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# Pieter Geyl and Britain

Encounters,  
Controversies,  
Impact

Edited by Stijn van Rossem  
and Ulrich Tiedau

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Pieter Geyl (July 1935).  
Photo: Utrecht University Library, Special Collections.

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Cover image: Geyl in his study, 15 Finchley Road, St John's Wood, London (1920s). Utrecht University Library, Special Collections.



**INSTITUTE OF  
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To the memory of Pieter van Hees (1937–2021)



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PIETER VAN HEES† worked at the Department of History of the University of Utrecht. His publications include editions of Geyl's correspondences (with Arie W. Willemsen) *Geyl en Vlaanderen: Brieven en Notities* (3 vols, 1973–75), (with George Puchinger) *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl* (5 vols, 1979–81) and (with Wim Berkelaar and Leen Dorsman) Geyl's autobiography *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef...* (2009), as well as numerous articles on the Greater Netherlands and Flemish movements.

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# I. Geyl and Britain: an introduction

*Ulrich Tiedau and Stijn van Rossem*

Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl (15 December 1887–31 December 1966) was arguably one of the most internationally known historians to come from the Netherlands in the twentieth century, and one of the most controversial at that. Having originally arrived in the UK as a journalist, he started his academic career at the University of London in the aftermath of the First World War, with the first endowed chair for Dutch studies in the anglophone world (1919), a remit that five years later was changed to Dutch history and institutions (1924). Known during this time for his reinterpretation of the sixteenth-century Dutch Revolt against the Habsburgs, which challenged existing national historiographies of both Belgium and the Netherlands but was also closely linked with his political activism in favour of the Flemish movement in Belgium and the ‘Greater Netherlands’ ideology,<sup>1</sup> as well as for his questioning of the dominant monarchist tradition in Dutch historiography,<sup>2</sup> Geyl left his stamp on the British perception of Low Countries history and that of the anglophone world at large before leaving the British capital in 1935 after more than two decades to accept a chair in his home country, at Utrecht University.

Arrested during the German occupation of the Netherlands after a series of lectures on Napoleon at the Rotterdam School of Economics in September 1940, in which Geyl had drawn too obvious parallels to a more contemporary dictator, eliciting ‘occasional bursts of laughter’<sup>3</sup> from the

<sup>1</sup> P. Geyl, *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations*. Three lectures held at University College (Leiden, 1920); P. Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands, 1555–1609* (London, 1932); P. Geyl, *The Netherlands Divided, 1609–1648* (London, 1936); P. Geyl, *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century* (London/New York, 1964). The latter three are differently arranged translations of the first two volumes of his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, both written in London (4 vols, Amsterdam, 1930, 1934, 1937, 1959). Also see his other main work from the 1920s: P. Geyl, *De Groot-Nederlandsche Gedachte: Historische en Politieke Beschouwingen* [‘The Greater Netherlands Idea: Historical and Political Reflections’] (2 vols, Haarlem, 1925; Antwerp, 1925 and 1930).

<sup>2</sup> P. Geyl, *Willem IV en Engeland tot 1748* (Utrecht, 1924).

<sup>3</sup> P. Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (London/New Haven, Conn., 1949), p. 7.



audience, he was held for four years, initially at Buchenwald and then at Haaren and St Michielsgestel in North-Brabant. During this time, he not only conceptualized his major historiographical study of Bonaparte, but also authored a collection of poems, a detective novel and an extensive pre-war autobiography (in Dutch) covering his period in London (1913–35) in full; the latter was posthumously edited and published in 2007 to much acclaim by three of the contributors to this volume (Van Hees, Berkelaar, Dorsman).<sup>4</sup> After his release on health grounds in 1944, he wrote for the underground press and supported the resistance, before the liberation ushered in a new chapter in Geyl's work. As already signalled by his *Napoleon: For and Against* (1946), published in English in 1949, he increasingly turned his attention to historical criticism and philosophical questions of history, and in the immediate post-war years famously engaged in a long and bitter public debate with Arnold Toynbee, partly conducted on the airwaves of the BBC, in which he took issue with the determinism of the British historian's system of civilizations (1948/9).<sup>5</sup> Many critical essays followed, in which Geyl sharply dissected the methodological framework of other historical scholars, past and present, and it is indeed this part of his work that brought him international fame and for which he is now best remembered in the anglophone world.<sup>6</sup> Becoming a staunch defender of western civilization during the developing Cold War (which in some ways can be interpreted as a broadening out of his pre-war Dutch and 'Greater Netherlands' nationalism to take in the new geopolitical situation),<sup>7</sup> he also became a much-sought-after commentator on many contemporary issues from the relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia to the emerging economic and political integration of Europe. The Second World War had doubtless been the turning point of Geyl's career. After it, as *The Times* wrote, 'the lifelong rebel found himself an honoured patriarch; the scholar little known outside of Holland and England found himself a figure of world fame; and in his own country he rose easily and by acclaim to the pinnacle of his profession'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar, L. Dorsman and Pieter van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For example: P. Geyl, A. J. Toynbee and P. A. Sorokin, *The Patterns of the Past: Can We Determine It?* (Boston, 1949).

<sup>6</sup> For example: P. Geyl, *Debates with Historians: Ranke, Carlyle, Michelet, Macaulay, Sorokin, Berlin, Toynbee* (The Hague, 1955); P. Geyl, *Use and Abuse of History* (New Haven, Conn., 1955); P. Geyl, *Encounters in History* (London, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Geyl: history as a form of self-expression', in *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands: Papers Delivered to the Eighth Anglo-Dutch Historical Conference*, ed. A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse (Zutphen, 1985), pp. 85–214, at p. 204.

<sup>8</sup> 'Professor Pieter Geyl: an eminent Dutch historian', *The Times*, 3 Jan. 1967, p. 12.

