

The Embarrassment of Riches

An interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age

S.Schama

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Holland seems to have emerged full-blown, just as Pallas Athena out of the brow of Zeus. What was Holland before the rebellion against the Spanish and the separation from the Flemish? It claims an ancient history going back to the Batavians, but such histories are usually the result of retroactive imagination. Dutch is a tongue that in addition to bearing a strong resemblance to German, also has touches of English and Norse, as well as some totally indigenous grunts. I have been told, and have very little reason as well as motivation to doubt, that there is a continuous deformation of Low-German dialects into Dutch. The conclusion is obvious. The Dutch make up a western German tribe squeezed between land and water, in constant danger of inundation, be it of water or people. But for the vagaries of history, Holland might have been a German state, its indigenous dialect suppressed, and now part of the reunited Germany. But so it did not turn out to be, and why not, this is a mystery, but maybe not much more mysterious than that the Danes too escaped that fact.

For eight years the Dutch fought the Spanish and flourished at the same time. War means hardship for all, and disaster for the few. And the Dutch have their store of atrocity stories to go around. Admittedly thirty out of those eighty took place during the Thirty Years War, when admittedly Holland participated and fought crucial battles, but by that time most of the hard work had really been done.

Were the Dutch a chosen people? In many ways they were. Like many Northern Europeans they had joined the Reformation during the 16th century. The Dutch chose the Calvinist route, unlike the Scandinavians and the Eastern German states that opted for the Lutheran. While in many cases Lutheran conversion was a top-down affair, with local rulers seeing the opportunity of breaking the power of the Church and confiscate its riches to boot, Calvinism seems to have been a bottom-up phenomenon. Nowhere is there any indication that Dutch rulers would have found Reformation an expedient affair, in fact it is not clear whether the Dutch really had any rulers in the conventional sense at all. Was it a Monarchy or not? If and if so what kind of kind? Names like William II and William III certainly do point to the existence of Monarchs, but what kind of power did they really wield? There were also Stadtholders, and who were they? The book gives no guidance whatsoever, it is no traditional history, focusing on political structures and dramatic events, its mission is something entirely different, to evoke a culture, to put everyday life in the foreground, to make us identify with people and customs of the past. Anyway the Reformation did, if it did anything at all, bring the Bible to the people, and with that its grand gripping stories. And whoever reads the Bible cannot avoid to become aware of the Jews. After all, it is their story we are asked to engage ourselves in, as it makes up the entire oeuvre of the Old Testament. Although the New Testament gives

plenty of reason to persecute the Jew, the Old makes him very visible. How can you not be affected by their plight? In fact as with any story, identification comes very natural. Thus, according to the Author, the Dutch identified themselves very much with the Jews. Not literally of course, but in the sense of they too being a chosen people, living a precarious existence on the very edge.

The Dutch cannot boast of any literature. While people are known to learn English in order to read Shakespeare, or German to read Goethe, Italian to read Dante, Russian to read the great Russians, even Danish to read Kierkegaard (and French, of course, for a variety of reasons) no one learns Dutch unless they have to. But they can boast of painting. The old Dutch masters of the 17th century are indeed unsurpassed in the history of classical painting. There is of course impressive skill and the mastery of verisimilitude, but it is in the choice of subject matter the Dutch stand out. Those so called genre paintings, give a window into their quotidian life and culture, presenting it almost as a peep-show. There are names such as Avercamp, de Horch, Steen and Hals, topped by masters such as Rembrandt and Vermeer, who transcend their particular time and place. Whatever, those have great charm, accessible to young and old alike. I still recall the particular thrill I felt when I for the first time came across reproductions of Vermeer as a young child of four. Schama is an art critic, and it makes sense that his book is lavishly illustrated by samples of that tradition (but typically of course by no samples of either Rembrandt or Vermeer).

