

What the United States Learnt from the Netherlands

John Lothrop Motley's History of the Dutch Revolt

A little more than thirty years ago, Simon Schama caused a commotion with his book *The Embarrassment of Riches*. While this history of the Dutch Golden Age flew off the bookshelves and provided pleasurable hours of reading, the professionals grumbled and began sharpening their knives. Nicely written, nicely put together, they agreed, but ... A storm of criticism ensued which has not yet abated.

Schama was not the first Anglo-Saxon historian to put forward a controversial view of Dutch history – not the last, either: James Kennedy also belongs in that group – and thereby spark off debate and research. He was preceded by a man who in a sense deserves the honour of having laid the foundation for Dutch political historiography, not so much because he wrote it himself as because he prompted his critics to do so. The man in question is John Lothrop Motley (1814–1877), a name which is all but forgotten today. Jaap Verheul, a lecturer and researcher in cultural history at Utrecht University, has written a book about him: *De Atlantische pelgrim. John Lothrop Motley en de Amerikaanse ontdekking van Nederland* [The Atlantic pilgrim. John Lothrop Motley and the American discovery of the Netherlands].

Together with men such as Prescott, Carlyle, Bancroft, Renan and Macaulay, Motley could be slotted into the group of 'great popularisers of history'. After a number of failed attempts as a novelist and a stranded diplomatic career, Motley turned to the study of the Dutch Republic, and in particular its beginnings. The first impulse for this came from the works of Goethe and Schiller, who published heroic tales of the Dutch struggle for freedom in the years surrounding the French Revolution. Those stories found wide appeal. But there is another reason, and a more important one: the American desire in the years after the Declaration of Independence to find a tradition for its own history. According to the dominant picture in the US at the time, such a tradition could not possibly be found in the Netherlands. Thanks to Washington Irving's famous satirical history of New York, the Dutch were seen as a nation of pipe-smoking,

gin-guzzling dimwits who were constantly battling through wind and weather and who lived in what one US ambassador called a 'decayed and decaying nation'. Partly thanks to Goethe and Schiller, Motley took a completely different view of this.

After years of study and a lengthy stay in Europe (Dresden, Brussels, The Hague), he published *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* in 1856. In this book he more or less presented Dutch history, and in particular the struggle of the Dutch against the Spanish, as the model that the United States had also followed – itself also a republic which had developed into a federation following a struggle for freedom, in this case against the British. In doing so, he was providing a country which had just shaken itself free with a historical example. The picture that Motley paints of the Netherlands – and in particular its 'father', William of Orange – is thus as illustrious as the image that he portrays of its enemy – Spain, led by Philip II – is deeply dull. The contrast not only worked, but caught on, all the more because Motley had done his homework very well and possessed a skilful pen. On both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in the US, his book garnered great success, received critical acclaim and sold well. The latter was not unimportant because Motley, who came from a well-to-do Boston family, had invested just about his last cent in the project. Ultimately, the investment paid off: *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* not only provided its author with an affluent lifestyle, but also earned him prestige. Suddenly Motley was a 'famous American'.

In the Netherlands, the book was received with mixed feelings. That was not surprising: in earlier decades, Dutch and Belgian historians had followed the nineteenth-century fashion by accessing lots of archive material and using it as a basis to produce a fair number of detailed studies. What had not yet been produced, however, was an overview, let alone a vision of the history of the fatherland. And then suddenly an unknown American appeared and put the key moment of that past on the international map with a few large brushstrokes. That could do nothing other than rankle.

The sharpest criticism of Motley's book came from the man regarded as the Dutch version of Leopold von Ranke, the greatest German historiographer of the nineteenth century: Robert Fruin. A year after the publication of *The Rise of the Dutch*

Republic Fruin, who at that time was a teacher in Leiden, published a tract on the years 1588-1598. It appeared as an appendix to the annual report of his school, the Stedelijk Gymnasium, and went virtually unnoticed.

But that soon changed. In 1859 and 1860, Fruin placed a discussion of several books about the Dutch Revolt in the journal *De Gids*. In reality, this discussion was a fierce criticism of Motley's work. Motley described events in an appealing way, Fruin conceded, but fell seriously short when it came to analysis. The main reason for this was that he placed all the emphasis on freedom and ignored state formation – the absolute topic of the moment in the nationalistic Europe of the nineteenth century. Partly because of these articles, a year later Fruin was appointed a professor in Leiden and published a series of works which formed the basis for classical Dutch political historiography.

What makes Jaap Verheul's book so readable is the good mix it offers of biography and historiographical context. But there is more than that. It is also important because Motley, as Verheul illustrates persuasively, was a more important figure than people realise. While he provided American history with a tradition, he also forced Dutch historiography to formulate a vision. Those are two large birds with one stone.

CHRIS VAN DER HEIJDEN
Translated by Julian Ross

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From Ghent to South Korea **Ghent University at 200**

Ghent University is celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2017/2018. Together with its sister university in Liège and stakeholders within and outwith the university, the anniversary will be used to mark the position and significance of the university in the twenty-first century. But it also offers a perfect opportunity to commemorate the history of the old university. A brief exhibition has been held, a book

has been written and a website has been created documenting the 'memory' of the university community.

How are universities born? In the case of Ghent University, it was tied in with matters of statehood. In 1817, William I became the new king of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. To bring together his newly acquired territories in a sense of a shared culture, he needed to invest in language and education. On 25 September 1816, the king proclaimed a higher education law which created six state universities throughout the kingdom. One of the southern universities was in Ghent. The two others were in Leuven – where the medieval university had been abolished in 1797 – and Liège. Partly due to the policy used to appoint professors, the new universities became the tools of an enlightened politics which sought to promote Dutch as a language of unity. Among the well-known figures who either taught or studied in Ghent between 1817 and 1830 were the Dutch statesman Johan Rudolf Thorbecke and the Ghent psychiatrist Joseph Guislain.

After the Belgian Revolution (1830), which saw present-day Belgium separate from the Netherlands, Ghent, like Liège, once again became the seat of a state university. Henceforth, however, the language of teaching and science was French. Free universities were established by private initiative in Leuven and Brussels. The two state universities consequently found themselves ranged against a Catholic (Leuven) and a liberal (Brussels) counterpart. Until the university expansion in the 1960s, these four institutions held each other in balance. Despite the wave of secularisation, ideological oppositions still played a role in Flemish university life.

These ideological oppositions arose shortly after 1830. In areas such as care and education, the early liberal governments increasingly found themselves facing a militant, ultramontane Church. The state university in Ghent fell victim to this polarisation; in the 1850s the university found itself at the heart of the clerical struggle that ensued from a number of headline-making disputes about the rationality of its teaching. The number of students fell to 291. The then newly formed – but still in existence today – student society *'t Zal wel Gaan* was even the subject of a papal excommunication order, an edict that was received as if it were a trophy.