vaccine was developed in the eighteenth century) and that the Dutch Inspection of Public Health, which keeps track of which countries require vaccinations, was set up in 1804? Are you aware, too, that Schiphol Airport is situated partly on a polder that was reclaimed in the nineteenth century; and that the trains that take you there have been running since 1839 in the Netherlands; or that it was impossible to get travel insurance in those days?

In the meantime, it has become common knowledge: the modern world began in the nineteenth century. The fact that time, place and speed have become more or less relative concepts instead of absolutes only became conceivable in the nineteenth century. Till then time was strictly linked to your location and the position of the sun. If it was eleven o'clock in Rotterdam, it was already half past eleven in Hengelo. If you were in one place, you could not be in a different place at the same time, as has happened with the development of the telephone. At the start of the century, the highest speed imaginable was that of a bolting horse.

It is only for the last few decades, however, that this modernity has been generally acknowledged. It took a long time before Dutch historians realised that the Netherlands was no exception in Europe, but was in line with other countries, both big and small. In older studies of the nineteenth century, historians emphasised a relative backwardness and stagnation in the Netherlands. It was thought to be lagging behind other countries economically, entrepreneurially, in its willingness to give up old institutions, and in cultural terms too. Reference was frequently made to an essay written by the leading writer



Everhardus Potgieter in 1842. In it he sketches a Dutch family in which all the sons are called Jan. Some of the Jans are enterprising and behave in an exemplary fashion. Those are the sons who are involved in shipping and trade. The youngest son is called Jan Salie and is a metaphor for the nineteenth century: flabby, indolent, a lie-abed. Potgieter intended his essay as a mirror for the Dutch nation: the country needed more entrepreneurial spirit to get it out of the economic crisis. Subsequently, the 'Jan Salie mindset' became a concept that historians, assuming an economic and cultural impasse, applied to the whole century.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,  
1885

### **Speed, progress and steam power**

Over the past few decades historians, including art and literary historians, have been countering this notion. The change coincided with the founding of the journal *De negentiende eeuw*, in 1977, by some young Dutch studies scholars, who were bothered by the contempt for Dutch literature of the period and realised that there was too little research on which to build. There were no surveys of publishers, journals, newspapers, or children's books; there was no knowledge of translation and publication rights, and no survey of contemporary history writers. The journal systematically published research that could be built on. In universities certainly the study of the nineteenth century gained new momentum. Theses appeared thick and fast and certain schools of thought began to form. Professors like Willem van den Berg, Piet Blaas and Niek van Sas supervised young historians and students of Dutch language and

The first train in the Netherlands, 1839



literature, who launched a broadening of the research, with other themes than those that had been customary till then. They were joined by professors with a public profile as well, like Auke van der Woud, Piet de Rooy and myself. This research too brought about a change in the way the nineteenth century was viewed. The sleepy metaphors that had been attributed to those one hundred years changed into metaphors of speed: a century of speed, progress and steam power.

These about-turns in the research are concentrated on a few topics and periods. The history of the early and late nineteenth century had been neglected for years, but now pioneering new research into these periods appeared. The traditional study of literary texts and writers was broadened to include research into reading, publishers, criticism and terminology. The study of nationalism was developing internationally and it was picked up in the Netherlands too. Research into technology, industrialisation and infrastructure was by no means familiar territory for historians, until that too changed both inside and outside the Netherlands. Art history had always been limited purely to art, but broadened its horizons now to take in the art trade, the creation of museums and the collectors. That old favourite, political history had to relinquish its position to social history. The history of poverty, prostitution, migration and education were studied, as was the history of the landscape. The emancipation of Jews, Catholics, workers and women was given a place in history, too, and the internationally developed history of mentality was also practised in the new context. Because so much new research was done in the late 1970s, revised surveys could be published for a wider public in the twenty-first century.