The Dutch did stand out among its contemporary rival states during the 17th century. It stood out by the predominance of its middle-class. Thus there were comparatively little poverty in Holland, just as there was not much ostentatious wealth. Visitors were surprised by there being so few beggars and by cleanliness of the Dutch that also included public space. The Dutch population on the whole was quite well-fed, the diet being varied and wholesome, in particular fish and seafood were plenty and cheap. And also people of humbler occupations earned enough to allow themselves at least modest luxuries. The Dutch presented already in the 1600's a wide mass-market consumerism, and this might be one of the reasons they appear to us so modern. Although there was a conventional division of labour when it came to the sexes, women had inalienable rights, and could not legally be oppressed by the men. Children were not thought of as dispensable chattel not worth wasting attachment to. Child mortality was high by modern standards, but that did not mean that the death of children did not constitute a major trauma. After all giving birth to a child was in many cases hard labour, definitely not less than today, and such efforts are bound to result in a heavy initial emotional investment in the newborn. In fact the concern for children may be particularly well cultivated as well as documented by the Dutch, but I suspect strongly that they in those basic human respects were not that different from their neighbors. Schama does in fact take exception to Stone and others, who so confidently have retroactively projected a general callous attitude towards children and child death. The documents surviving from the past are indeed fragmentary and haplessly chosen by providence, making complete and confident historical reconstructions of general moods a very risky business indeed. A most interesting and revealing document that have survived, is the diary of the midwife Catharina Schrader, who until her 91st year kept on delivering babies. Every single delivery is noted, often with comments. We are talking about several thousand. She had common sense, much more so than the more

learned doctors, whom she often could beat at their own game. She had no resource to scientific expertise, and she disdained using modern contraptions such as forceps, which were introduced already in the beginning of the 18th century. (She lived 1655-1745). But she had a lot of stamina, strong and supple hands, and a lot of self-confidence. From statistics available one concludes that the rate of fatal child births was significantly lower than that of other European countries. When it came to bringing up children and attending to their minor health hazards, the handbooks of the time, which were published in large quantities, present sensible views, almost indistinguishable from those that were available in the 80's when the author wrote his book as well as (one presumes) brought up his children. Incidentally when it comes to books on sexual advice, the Dutch knew how to present them in a no-nonsense, down-to-earth way, hardly different from the prosaic kind written nowadays. Were the Dutch ahead of their times, or was all of this just an inevitable consequence of a prematurely consumerist society? If so, consumerism may have its good sides.

The Dutch themselves were rather ambivalent on the issue. On one hand the society generated a lot of wealth, on the other hand Calvinist morality praised un-worldliness and material modesty. Of course whenever there are pressing reasons to make them, compromises are bound to be made. Material comfort is a sweet thing indeed, and any kind of excuse can easily be concocted. One way wealth may be spiritually beneficial is by empowering you to do good. And the Dutch made good presiding over an incipient welfare society with provisions for caring for the poor and the sick and the destitute. Such restraining factors may be absent from modern consumer societies, in which individual success trumps social obligation. The Dutch did see themselves as a chosen people and they were naturally suspicious of foreign elements, as all people tend instinctively to be unless educated to the contrary. Just as the home was their castle, more perhaps than any other nationality including the English, the saying notwithstanding, what was outside were of distinctly less concern. Thus there were a clear line of demarcation between the private and the public space. Yet their tolerance was legendary during the 17th century, where else but in Holland would Jewish refugees find a sanctuary? Such generosity and hospitality are indeed commendable, and what would the world have been without Spinoza¹? But one should not jump to conclusions as to the broadmindedness of the Dutch, if you read the fine print, the strictures against Jews would today have generated an outcry and accusations of anti-semitism. But in like manner would the opinions on the racial inferiority of Blacks voiced by Lincoln, regardless of the fact that he did more for the liberation and resurrection of the Negro than any other American President. When it came to the gypsies the matter was totally different, they were shunned and treated as animals and hounded into remaining wilderness off from respectable Dutch territory. Persecuted as Jews have been by Christians and Muslims, the very centrality they occupy in the sacred books, ensures that they have always been visible. Gypsies on the other hand can make no such exalted claims on our attention. Had the Nazi Holocaust confined itself to the Gypsies (and the mentally unfit) it certainly would not have played the same ominous role in our

¹ not very different from what it is today is the cynical response, and as usual a cynical answer is by its very virtue of its tenor more likely than rival ones to be the one closest to the truth, at least compared to those sentimentally wished to be so

collective consciousness and been far easier to forget and disregard.

Dutch life was of course not entirely idyllic. It thrived on a precarious but successful balance between opposing forces. As opposed to home there was the anti-home, the tavern of drinkers and lewd women, immortalized in the paintings of a Jan Steen. Schama argues that indeed that seedy aspect of the culture, just as it is today with its open prostitution and tolerance as to drug use, was essential for its intactness. There were ways of channeling the baser instincts by making such clear demarcations. The whores were of course to a large extent indigenous, but just as in modern western societies a fair amount were made up by foreign imports, from Germany or Scandinavia. In fact without well-defined sin there can not be any obvious virtue.