A polemicist and controversialist by nature, ‘he engaged in political and intellectual conflict with deadly zeal’<sup>9</sup> or, as his former student and successor to the London chair (1935–57), Gustaaf Renier, expressed it: ‘He gave the Chair scholarly distinction and that aura of controversy that is the life-blood of the humanities. But he will also be remembered as the man who dined as Toynbee’s guest, before slaughtering him at the microphone. A man who neither looked to the right nor to the left and yet a kindly colleague and a gentleman.’<sup>10</sup>

An extremely prolific writer,<sup>11</sup> among the most influential thinkers on history of all time<sup>12</sup> and an early example of a ‘public historian’, Geyl, unsurprisingly, is a scholar whose life and work has received much attention, as well as major controversy, although interestingly his early years in London (1919–35) tend to figure much less prominently in these studies than Geyl’s later period in Utrecht (1935–66), certainly in those published in English. At the end of 2016, on the fiftieth anniversary of his death, an international symposium was held at the Institute of Historical Research (IHR), London, to re-examine Geyl’s time in Britain and his relationship with the anglophone world more generally and to shed new light on his multifaceted work as a historian, journalist, translator and political activist, on his contemporary networks, and on the lasting legacy of his work on British views of Low Countries history. The present volume, appearing shortly after the centenary of the foundation of the IHR (1921–2021), in the early years of which Geyl played an important role, and the centenary of his appointment as professor at the University of London in the autumn of 1919, is the result of this symposium, with a couple of additional contributions also included, and we hope and believe that it goes some way towards shedding light on the early Geyl, on his formative years in Britain, as well as on his relationship with the anglophone world more generally.

While there is no shortage of biographical sketches of Geyl, few provide much detail on his time in London and those that do cover the period view it largely through a Dutch or Belgian lens. In their critical assessments of Geyl’s historical work published in English, both Herbert Rowen (1965) and Hermann von der Dunk (1985) mention Geyl’s appointment in London, but in passing, as a stepping stone to future greatness as a historical critic and

<sup>9</sup> ‘Dr Pieter Geyl – writer, teacher, and historian’, *Guardian*, 3 Jan. 1967, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> G. J. Renier, ‘Dutch history in England’, *Pollardian: Journal of the History Department, University College London*, no. 17 (spring term 1957), UCL Special Collections, College Collection, PERS/3–4, box 4.

<sup>11</sup> P. van Hees, *Bibliografie van P. Geyl* (Groningen, 1972) lists more than 1,000 items.

<sup>12</sup> M. Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, 2nd ed. (London, 2015), pp. 109–13.

doyen of the Dutch historical profession after the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> And while this assessment is certainly not incorrect, and coincides with Geyl's own assessment of his early period as an 'exile' from Dutch academic and political life, by largely focusing this volume on Geyl's period in London and investigating his relationship to Britain more generally, we hope to shift the emphasis slightly and to highlight how formative Geyl's British experiences, both as a journalist and as an academic historian, were in his personality and historical thinking.

In Dutch language, the selection is somewhat greater, from J. C. Boogman and L. J. Rogier's major commemorative articles from 1967 through Hermann von der Dunk's *levensbericht* of Geyl for the *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* from 1972 to the recollections of Ernst Kossmann (1998), Geyl's second successor as occupant of the London chair (1957–66).<sup>14</sup> There is also a great number of journal articles critical of Geyl's political involvement with the Flemish movement in Belgium, which was at its heaviest in the 1920s and thus during his London period, some of the most important of which have been collected in a volume by Lode Wils (1994). The very divergent assessments of Geyl's political involvement with the Flemish movement – or his meddling in internal Belgian affairs, depending on one's vantage point – during his London years, in the 1970s and 80s even sparked a veritable Dutch–Belgian *Historikerstreit* that has never been fully resolved.<sup>15</sup>

Geyl of course also figures prominently in more general overviews of Low Countries historiography, as well as in historical encyclopaedias and handbooks in both languages.<sup>16</sup> Still, and somewhat surprisingly for a figure

<sup>13</sup> H. H. Rowen, 'The historical Work of Pieter Geyl', *Journal of Modern History*, xxxvii (1965), 35–49, reprinted in H. H. Rowen and Craig Harline, *The Rhyme and Reason of Politics in Early Modern Europe: Collected Essays of Herbert H. Rowen* (Dordrecht/Boston, 1992); H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Geyl: history as a form of self-expression', in *Clio's Mirror*, pp. 85–214.

<sup>14</sup> J. C. Boogman, 'Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)', *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xxi (1967), 269–77; L. J. Rogier, 'Herdenking van P. Geyl (15 december 1887–31 december 1966)', *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, afdeling Letterkunde*, Nieuwe Reeks, xxx (1967); H. W. Von der Dunk, 'Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl', in *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Leiden, 1972), pp. 123–35; E. H. Kossmann, *Familiearchief: Notities over voorouders, tijdgenoten en mijzelf* (Amsterdam, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> L. Wils, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland: Mythe en geschiedenis* (Leuven, 1994). See also N. van Sas, 'The Great Netherlands controversy: a clash of great historians', in *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts: Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, ed. T. Frank and F. Hadler (London, 2011), pp. 152–74, and Fons Meijer's contribution to this volume.

<sup>16</sup> For example: J. Tollebeek, 'Historical writing in the Low Countries', in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing 1800–1945*, ed. S. Macintyre, J. Maignushca and A. Pók (Oxford, 2011), pp. 283–300, at pp. 298–300; R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Historians and the Second World War, 1945–1960* (London/New York, 1993),

of his stature, no monographical biography has seen the light of the day, neither in Dutch nor in English. The sheer volume of the papers of the extremely prolific and famously vain historian – throughout his life he kept carbon copies of almost every piece of correspondence he produced, to preserve them for eternity – seems to have been intimidating to potential biographers, although some of the most extensive and illuminating letter exchanges have been exemplarily edited.<sup>17</sup> The most comprehensive biographical account of Geyl to date is provided by Jo Tollebeek in a chapter of his *De toga van Fruin: Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland, 1860–1960* (1988).<sup>18</sup> Marnix Beyen also devotes significant attention to Geyl, although the coverage of his *Oorlog en verleden: Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938–1947* (2002) starts only after Geyl's move to the Netherlands in 1936.<sup>19</sup> This volume does not attempt to provide a full life-history of Geyl, but aims to contribute insights on Geyl's early period in London and on his continued relationship with Britain and the anglophone world in later life, hopefully as input for a desirable full intellectual biography of Geyl, which someone might want to undertake in the future.

