

The Bluebird of Ghent

One of Europe's Hidden Gems?

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[T O M A S V A N H E S T E]

'Welcome stranger,' someone shouted to me from on high. It was a mild autumn evening and I was walking back to my room after a book presentation in Ghent, at which I had said a few words. People danced behind lighted windows, a fairy-tale scene that I stopped for a moment to watch. Until someone invited me in and I spent a few pleasant hours at a party in Herberg Macharius, the old gatehouse of a former abattoir, now a neighbourhood community centre.

Two years later I came here to live. There's no connection. The reason for our move from the Netherlands is that my beloved was offered a good job in Jacob van Artevelde's city and it was convenient for me, as Europe correspondent for the Dutch journalism platform De Correspondent, to be domiciled there, not too far from Brussels. Yet it still feels a little as if I accepted that invitation from on high and that destiny chose Ghent for me.

I did get some warnings from people in the Netherlands who thought they knew all about it. Those Flemings, they retorted, they're a friendly lot with a Burgundian streak. If you want a good meal it's the place to be. But as far as they're concerned you'll always be 'the Dutchman', the somewhat churlish, noisy know-it-all with no idea of the charm of the indirect approach, someone who always goes straight for what he wants. You will never break through the shell of the friendly but formal Fleming. They keep their cards close to their chests and only reveal their deepest feelings to a small circle of intimates at the most – and don't think, as a northerner, that you'll be allowed to become one of those.

It'll be fine, I thought. After all, I might have grown up in the Netherlands and have lived there a good forty years, but I first saw the light of day in the hinterland of Ostend and my parents are from West Flanders. I thought I knew the secrets of the culture to some extent; it didn't exactly feel like emigration, more like a return to the land of my roots. What's more, I reasoned, the stereotypes on both sides are gross generalisations. There would be a wide variety of people living in Ghent, who would not allow themselves to be pushed into a box either. And after all, the Low Countries share not only a language but a lot of historical and cultural references as well.



Cultural Centre 'Vooruit',
Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat
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I have lived here in this city in East Flanders for a little under a year now. So were the warnings right, or did my optimism turn out to be well founded? Do I still feel as welcome as on that lovely autumn evening two years ago? And what are my impressions of Ghent now?

Not one of us

One thing is true, it's not that easy to get rid of your Dutch label if you've got a northern accent. The guide at the magnificent eighteenth-century mansion-turned-museum, Hotel d'Hane-Steenhuysse, where Louis XVIII hid from Napo-

leon, continued to talk about 'your King William II', even when I told her about my West Flemish origins. People in our street talk of 'the Dutch neighbours' too. And although I thought I would never have to explain again that you write my surname the Belgian way, in one word, people still write Van Heste instead of Vanheste based on the idea that I am a Dutchman.

These are the mild irritations of the newcomer who wants to integrate, but feels that others don't see him as 'one of us'. But if that's how it feels for a Dutch-Belgian, I sometimes ask myself, what must it be like for people of a different colour or from more distant parts?

A woman, born and bred in Ghent, who fled the city of her birth, wrote a painful testimony about it in an opinion piece in a national newspaper recently. She is the daughter of a Flemish father and a Rwandan mother who was brought to Belgium during the decolonisation of Rwanda. Thanks to her colour she is asked ad nauseam where she comes from. 'I'm from here, I'm a product of our colonial past,' she used to answer, usually leaving her interlocutor dumbfounded. These days she is mostly indignant that 'my nationality is consistently called into question by the very same nation that severed my link with Rwanda'. She is angry with Ghent, a traditionally socialist city that considers itself to be the Flemish Valhalla of progressiveness and tolerance and thinks that the post-racial society has dawned already.