The research into the Batavian Republic (1795-1806) and the periods shortly before and after it can be described, quite simply, as innovative. The Netherlands had wrested itself from Spanish dominance in the sixteenth century and become a republic, under the leadership of a stadholder from the House of Orange. By the eighteenth century, few of those republican principles were still in evidence. The stadholder conducted himself like a monarch and his administrators, who all came from the same ruling families, did his bidding. As of about 1780, there was opposition to this from the so-called patriots. The latter appeared to be gaining ground until the King of Prussia came to the aid of the stadholder, in 1787, causing the patriots to flee in large numbers to France. There they reorganised and, with the help of a French army, invaded the country and drove out the stadholder in early 1795. The Batavian Republic was then



Charles Howard Hodges,  
*Louis Napoleon Bonaparte*,  
1809, oil on canvas,  
223 x 147 cm,  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

established as a vassal state of France, which demanded the maintenance of a French army and a huge sum of money for its help. As of 1800, the most powerful man in France was Napoleon, who regarded the Netherlands as a source of income and a means to increase his influence. In 1806, he appointed his brother, Louis Napoleon, as King of Holland. However, when Louis failed to toe his elder brother's line, he was relieved of his duties and the country was turned into a French province. After the fall of the elder Napoleon in late 1813, the son of the former stadholder returned to the Netherlands and was proclaimed king. The major powers then decided that it would be clever to amalgamate Belgium and the Netherlands as a buffer against France, which was still greatly feared, so the so-called United Kingdom of the Netherlands was created. However, in 1830 the Belgians revolted against the politics of William I and declared independence.

This potted history – and particularly the early period of the patriots and the Batavian Republic – had never been recorded and evaluated in all its finer details. Niek van Sas applied the reconciliation thesis to it: both in the early years of the Batavian Republic and after 1814 it was considered necessary for the opposing parties to unite. Patriots and moderate Orangists therefore decided to cooperate in the National Assembly, which had been the most important decision-making body for government affairs since 1796. After 1814, there was tension between the civil servants who had worked in the service of the French and those who had helped drive out the French. The old civil servants were still needed after 1814 to consolidate the by now specialised administration, so it was important not to make too much of a fuss about their misguided past. Thorough theses and studies have been published on the patriot movement, the significance of the exiles in France, the modernity of the first constitution, the opposition press, the civil service and so on, casting a whole new light on this previously neglected period. They show that modernity began in this period, when infrastructure in the Netherlands was tackled on a large scale, primary school education was regulated and the registry of births, marriages and deaths was introduced. In the wake of research into the Batavian Republic came research into the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, another period that had been ignored for a long time before both Belgian and Dutch historians got their teeth into it.

### A masked century

This neglect also applies, to a lesser extent, to the late nineteenth century, but research into the period has in any case led to the last decades of it being called a 'second golden age', when new buildings were constructed on a massive scale, huge shopping palaces opened, and enormous projects like the construction of Amsterdam's Central Station were started.

Literary historians extended the boundaries of their research. Readers became the focus. 'Wie las wat in de negentiende eeuw?' (Who Read What in the Nineteenth Century?), an article by Bernt Luger, in 1982, was an eye-opener. Earlier research, full of liberally gratuitous value judgements about literature, was abandoned for research into reading habits, publishers, book distribution, advertising, series, translations and, recently, authors' positioning and the use of literature for political purposes. Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt carried out detailed research into the sales of a publisher in Middelburg, to which new conclusions about reading behaviour were linked. The angles taken became more diverse: children's books, censorship, commercial libraries and copyright all became the subject of studies. The precise meaning of various terms was also studied, that of 'realism', for example, 'the true poet' and 'fatherland'. Willem van den Berg was a forerunner in this with his dissertation on the term 'Romanticism', in 1973. I myself linked literature to the history of mentality in my study on the double moral standards of the nineteenth century, which I called *De gemaskerde eeuw* (The Masked Century). The result of the new literary research was that the earlier negative judgements about the quality of Dutch literature no longer mattered. If we look at reading behaviour, we see a growing appetite for reading to which publishers were eager to cater.

The research into nationalism came to some striking conclusions because a comparative approach was used. It became clear that in some respects the Netherlands had an advantage over other countries, which were still struggling for their position as a nation. But during the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands it was important to promote the perception of a nation or, better said, to forge one, and that was done by drawing attention to a common past. Joep Leerssen mapped out Dutch nationalism within a broad European context. The extent to which the past was used as if for legitimation has been shown by Leerssen and Mathijsen in various studies. This research had other consequences too. For example, where nationalism used to be interpreted as oppressive and restrictive, it is now clear that no movement is more international.