The importance to Geyl of his London years cannot be underestimated. When he arrived in the British capital at the age of twenty-five to take up the post of London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, only a few months before the outbreak of the First World War, he experienced it as a liberation:<sup>20</sup> ‘The editor of his paper gave him complete freedom to write about

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pp. 11–15; M. Carlson, ‘Geyl’, in *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, ed. Kelly Boyd (London, 1999), pp. 457–59; P. van Hees, ‘Geyl, Pieter Catharinus Arie’, in *Great Historians of the Modern Age*, ed. L. Boia (Westport, Conn., 1991), pp. 166–67; W. Berkelaar en J. Palm, *Ik wil wekken en waarschuwen: Gesprekken over Nederlandse historici en hun eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 51–8; H. L. Wesseling, ‘Pieter Geyl: een groot Nederlands historicus’, in H. L. Wesseling, *Onder historici: opstellen over geschiedenis en geschiedschrijving* (Amsterdam, 1995), pp. 101–8; P. van Hees, ‘Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)’, in P. A. M. Geurts and A. E. M. Janssen, *Geschiedschrijving in Nederland*, part I: *Geschiedschrijvers* (The Hague, 1981), pp. 331–47; H. W. von der Dunk, ‘Geyl, Pieter C. A.’, in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. R. de Schrijver et al., ii (Tiel, 1998), pp. 1302–5; H. van der Hoeven, ‘Geijl, Pieter Catharinus Arie (1887–1966)’, *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland* <<http://resources.huuygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn1/geijl>> [accessed 15 May 2021].

<sup>17</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen: Uit het archief van prof. dr. P. Geyl. Brieven en notities*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen, i (1911–1927) (Antwerp/Utrecht, 1973); *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (5 vols, Baarn, 1979–81).

<sup>18</sup> J. Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin: Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland 1860–1960* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 324–84.

<sup>19</sup> M. Beyen, *Oorlog en verleden: Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland 1938–1947* (Amsterdam, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> P. Geyl, ‘Levensverhaal (tot 1945)’, P. Geyl, *Pennestrijd over staat en historie: Opstellen over de vaderlandse geschiedenis aangevuld met Geyl's Levensverhaal* (Groningen, 1971), pp. 312–75, at p. 313.

everything that interested him, and Geyl made full use of this opportunity,' as Charles Boxer writes, and when Geyl exchanged his journalistic career for an academic one in 1919 (although he struggled 'for the first very difficult years', as he himself described them), his position at the University of London gave him great satisfaction: 'He became completely at home in the English academic world, where he had many friends and admirers, and several of his students have since produced admirable work in the field of Dutch history.'<sup>21</sup>

That Britain, and London in particular, continued to occupy a unique place in Geyl's heart even after he had left what in the 1930s he increasingly came to regard as an 'exile' from the political and academic affairs of his home country, he expressed explicitly in a 1956 address to the Anglo-Netherlands Society, an organization of which Geyl had been a member during his time in London (then still known as the Anglo-Batavian Society). Recalling his wartime captivity, he told the audience:

How terribly important, a matter of life and death to us, helpless and forcibly inactive as we were, was the awful ordeal through which London passed in September 1940, and through all those years of the War. Our German guards at Buchenwald used to commiserate hypocritically with us on the doom of London when I arrived there as a hostage in 1940. We remained stoutly convinced that they were exaggerating, but in fact it was not until September 1945 that I was able to see with my own eyes that London was still London. That remains with me as the most vivid recollection of that first visit after the War. The relief that I felt, in spite of the terrible destruction around St Paul's Cathedral and in so many other parts of the metropolis, that London was still there, that London was still London ... I have more profound feeling of affection, admiration and gratitude for London than in the twenty-two years that I used to live here.<sup>22</sup>

But a volume on Geyl's relationship with Britain would be incomplete without also devoting attention to the continued influence that Britain, and the anglophone world at large, had on Geyl, even after he had left the UK, and the influence he continued to exert there. For here, in the Public Record Office, today's National Archives, he conducted a good part of the archival work that also his later historical work would draw on.<sup>23</sup> His London period continued to inspire him even when he was imprisoned in German hostage camps during the Second World War, as a poem unearthed by Wim Berkelaar for this volume demonstrates, and his public debates with

<sup>21</sup> C. R. Boxer, 'Pieter Geyl, 1887–1966', *History Today*, xvii (March 1967), 197.

<sup>22</sup> P. Geyl, 'A sense of Europe', in *Off the Shelf: a 75th Anniversary Voyage through the Papers of the Anglo-Netherlands Society* (London, 1995), pp. 40–43, at pp. 40–41.

<sup>23</sup> For example: P. Geyl, *Oranje en Stuart, 1641–1672* (Utrecht, 1939); in English translation: P. Geyl, *Orange and Stuart, 1641–72* (London, 1969).

Arnold Toynbee, A. J. P. Taylor and other prominent British historians were hugely influential in the decades after 1945. As Ved Mehta, a prominent journalist on the *New Yorker* magazine, wrote in 'Encounters with English intellectuals' (1963), for which he interviewed Geyl in his home in Utrecht in the early 1960s, wrote: 'He [Geyl] is well acquainted with – indeed a part of – the English historical scene,'<sup>24</sup> despite being located elsewhere.