How did Holland acquire its wealth? By trading. As Schama notes, the staple of its trade, was with the Baltic, importing grain and furs as well as wood, copper and iron. Successful trade requires a large merchant fleet protected by ships of war. Here the Dutch were involved in a struggle with the English for the mastery of the seas. The Dutch wanted the seas to be free to all, after all their lifeblood depended on it. During the 17th century the race was tight, and indeed the Dutch did defeat the British a few times sailing up the Thames. And in a sense with the ascension of William to the joint throne of England, the Dutch did in a sense conquer the country, but as the saying goes *de slang dat slikt een varken wordet zelf een varken*². But the British eventually became masters of the sea, and that in effect blocked the way for the Dutch, who then in the 18th century were doomed to play second fiddle. This toppling from the crest might have been inevitable in the long run, but the joint alliance of the English and the French against the Dutch in 1672, certainly must have speeded up matter although the conflict dragged on for some forty years and only ended, to the detriment of the hosts, at the treaty of Utrecht in 1714. Although it would be naive to set a definite date for the end of the golden century, that date serves as well as any other date. It is incidentally interesting to note that the high century of the Dutch almost exactly coincided with that of the Swedes, the latter also went into a prevailing slump of international power and prestige by the beginning of the 18th century having as well come into prominence during the Thirty Years War. One would expect a lot of interaction between the two, after all the staple and basis of Dutch trading was the Baltic route, and during the 17th century the Baltic was on its way of becoming a Swedish inner sea. But there seems not to have been terribly much, and what was was rather one-sided. Except for its raw materials the Swedes had not very much to offer the Dutch, Sweden was after all a rather uncivilized country who owed its political clout to successful military adventures. While the Dutch on the other hand had a lot to offer the Swedes as to practical knowledge in trade, city-planning³, mining etc, just as later the Dutch would add assistance to the Russians and the Japanese. Especially in shipping the Swedes have imported a lot of Dutch words, but I doubt that the Dutch found any occasion to adopt any Swedish vocabulary.

Now there are two aspects of the Dutch experience, apart from the circumstances of its birth, that does not get much coverage in Schama's book. One is connected to

² The snake that swallows a pig becomes itself a pig

³ The City of Gotheburg, the second largest in Sweden, was planned by Dutch, replete with canals. In fact the plan seems to have been the same used for the colonial city Batavia in the Dutch Indies

its birth and that is its relation to the Flemish lands. A Flemish city such as Antwerp is to a contemporary visitor more Dutch than Dutch. What kind of interaction existed between the Netherlands proper and the Habsburgian part? There is in painting a definite continuity in tradition, much of Dutch painting being incomprehensible without its Flemish roots, such as that of the Brueghels. Of course the Habsburgian part was Catholic, but even in the Netherlands the Catholics always constituted a substantial religious minority. Politically divided but culturally united? The second concern the colonial adventures of the Dutch. They did get around in their Golden century just as much as the British. As for anyone who has lived in New York, the Dutch legacy is unmistakable. Their venture into Brazil, as Schama points out, was commercially a loss and a burden, but I guess maintained for reasons of prestige. Theirs were the only white presence in Africa to become permanent. And of course their major colonial venture was the Dutch Indies, where they were to prove themselves neither better nor worse than other European colonizers. It is easy to see them as eminently decent, especially compared with 20th century Germans, yet human nature does not deny itself provided the opportunities are given. Belgian Congo is by many considered as the worst colonial adventure of them all, and Belgians are, to a large extent, the same kind of people as the Dutch. Schama has been censured for censoring that aspect of the Dutch experience, but in that respect the Dutch are no worse than others. Any kind of wealth is bound to be based on misery, preferably that of others.

The book is, as already mentioned, not a political and dynastic narrative, thus it is devoid of plot. Nor does it offer any logically structured narrative of explanatory ambitions, instead, what is often the case with humanistic scholarship, it is a display of dazzling erudition. The result is like that of a rich cake, that contains all kinds of goodies. Currants, almonds, butter, apples, prunes, apricots and peaches. It is rich and at times make you doze. But no need to worry, there really is no single tread to be followed, if you get lost it is no disaster, you will pick up another tread and be in good shape.

July 14, 2011 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se