

# The International Relevance of Dutch History: Introduction

Long gone are the days in which the only audience that really counted for the historian was to be found within his or her own national community. In times of increasing globalisation, the relevance of national history to an international audience is an issue no one can really ignore. It forces historians to rethink priorities in the histories of their own countries, and to face the possibility that what is important in their own national context might not be important in the international context, and visa versa.

The relevance of national history is an issue confronting all historians, of whatever national background. To mark the occasion of the 21st International Congress for Historical Sciences in Amsterdam, this special issue focuses on the relevance of the history of the Netherlands to more general historical debates. In November 2008, the editorial board of the *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden/Low Countries Historical Review* organized a conference on this theme under the aegis of The Royal Netherlands Historical Society (KNNHG). Leading historians were asked to consider the role of the Netherlands in a number of key problems in world history, from medieval trade to the Holocaust of the twentieth century, relating Dutch experience to broader patterns of European and global history and comparing the work of Dutch scholars to that of historians in other countries. Are there themes within international history, they were asked, that can be illuminated by paying attention to the history of the Netherlands? Thanks to the speakers, the discussants from the Netherlands and from abroad, who also acted as referees for the written versions of the contributions, we were able to put together a fine collection of essays concerning internationally relevant chapters of Dutch history.

In our choice of topics, we tried to include cultural, political, social and economic history, spread evenly over time. However, some of the factors in Dutch history many readers may have expected to be included in this volume are left out: for example, the history of water management and early modern Dutch overseas history. In these two cases, the international relevance of Dutch history is so evident, that it would in a way be carrying coals to Newcastle to stress the importance of these here. As editors of this volume, we intended simply to show that Dutch history is of relevance to international history.



Dutch landscape with snow and ice. Frozen canal outside a village, on the left a church, on the right some windmills on a dike. People are skating on the ice and several figures are pulling sledges. To the left, a stall with a flag flying outside.  
Charles Leickert, *Winter View*, 1867  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The international relevance of Dutch history (or for that matter the history of any country) can be demonstrated in various ways, and the contributors to this volume have each chosen their own format within which to make their case. For example, Dutch history can be relevant internationally because the Dutch provide the exception that proves the rule. In other instances, Dutch history may be the exemplary case: the finest example one can think of to prove a certain case. Yet other contributors have taken the Netherlands as a kind of laboratory where, due to certain special circumstances, people in the past have experimented with new ways of living or new ways of thinking that were still impossible to find elsewhere. And finally, some contributors have highlighted how the Dutch situation simply raises questions that have not yet been properly addressed by the international literature. In all these cases, the aim was not to prove that the Dutch situation was unique. Uniqueness in history is hard to prove in any case, and in more than one instance what was thought to be unique turned out not to be quite so unique after all. Our concern was more to demonstrate that, even in cases where the Dutch seem to have taken their own route to modernity, a study of the peculiarities of Dutch history may prove to be rewarding for those historians who are mainly interested in themes of a general, rather than specifically national, character. The general themes, rather than the special nature of Dutch history, are our point of departure; we did not ask the contributors to deal with topics that are important to understanding Dutch history, but topics that are relevant to the historical process in a more general sense. Without denying the value of national history for a national audience, our ambition was thus to present a collection of essays that deal with history *in* the Netherlands, not just the history *of* the Netherlands.

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# The Relevance of Dutch History, or: Much in Little?

Reflections on the Practice of History in the Netherlands

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This essay presents a series of reflections on the relevance of Dutch history. Taking different angles of approach, it examines in particular the historical image and self-image of the Dutch and the nation's cultural identity; the role played by the heritage issue in the rise of the new political nationalism; the fascination of foreign historians for Dutch history and their influence on Dutch historiography itself; the role of language in history-writing and the question of whether 'relevance' is a meaningful category at all for historians. To conclude, four great themes of Dutch history are identified as of supranational relevance: water management; economy and society, in particular capitalism and colonialism; culture and intellectual life, tolerance and secularity, in particular – but not only – in the early modern era; and the national ambition to show the world an exemplary route to modernity.

## National and trans-national history

There is one Dutch historian whose name every cultivated European knows: or at least should know.<sup>1</sup> That man is Johan Huizinga (1872-1945).<sup>2</sup> From a professional perspective, Huizinga's career was that of an innovative and versatile scholar enjoying international recognition. Having graduated in the Indo-Germanic languages, he turned to history at the age of 25. Starting out as a teacher at a secondary school, he went on to become a professor of general and national history successively at Groningen and Leiden, where he served as rector of the university for a year. For thirteen years, he chaired the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of the Royal Netherlands Academy at Amsterdam; he served on the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations and received international rewards for his historical work and intellectual commitment. Yet his scholarly authority went far beyond his rather traditional professional career. In fact, there