Geyl's perfect command of the English language, in an age when this had not yet become second nature for continental historians, only added to his ability to build bridges across the Channel, as well as across the Atlantic, and it was in the anglophone world where he enjoyed his greatest success and popularity. While immediately after his departure for Utrecht in 1935, his colleagues in the history department at University College London (UCL) refused to add his portrait to the departmental gallery of former history professors, a decision that came close to being regarded as a 'traitor' (the honour was reserved for colleagues who had retired or passed away in office), high acclaim from Britain and the United States came to him after the war. In 1951 he was elected a corresponding member of the Royal Historical Society, of which he had been a fellow during his time in London (1921–35), followed by honorary memberships of the American Historical Association (1957) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1958). He received honorary doctorates from St Andrews University (1958) and Oxford University (1959), as well as from Harvard in the same year, and in 1961 was elected corresponding fellow of the British Academy. He spent time at Princeton (1949), Smith College, Massachusetts (1952), Yale (1954), Stanford and Harvard (both 1957) and in 1966 was awarded the first MacVane Prize by Harvard's history department for his distinguished contributions to European historiography. In 1959 Queen Elizabeth II made him, a lifelong anti-monarchist in his own country,<sup>25</sup> a Commander of the British Empire (CBE).<sup>26</sup> While developing this project we thus moved away from the original working title 'Geyl *in* Britain' to the more apt 'Geyl *and* Britain' and include chapters that focus both on the influence that his British connections continued to exert on Geyl after he left the UK, and vice versa, on the reception and impact that Geyl's work continued to have in Britain and the anglophone world, while he was working in Utrecht. It is

<sup>24</sup> V. Mehta, *Fly and the Fly Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (London, 1963), p. 122f.

<sup>25</sup> Apparently, his appointment in Utrecht was delayed for months because Queen Wilhemina disliked Geyl's writings critical of her ancestors like his *Willem IV en Engeland* (1924); H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Geyl: history as a form of self-expression', in *Clio's Mirror*, pp. 185–214, at p. 212, fn. 26.

<sup>26</sup> 'Geyl, Pieter', *Who's Who and Who was Who?* <<http://doi.org/10.1093/ww/9780199540884.013.U56971>> [accessed 15 May 2021].



not without irony that Geyl, due to his obsession with ‘Groot-Nederland’, was more ‘Dutch’ in his time in London than in his later period in the Netherlands, whereas his influence in Britain and the wider anglophone world was much greater after he had left London. Most of the chapters in this volume focus on Geyl’s connections to Britain (although not always exclusively to Britain) in this sense, reflecting his widespread interests.

One aspect of Geyl’s work and life that we would like to point out particularly, as it encapsulates one of the central aspects of how we define the role of professional historians nowadays, and which gives Geyl an importance that outlasts some of his scholarship, which like most scholarship has eventually become superseded (Geyl, who coined the aphorism that history is ‘an argument without end’,<sup>27</sup> would be the last one to contest this – or would he in this case?), is his role as one of the first ‘public historians’ immediately after the Second World War. As Remco Ensel discusses in more detail in his chapter, Geyl saw the historian’s role not restricted to the confines of the ivory tower but in engaging with the wider public, earning him the epithet ‘model historian’, as A. J. P. Taylor called him (in an almost Gilbert-and-Sullivan-esque way) in the *Observer* in 1963, a role towards which other historians ought to aspire.<sup>28</sup> As several chapters in this volume point out, Geyl’s journalistic roots and affinity with the media<sup>29</sup> had certainly laid the foundations for the development of this profile and the particular amalgam of scholarship, journalism and political activism, for which he was known, is what gave him ‘impact’, if not always in unproblematic ways.

During his London years, Geyl’s scholarship and his political activism could never be fully separated from each other; in fact, the publication of the first volume of his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (1930) was timed to coincide, or interfere, with the centenary celebrations of Belgium’s independence in 1830, the second partition of the Low Countries after that of the sixteenth century, a secession at odds with Geyl’s cherished ‘Greater Netherlands’ idea which inspired both his scholarship and his political activism. Pieter van Hees, co-editor of Geyl’s autobiography as well as several volumes of Geyl’s most important correspondence, introduces us to Geyl’s development and interpretation of this peculiar form of linguistic-nationalist thinking, both in the historiographical and the political fields. First put forward in three lectures at University College London in 1920,

<sup>27</sup> In his *Napoleon: For and Against* (London, 1949), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, ‘Escapades of a model historian’, *Observer*, 6 Oct. 1963, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Geyl’s association with the BBC actually predates the Second World War. On 28 May 1931 the National Programme Daventry aired a discussion between Geyl and the editor of *The Spectator* (40 mins): ‘Where Holland Leads the Way: Part of the Discussion between Professor P. Geyl and Evelyn Wrench’ (*The World and Ourselves* viii), *The Listener* v (1931), p. 942.

published together as *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Relations* in the year after, and developed in detail in the first volume of Geyl's magnum opus *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* (1930; published in English as *The Revolt in the Netherlands* in 1932), he dismissed the then prevailing historical interpretation of the sixteenth-century partition of the Low Countries as deterministic and teleological. Rather than being a logical separation of the Republic of the United Provinces, the predecessor of the current Dutch state, and a proto-national version of Belgium, this division, according to Geyl, was the accidental and unintended consequence of military fortune and misfortune in the course of the Eighty Years' War. Geography, in particular the barrier of the Great Rivers, rather than deep-rooted differences in identity to the north and south of it, had played the decisive role in the partition. Sparking controversial debates among Dutch and Belgian historians, Geyl's more possibilistic reinterpretation of the history of the Revolt quickly caught on in the anglophone world of the 1930s, but there was also another, somewhat darker side to it: Geyl proposed not only that the hypothetical emergence of a state encompassing all Dutch-speaking parts of the old Burgundian lands had been disrupted by the outcome of the Eighty Years' War but also that this, at least potentially irredentist, conception could be a way forward for solving the linguistic-communitarian differences in contemporary Belgium.