Peace and quiet

There is no denying it; Ghent does have a rose-tinted image of itself. Many people who ask whether I'm managing to integrate a bit immediately add that they're sure I am, because Ghent is such a friendly and open city. The city profiles itself as a 'city of peace', a place of dialogue and respect, and is organising a 'year of peace' in 2018. The brochure of the Ghent Festival of Flanders 2016 opens with an ode to the city. 'Everyone longs for peace and quiet – whatever his race, beliefs or age may be. In no other city in Flanders, Brabant or Limburg can such overwhelming peace and quiet be found. The reason is the exceptional tolerance of the city authorities and the imagination of the young people who have settled over the years in the provincial capital of East Flanders. Tolerance and imagination have ensured an explosion of festivities.'

The nice thing is that it's true. In the summer, certainly, there is one festivity after the other. The atmosphere here really is kindly and there is a lot to do in the cultural sphere. The 'welcome' that sounded from the Herberg Macharius I heard again in our street, where we were received with open arms and have been invited for drinks at many a neighbour's house. So, very quickly the motley reality turned out to belie the cliché of the friendly but reserved Fleming.

It occurred to me after the attacks on Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station, on 22 March 2016, that the desire to be a city of peace is more than just a marketing tool. It is also integral to the city's soul.

As they do every morning, all the children from my daughter's primary school assembled in the hall the next day. The early morning ritual is that the headmistress rings a little bell, after which a sacred silence descends – a rather surprising phenomenon for parents used to the Dutch education system – and the headmistress addresses the children briefly. That day her words



Graslei with Post Plaza Building, Sint-Niklaas Church and Belfry
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were especially charged. She stood there with the flag of 'our Belgium' in her hand. The flag of all of us who live here, regardless of religion, nationality or colour, explained the headmistress. The flag of all the children in this school who come from all over the world and practise all sorts of different religions. She explained that this was a moment when we should all feel like one family, whatever our backgrounds. 'There is only one right word today: love.' She called on the children and those parents present to make a carpet of peace messages in the hall, like the one on the Place de la Bourse in Brussels.

These soothing words were intended mainly for children's ears, of course. But the same message was sounded that afternoon at a wake in the Sint-Niklaas Church in the centre of the city. Representatives of a variety of religious faiths – Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and humanists – joined the Mayor of Ghent in expressing their horror and calling for unity. 'No faith preaches hatred, no faith preaches violence,' said the president of the Association of Ghent Mosques, the VGM. A Zen Buddhist recalled the words of Buddha: 'Hatred is not conquered by hatred, hatred is conquered by love.'

Now those terrible events are behind us, this might all seem rather clichéd or high-flown. But in my view they were exactly the words we needed at the time. They were a sign, amidst all the dismay, of a calm determination not to allow ourselves to be divided, but to defend our open society in solidarity and unity. In those days I almost thought that Ghent was the Valhalla of tolerance that the lady with Rwandan roots, who fled the city, considers a mirage.

Birds of Ghent

The Ghent of our dreams is in my view nicely portrayed by the homegrown band Olla Vogala, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in the Handelsbeurs, one of the local concert halls, in May 2016. Their respect for tradition is clear from their name. Old Dutch for 'all birds', it is a reference to one of the oldest known sentences in the Dutch language. The group performs enjoyable numbers like 'Met de meeuw' (with the seagull) in their native tongue. But on that lovely May evening there were also performances by musicians from Senegal, Syria and Slovakia. Olla Vogala draws its inspiration from musical traditions from various parts of the world, as well as from different genres and periods. Their music never becomes a mishmash though, in all their eclecticism they succeed in producing a sound that is all their own. Wouter Vandenabeele, the driving force behind the group, presents everything with a pleasant dose of self-mockery and humour.

'Met de meeuw' is inevitably reminiscent of that other Ghent bird 'l'oiseau bleu', or the bluebird, from the 1909 play of the same name by the Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck. In the play, which was once madly popular as far afield as Japan, Tytyl and Mytyl go in search of the bluebird, which symbolises happiness. Although its origins have been forgotten, the symbol is still very much alive in popular culture. The bluebird has been immortalised in many films, including *The Blue Bird* (1976), starring Elizabeth Taylor, Ava Gardner and Jane Fonda, and songs like Paul McCartney's 'Bluebird' (1973).