Art history underwent the same broadening of scope as literary history. The main focus of study was no longer the works and the artist but the art trade, the function of art, the collectors and the museums. The Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum and the Amsterdam History Museum (now the Amsterdam Museum) widened their horizons and came up with some sensational subjects: 'The ugly period' (*De lelijke tijd*) exhibition of 1995 at the Rijksmuseum, for example, in which neo-historical art forms stood centre stage. The history of the museums themselves also attracted a lot of attention. National museums appear to have been set up all over Europe in the nineteenth century, and that applies to the Netherlands too. Appreciation of nineteenth-century art in the Netherlands, which was previously frequently written off as sham seventeenth century or homely romantic, grew with the organisation of comprehensive exhibitions like the *Meesters van de Romantiek* (Masters of Romanticism) in 2005 in Rotterdam.



National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden, founded in 1818 by King Wilhelm I

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Zuid-Willemsvaart, canal connecting Maastricht and 's-Hertogenbosch

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We have seen that historians applied themselves to little-known periods in order to shed new light on them, but they also admitted new areas of research to their disciplines. In the 1970s, social history became popular, with the result that studies were published on position and class, poverty and charity. But peripheral areas were researched too, such as prostitution. The emancipatory function that the Society for the Promotion of General Welfare (Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen) had for education and culture was clear. The Netherlands turned out not to be lagging behind in education, but in terms of literacy rates and regulation, it was actually ahead of other countries. The same applied to infrastructure. The number of paved roads was low, but not proportionally, and thanks to the canal boats public transport was actually highly developed. Though it is true that the existing public transport delayed the construction of railway lines, it was very easy to travel around the Randstad early on. Detailed research into the history of technology was carried out under the supervision of Harry Lintsen, whereby both major and minor changes in everyday life in the nineteenth century could be recorded, from the construction of street lighting to that of sewers, from the arrival of the steam press for newspapers to the founding of large machine industries.

### The iron century

All of these studies have contributed to the image of the nineteenth century as a sleepy century being consigned to the past once and for all. The results of the research have been published in books for a wider audience, and some studies

have even reached a large public, like Auke van der Woud's, for example.

Of great importance in terms of influencing public opinion about these hundred years are the recent biographies of the three nineteenth-century kings, William I, II and III, written on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the monarchy under the Orange family, and accompanied by exhibitions and TV documentaries. The biographies interweave original and recent research, and because they put the kings in a broad context, a revised image of politics and society has logically emerged. Via King William I, it has become more obvious than ever how completely inappropriate the image of stagnation is, and that there was actually more of a drive for development. He had one canal after the other dug, ordered land reclamation, supported industry with prizes and exhibitions, and promoted the use of steam power everywhere.

The thirteen-part television series *De ijzeren eeuw* (The Iron Century), made in 2015, was also clearly aimed at a large public. In it, the popular presenter Hans Goedkoop presents the developments of the nineteenth century in a very personal way. Here 'iron' is a metaphor for industrialisation, and by extension modernity. There is not a word about stagnation, sleep or decline. The influence of the modernised approach to studying the nineteenth century is clearly visible from the very first episode. In it, the emphasis lies on the infrastructure, modernised according to the Napoleonic model, which was taken over by the kings of Orange. The economic decline is presented as a fact that gave rise to private initiatives and had no influence on idealistic projects, schooling and charity. The fact that patronage was associated with this is something we have seen in many recent studies concerning the patriarchal and sometimes stifling good intentions concerning care for the less fortunate, something which shifted, in the course of the century, to the government. The episodes about manufacturers and businessmen share a great wonder for the energy of those involved and the megalomania of their projects. Every aspect that is covered – feminism, the promotion of hygiene, the emancipation of Catholics, scientific progress, the colonial question – is based on knowledge acquired in recent decades. The series' own merit lies mainly in the beautiful images. And who could ever forget Goedkoop having himself made up as a cholera patient and having leeches applied? The series ends with an image of the flight from modernity, as it was expressed at the end of the century in the various reform movements.

All things considered, the image of the nineteenth century has changed radically in the last forty years. No school textbook today would dare speak of a dull period. The emphasis these days is on the nineteenth century as the cradle of nearly all the developments that continue to evolve now. The famous critic Kees Fens once called the nineteenth century 'the most industrious of all centuries', because of the colossal projects being undertaken in all areas, from dictionaries to museums of antiquity, from the construction of railway lines to water pipes. He might say the same in slightly different words about all the academics who, through their diligence and industry, have made a different nineteenth century common property since 1976. ■