Naturally, his Greater Netherlands interpretation of Low Countries history and associated political agitation brought Geyl into open conflict with Belgian interests in Britain, in a way that is also of direct interest for the institutional history of the University of London. In an extended chapter, Ulrich Tiedau traces the conflict between Geyl and his Belgian counterpart and nemesis during his London years, Émile Cammaerts. Geyl and the Anglo-Belgian poet, like Geyl a semi-official spokesperson of his country of origin, became direct opponents in the propaganda battles between Dutch and Belgian interest groups trying to influence British academic, public and government opinion about the Low Countries in the aftermath of the First World War and especially in the approach to and during the Paris Peace Conference (1919/20), when, apart from a new world order, Belgian claims on Dutch territories and the international status of the River Scheldt were renegotiated. While Geyl had managed to exchange his journalistic post for the newly founded university chair of Dutch studies in 1919, it would take until 1931 for a Belgian counter-chair to be endowed, in an attempt to contain Geyl's for Belgium deleterious influence on British opinion of the Low Countries. While they produced distinguished academic works, both scholars, as Tiedau shows, were never able to *fully* part with the propagandistic roots of their respective chairs, Geyl certainly not during his time in London. The (inter)disciplinary

infrastructure they created did however lay the institutional foundations for the University of London to become one of the foremost centres for Dutch and Low Countries studies in the anglophone world. Central to Geyl's success in British academia, as Stijn van Rossem shows, was his role in the early years of the Institute of the Historical Research (IHR), Albert Frederick Pollard's initiative to pool the postgraduate activities of all historians across the various colleges of the University of London. While, initially, Geyl's career at UCL and Bedford College was anything but a resounding success and, having alienated the powerful provost of UCL, Gregory Foster, he came close to losing his academic post in 1924, the IHR would become the vehicle for Geyl's belated integration into the British historical profession. Not only was he able to develop close relations with scholars such as Hugh Bellot and John Neale through his involvement in the seminars<sup>30</sup> and conferences of Pollard's newly founded institute, but by arranging for the Dutch history books to be transferred from the library of Bedford College to the IHR, along with a considerable annual grant from the Dutch government to expand the collection, he built up the IHR Low Countries collection as one of the most important reference libraries on the subject in the anglophone world. Using new source material from the IHR archive, Van Rossem discusses the organization, growth and profile of this collection, considered to be one of Geyl's major legacies at the University of London.

A little-known aspect of Geyl's work is the subject of Wim Berkelaar's chapter: Geyl's literary ambitions. While he is remembered mainly for his historical work, Geyl also sought to obtain recognition as a poet and novelist. In his youth he imitated famous Dutch poets, without much success. During his London years he translated two medieval Dutch plays, *Lancelot of Denmark* (1923) and *The Tale of Beatrice* (1927), into English (both were staged in the West End), and also authored his own play. But, as Berkelaar shows, it was only during his internment during the Second World War that Geyl found his voice as a poet, writing about his desire for liberty, reminiscing about his years in London and expressing his view of history. After the liberation, Geyl's poetry, as well as a detective novel, received a less than enthusiastic critical response: they were considered old-fashioned and of more interest as an expression of his experience in the camps than as a real contribution to literature. Nonetheless, in 1957, Geyl was awarded the P. C. Hooft Prize, the highest literary award in the Netherlands, for his life's work, although that was of course predominantly historical.

<sup>30</sup> See also U. Tiedau, 'History of the IHR Low Countries history seminar, 1924–2021', in *Talking History: Seminars and Seminarists at the Institute of Historical Research, 1921–2021*, ed. David Manning (London, 2023).

Leen Dorsman traces the role of the idea of federalism as a political organizing principle for Geyl. Having become interested in the politics of empire during his time as London correspondent of the leading Dutch broadsheet *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (1913–19), he reported extensively from the British imperial conferences, where, with a view to securing the empire's longevity, its possible reorganization along federal lines was contemplated, and adopted the approach as a possible way forward in other political contexts close to his heart. As Dorsman demonstrates, federalism as a concept recurs in Geyl's thinking throughout his life, ranging from his well-known interventions on behalf of the Flemish movement in Belgium in the 1920s and '30s, for example as co-author of the unsuccessful proposal of a federal statute for Belgium in 1929, put forward by the Flemish nationalist parliamentarian Herman Vos, to his lesser-known contributions to the debate about European integration in the 1950s.

Remco Ensel, as already indicated, investigates Geyl's role as a public intellectual in post-1945 Europe. With his sparring partner Arnold Toynbee he was one of the first historians to embrace the medium of broadcasting, and the public debates between the two on BBC radio on the catastrophe that was the Second World War and on the historical profession, caught the public's imagination. While both historians presented themselves as authoritative public intellectuals, the debate, which after 1948 developed into an intense dispute, illustrates how differently Geyl and Toynbee conceived their role in the post-war world. While Toynbee was not afraid to provide political and moral advice to the general public, even beyond the boundaries of his specialist knowledge, Geyl envisaged a more restricted role for professional historians. Re-analysing the debate, Ensel compares the two approaches, which gave rise to fundamental 'post-Holocaust' questions on collective and individual responsibility and guilt.

Geyl's historical work on the eighteenth century is re-read by Reinier Salverda, examining its legacy to today's historiography. As he points out, studying the eighteenth century was a lifelong intellectual pursuit for Geyl, from early on in his London years until the end of his career. Considering Geyl as a historian in his own time, quite different in style, character and commitments from contemporaries such as Johan Huizinga and Herman Theodoor Colenbrander, Salverda analyses Geyl's investigations of the Dutch Republic's *ancien régime* under the Orange stadholders and the breakthrough (in revolts well before the French Revolution) of the 'new' in late-eighteenth-century Dutch politics and society. While identifying certain limitations and blind spots in Geyl's historical work on the period, his analysis clearly demonstrates the historical impact, lasting value and scholarly relevance today of Geyl's contributions in this area. In a similar vein, Mark Edward Hay points

to Geyl's historiographical legacy for revolutionary and Napoleonic studies. While there is a tendency to seek and thus to find Geyl's historiographical legacy predominantly in Low Countries history, his transnational comparison of revolutionary turmoil in the Dutch republic, the Austrian Netherlands and France in particular, Hay suggests, could, and should, be interpreted as a precursor to the watershed moment in revolutionary and Napoleonic studies that was Jacques Godechot's and Robert Palmer's 'Atlantic thesis'. He also argues that Geyl's monumental study of Napoleon, partly written in captivity during the Second World War (1946–8),<sup>31</sup> not only marks a turning point in the biographical study of the emperor but also remains an important cornerstone for research on Napoleon to this day.