Maeterlinck was born two hundred metres from the place where I live now. The actual house of his birth is no longer there, but an inconspicuous bronze plaque commemorating the great writer hangs on the front of the present building. The only Belgian Nobel Prize winner for literature is certainly not wholeheartedly feted elsewhere in the city either. There is a Maeterlinck gallery in the Arnold Vander Haegen Museum, which can be visited along with the

Villa L'Oiseau bleu,
Patijntjesstraat
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Herberg Macharius, Coyendanspark, Voorhoutkaai

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Hotel d'Hane-Steenhuysse, but only with a guide and during a limited number of hours. One Saturday in August, which is high season after all, two French tourists, a Belgian and I turned up for the guided tour. At the end of our roam through these two extraordinary mansions there was a quarter of an hour left to look around the Maeterlinck gallery where, besides a nice portrait of the writer by Frans Masereel, you can admire some photos, first prints and newspaper cuttings from the desk and bookshelves brought from his later home in Nice.

It might surprise you that Ghent is so modest in its celebration of one of its greatest sons and that it does so little to exploit him as a tourist attraction. But you might be pleased about it too. In his excellent book *The Other Paris* (2015), Luc Sante, an American journalist of Belgian origin, laments the fact that we have forgotten what a city is. 'The exigencies of money and the proclivities of bureaucrats – as terrified of anomalies as of germs, chaos, dissipation, laughter, unanswerable questions – have conspired to create the conditions for stasis, to sanitize the city to the point where there will be no surprises, no hazards, no spontaneous outbreaks, no weeds.'

Unfortunately he is to a certain extent right. The authorities and big capital do seem to have many cities in an iron grip. They transform them into open-air museums and amusement parks, pushing less wealthy inhabitants out to the fringes. Every neighbourhood and every free space has a director, every asset the city has is used for city marketing. Yet it is the unexpected and unpredictable, the fringes and darker sides that exert such charm.



Ghent has not completely escaped these developments either. In recent years the historic centre has been cleaned up and its old harbour district upgraded with luxury residential and shopping centres, house prices have shot up and cafes for trendies and parents with cargo bikes are mushrooming. There's a risk of a certain museumization and stagnation too. In contrast to a city like Bordeaux, which has a great wealth of contemporary architecture to offer in addition to its UNESCO-listed city centre, Ghent has few exceptional buildings or places dating from more recent years.

But it would be much too pessimistic to decide that Ghent has no surprises anymore or that the city has been sanitised and neutralised. If you stroll around the city you are bound to come unexpectedly upon architectural pearls from the many different layers of time of which the city is built – as Sante says quite rightly, 'the city's principal constituent matter is accrued time' – and places of refuge where people from all layers of the population, with a motley collection of ethnic and religious backgrounds, do their own thing.

On a lovely day recently, I cycled to the house on Sleepstraat where the Flemish poet Karel van de Woestijne used to live. In the busy, messy shopping street, full of Turkish and Bulgarian fabric stores, phone shops and grocers, number 82 caught my eye – a rather dilapidated, but amazingly beautiful Art Deco building that seemed to be classified but not protected. Later I went to the Villa L'Oiseau bleu, a duo of semi-detached middle-class town houses with the names Tyltyl and Mytyl, which were designed by the Ghent architect Geo Henderick and built in 1929. On the way, I stumbled across the surprising sign 'Execution site'. It brought me to the 'Execution site for those shot in the head 1914-1918', a rather secluded, hushed, highly impressive monument. Barely recovered from the memory of that abysmal atrocity, the sight of Henderick's houses put me in a heavenly mood. If the bluebird of happiness can be found anywhere, it must be in Ghent. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards

Above left

Execution site 'for those shot in the head 1914-1918',

Offerlaan

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Below left

Art Deco Building, Sleepstraat

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