While before 1945 Geyl's fame was largely restricted to the Low Countries and Britain (unlike, say, Huizinga, whose reputation was international), Geyl also gained limited recognition in Germany, not always in particularly savoury circles. Alisa van Kleef explores the extent of Geyl's entanglement, during his time in London, with the networks of German *Westforschung*, an academic strand which, inspired by German *völkisch* and revisionist thought in the interwar period, showed interest in the countries neighbouring Germany to the west and later would become directly involved in the occupation policies and practices in the Benelux countries, as well as in France.<sup>32</sup> The proximity of Geyl's ethno-linguistic Greater Netherlands narrative to *völkisch* approaches in German historiography led on more than one occasion to Geyl being suspected of having been a 'collaborator' in these tendencies, in spite of his later becoming a victim of Nazism himself. Considering all the known instances in which Geyl became embroiled in German *Westforschung*, Van Kleef arrives at the conclusion that while it is obvious that Geyl let himself in with these academic circles to a greater extent than he would feel comfortable with retrospectively, the accusation of 'collaboration' on the whole is unwarranted. While the famously vain Geyl may have been flattered by the attention he received from German historians, the relationship was a very lopsided affair. The *Westforschers* were much more fascinated by Geyl, an unlikely source of support for their programme as a Dutch historian based in London, than vice versa, whereas his thinking at no time was determined by German but always by Dutch ideas, which in his case, of course, always needs to be read as Greater Netherlands ideas.

<sup>31</sup> P. Geyl, *Napoleon: voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving* (Utrecht, 1946). Translated into English by Odile Renier, the wife of his former student and successor to the London chair (1935–57), Gustaaf Renier, as *Napoleon: For and Against* (London/New Haven, Conn., 1949).

<sup>32</sup> For example: *De Westforschung en Nederland* (Themanummer), *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, ciix (2005), ed. B. Henkes and A. Knotter.

In a related vein, Fons Meijer investigates the afterlife of Pieter Geyl and his 'Greater Netherlands' activism, in particular the Dutch–Belgian *Historikerstreit* in the decades since Geyl's passing about the ambivalent nature of his political commitment. Since the 1970s, Geyl's Greater Netherlands conviction has been the focus of a fierce debate among Belgian and Dutch historians over whether Geyl had imperialist motives and secretly worked towards the dissolution of the Belgian state. While in his autobiographical writings Geyl tended to emphasize the moderate nature of his political activism, the publication of two extensive series of his correspondence in the 1970s and early 80s allowed historians to re-examine this self-portrayal. In subsequent years, Belgian historians have shown that Geyl was not, or at least not consistently, the moderate activist he claimed to be, but that his professed moderation was largely the result of tactical manoeuvring. In turn, these allegations initiated a stream of responses by Dutch historians attempting to debunk the accusations. By paying close attention to both the historical-rational arguments put forward by the participants of the debate and the larger social-political context in which it was conducted, Meijer surveys and historicizes the charged afterlife of Geyl's ideological affiliation.

What remains is to thank the many people who helped bring this volume to publication: the IHR and Lawrence Goldman in particular for hosting the symposium, Julie Spraggon, Emma Gallon, Robert Davies and colleagues from University of London Press for accepting the manuscript for publication in the IHR conference series and seeing the book through to production, the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable feedback, the contributors for their patience, Bart Jaski and colleagues from the Special Collections department of Utrecht University Library for permission to reproduce some of the photographs from Geyl's time in London and, last but not least, Andrea Meyer Ludowisy from Senate House Library for supporting the project all along the way.

Shortly before the completion of this volume, the sad news reached us that Pieter van Hees (14 October 1937–20 April 2021) had passed away. During his student years Geyl's assistant, organizer of his voluminous *Nachlass* papers, co-editor of Geyl's autobiography and several volumes of his correspondence and author of numerous scholarly articles on Geyl, nobody on earth knew Geyl and his voluminous papers better than Pieter.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> W. Berkelaar, *Een immer evenwichtig en fair oordelend historicus: Pieter van Hees (1937–2021), kenner en bezorger van het werk van Pieter Geyl* <<https://wimberkelaar.wordpress.com/2021/05/15/een-immer-evenwichtig-en-fair-oordelend-historicus-pieter-van-hees-1937-2021-kenner-en-bezorger-van-het-werk-van-pieter-geyl/>> [accessed 15 May 2021]. Also see *Nationalisme en historiografie rondom Pieter Geyl: Afscheidsbundel voor Pieter van Hees*, ed. F. W. Lantink (Utrecht, 2005).



Pieter Geyl and Britain

His kind and generous support to the editors and contributors of this volume was much valued and it is a great sorrow that he does not live to see its publication. He will be greatly missed and it is to his memory that we would like to dedicate this volume.

## 2. The Greater Netherlands idea of Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)

*Pieter van Hees†*

After Belgium's secession from the Netherlands in the revolution of 1830, it took a few decades until Dutch-speaking writers and philologists from both sides of the border established regular contact with each other again. From mid-century onwards, visitors from the north began to be invited to assemblies of the Flemish movement and introduced to the struggle for equal rights for the Dutch language in Belgium, particularly in education but also in other aspects of public life. In the then unitary Belgian state, Flemish had only a poor second status after French, the language of the educated classes, which was prevalent in all social, political and economic contexts. It was by attending one of these assemblies that in 1911 Pieter Geyl discovered what would become a dominant theme in both his life and his scholarship. He was deeply impressed by the vitality of the Flemish movement and especially by the student campaign demanding higher education to be delivered in their mother tongue.<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time, interest in the Dutch language also reawakened north of the Dutch–Belgian border. Many people in the Netherlands took pride in the fact that their language was spoken in other countries around the world: in their colonies in the East and West Indies, in parts of North America, in Flanders and, not unimportantly, in South Africa, where the

<sup>1</sup> H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Geyl: history as a form of self-expression', in *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands. Papers Delivered to the Eighth Anglo-Dutch Historical Conference*, ed. A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse (Zutphen, 1985), pp. 185–214; J. Tollebeek, *De Toga van Fruin: Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* (Amsterdam, 1990, 1996), pp. 324–88; N. van Sas, 'The Great Netherlands controversy: a clash of historians', in *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts: Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, ed. T. Frank and F. Hadler (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 152–75; P. van Hees, 'Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)', in *Historici van de twintigste eeuw*, ed. A. Huussen Jr., E. H. Kossmann and H. Renner (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1981), pp. 144–62; P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar, L. Dorsman and Pieter van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009).

battles of the Afrikaners, then known as Boers, against English imperialism were followed with keen interest.<sup>2</sup>

Geyl's pre-war interest in Flanders and Flemish–Dutch relations was renewed after the First World War. Between 1913 and 1919 he had been London correspondent of one of the leading Dutch newspapers, the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, before in 1919 he was appointed professor of Dutch studies (changed in 1924 to professor of Dutch history) at the University of London, a position he held until his departure for a university chair in Utrecht in 1935. He was an outspoken proponent of the Greater Netherlands idea that sought to unite all speakers of Dutch at least culturally, if not also politically in one state, and pursued this aim both in the historical-scholarly and in the political fields.

### ***The Greater Netherlands idea in historiography***

As a historian, Geyl developed an alternative interpretation of the genesis of the Dutch state in the course of the revolt against the Habsburgs in the sixteenth century. In a series of lectures given at University College London in 1920 and later repeated in Belgium and the Netherlands,<sup>3</sup> he formulated the thesis that the line that came to divide the old Burgundian lands during the rebellion against Philip II's policy of centralization had been the result of military fortune or misfortune. The prevalent opinion among Low Countries historians until then had been that the partition was rooted in deep differences in national character between the north and the south, differences determined by the tenacity of the northern provinces – which were to become the Dutch Republic – in their struggle for old liberties, freedom of religion for the Calvinists and loyalty to the stadholders of the house of Orange.

Geyl deplored the division and dismissed the old view as a deterministic view of history. In his eyes, the cause of the partition could be found in chance elements of the military situation: Geyl pointed out that Parma had not been able to cross the barrier posed by the great rivers Rhine, Waal and Maas and for this accidental circumstance the northern provinces had been successful in breaking away, while the southern ones had not.

At the same time, Geyl criticized Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), the most prominent Belgian historian of his time, who like Geyl regretted the partition of the Burgundian lands, if for different reasons; however, Pirenne

<sup>2</sup> J. Bank and M. van Buuren, *1900: Hoogtij van burgerlijke cultuur* (The Hague, 2000); M. Bossenbroek, *Nederland op zijn breedst: Indië en Zuid-Afrika in de Nederlandse cultuur omstreeks 1900* (Amsterdam, 1996); *Tussen cultuur en politiek: Het Algemeen-Nederlands Verbond, 1895–1995*, ed. P. van Hees and H. de Schepper (Hilversum, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> P. Geyl, *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations: Three Lectures Given at University College* (Leiden, 1920).

also saw an advantage in the preservation of the unity of the principalities of Brabant and Flanders, the nucleus of what was to become Belgium. In Pirenne's eyes, Flanders, Brabant and the francophone provinces formed a fortuitous amalgamation of social, economic and cultural factors, an ideal blend of Latin (Romance) and Germanic cultures.

Geyl's novel interpretation met strong opposition because it challenged values and opinions that for a long time had been regarded as certainties among Dutch historians. The newcomer was considered arrogant for his criticism of highly esteemed historiographical authorities and reproached for intermingling history and politics, a claim that Geyl did not dismiss but defended by claiming: 'Politics and history have much to gain from each other, the first depth [from history], the second sense of reality [from politics].'<sup>4</sup>

In the Netherlands, Geyl had challenged the consolidated historical opinion of, among others, the liberal historians Robert Fruin (1823–99), Pieter Jacobus Blok (1855–1923) – who had also been Geyl's academic mentor – and Herman Theodoor Colenbrander (1871–1945), all from the University of Leiden, and Gerhard Wilhelm Kernkamp (1864–1943) from the University of Utrecht, as well as the opinion of Protestant historians such as Adriaan Goslinga (1884–1961) and Jan Cornelis Hendrik de Pater (1887–1971). Fruin saw the partition of the Low Countries around 1585 as inevitable, a view that he expressed most famously in his 1857 book *Tien jaren uit den tachtigjarigen oorlog, 1588–1598* ('Ten years from the Eighty Years' War, 1588–1598') (1857). It was not a passing misunderstanding that had caused the split but 'a profound difference between Northern and Southern Netherlands, in origin, in national character, in history, in religion, in mode of government, in social condition'.<sup>5</sup> Blok, Colenbrander and Kernkamp shared Fruin's assessment, whereas Goslinga and De Pater took another point of view. In their eyes, the choice of Calvinism and the role of Calvinist supporters in the rebellion against Spain had caused the split between the northern and southern Netherlands. Geyl's alternative interpretation, however, found approval from Roman Catholic historians such as Lodewijk Rogier (1894–1975), who praised Geyl's 1930 article on the protestantization of the northern Netherlands, in which Geyl, himself

<sup>4</sup> Geyl wrote this in his preface in P. Geyl, *De Groot-Nederlandsche gedachte* (Haarlem, 1925), p. 6: '[...] ik geloof dat politiek en geschiedenis veel bij elkaar's omgang kunnen winnen, de eerste aan diepte, de tweede aan zin voor werkelijkheid'.

<sup>5</sup> R. Fruin, *Tien jaren uit den tachtigjarigen oorlog, 1588–1598* (The Hague, 1924), p. 411. English text in P. Geyl, *The Low Countries: Episodes and Problems* (London, 1964), p. 37: '[...] geen voorbijgaand misverstand de scheuring had te weeg gebracht maar een diep geworteld verschil tusschen noordelijke en zuidelijke Nederlanders, in afkomst, in volkstaal, in geschiedenis, in godsdienst, in regeeringsvorm, in maatschappelijken toestand'.

an agnostic, stated that the influence of Protestantism in Dutch history was exaggerated and the role of Roman Catholics underrated. Of course, there were later corrections to the views expressed in Geyl's article, but it triggered a still-interesting discussion of the role not only of Roman Catholics but also of the 'silent majority' during the rebellion against the Habsburgs.<sup>6</sup>

To return to Geyl's great debate with Pirenne, in 1909, while still a student, Geyl had already scribbled the following remark in his copy of the first volume of Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique*:

What I object to in this Avant Propos, is that Pirenne too exclusively speaks of 'Belgian' where the context would often require 'Netherlandic'. How many of his observations apply just as much to the North-Netherlandic civilization! The North-South union, too, lasted too long and was too real to be completely ignored.<sup>7</sup>

Geyl elaborated on this early critique of Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* in his *Holland and Belgium* (1920) and in many subsequent lectures and articles. The Belgian historical establishment, for example Charles Terlinden (1878–1972), Hubert van Houtte (1872–1948), Léon van der Essen (1883–1963) and Hans van Werveke (1898–1974), opposed Geyl's critical view of Pirenne's work, whereas young Flemish nationalist historians such as Hendrik J. Elias (1902–73) and Robert van Roosbroeck (1898–1988) embraced these new ideas. So did the francophone historian Léon-Ernest Halkin (1906–98), although he asked for more attention to be paid to the francophone regions of Belgium. But more importantly, former opponents such as Van Werveke, Van der Essen and François Louis Ganshof over time came to appreciate Geyl's less deterministic view of the partition of the Low Countries. In 1938, Van der Essen wrote in *Nederlandsche Historiebladen*, 'The unity of the Netherlands! It is a fact that the lesser-Dutch and the lesser-Belgian historiographies failed to take into account.'<sup>8</sup> Ganshof, Van Werveke and Van der Essen would go on to collaborate with Geyl in editing the

<sup>6</sup> P. Geyl, 'De protestantiseering van Noord-Nederland' (1930), last published in P. Geyl, *Verzamelde opstellen* (4 vols, Utrecht, 1978), i, pp. 205–19. See also P. Geyl, 'Mr Carr's theory of history: the protestantization of the Northern Netherlands', in P. Geyl, *History of the Low Countries: Episodes and Problems (The Trevelyan Lectures)* (London, 1964), pp. 23–43.

<sup>7</sup> P. Geyl, *Pennestrijd over staat en historie: Opstellen over de vaderlandse geschiedenis aangevuld met Geyl's Levensverhaal (tot 1945)* (Groningen, 1971), p. 317, also quoted in Geyl, *History of the Low Countries*, p. 19: 'Wat ik op het Avant-Propos tegen heb, is dat Pirenne te uitsluitend spreekt van "Belge", waar dikwijls beter "Nederlands" had gepast. Hoeveel van zijn beschouwingen gaan evenzeer op voor de Noord-Nederlandse beschaving en de eenheid tussen Noord en Zuid is toch te langdurig en reëel geweest om haar te negeren.'

<sup>8</sup> L. van der Essen, 'De historische gebondenheid der Nederlanden', *Nederlandsche Historiebladen*, i (1938), 153–89, at p. 153: 'De gebondenheid der Nederlanden! Dat is een feit

*Nederlandsche Historiebladen*, a historical journal with a mixed Dutch and Flemish editorial board that existed from 1938 to 1941.<sup>9</sup>

Geyl's sharpest critique of Pirenne was not directed against the latter's views on the sixteenth century but on his interpretation of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. When writing his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* ('History of the Dutch-speaking Peoples'), Geyl admitted that Pirenne knew more about medieval history and the history of the Burgundian period than Geyl,<sup>10</sup> and the Dutch historian P. B. M. Blaas observed that in his 1936 inaugural lecture at Utrecht University, Geyl in fact came quite close to a Pirennean interpretation of the sixteenth-century history of the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> But in the early 1920s Geyl's ideas were novel, which is why Rogier, in his obituary of Geyl for the *Koninklijke Academie der Wetenschappen* could write, 'So there is a picture of Dutch history from *before* Geyl and one from *after* Geyl. I do not know of any Dutch historian for whom that applied in a similar way.'<sup>12</sup>

The historian Lode Wils from the University of Leuven, one of Geyl's strongest critics, begged to differ, but accepted that under Geyl's influence historiographical problems of the sixteenth century are now interpreted in different ways, if only for *North-* and not for *South-*Netherlandic historiography.<sup>13</sup> Geyl however never considered an *amende honorable*, a public apology, vis-à-vis Pirenne; he only admitted that on the matter of the sixteenth-century partition of the Low Countries, Pirenne had published 'no untenable simplifications'.<sup>14</sup>

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hetwelk door de klein-Hollandsche en de klein-Belgische geschiedschrijving absoluut over het hoofd werd gezien.'

<sup>9</sup> P. van Hees, 'Van *Nederlandsche Historiebladen* tot *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 1c (1986), pp. 476–506.

<sup>10</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (5 vols, Baarn, 1979–81), i, 378 (letter of 29 Dec. 1928).

<sup>11</sup> P. B. M. Blaas, *Geschiedenis en nostalgie: De historiografie van een kleine natie met een groot verleden: Verspreide historiografische opstellen* (Hilversum, 2000), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> L. J. Rogier, 'Herdenking van P. Geyl (15 december 1887–31 december 1966)', L. J. Rogier, *Herdenken en herzien: Verzamelde opstellen* (Bilthoven, 1974), pp. 350–88, quotation on p. 388: 'Er is dus een vaderlands geschiedenisbeeld van *voor* Geyl en van *na* hem. Ik ken geen Nederlands geschiedschrijver, van wie dat in zulk een mate geldt. Zo gezien, is Geyl dan de grootste.'

<sup>13</sup> L. Wils, 'De Grootnederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis (BTFC)*, iix (1983), pp. 323–66, quotation p. 364: 'Het historiografische probleem dat mede onder invloed van Geyl anders is aangepakt, is dat van de *Noord* Nederlandse geschiedschrijving, niet van de *Zuid* Nederlandse.'

<sup>14</sup> Geyl, *History of the Low Countries*, p. 18.

### *History of the Netherlandic stam*

Most profoundly, Geyl expressed his Greater Netherlands view in a multi-volume history of the Dutch-speaking people in the Low Countries. For its first volume, published in 1930 under the title *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* (later English translations were published under different titles),<sup>15</sup> he used the notion of *stam* or 'stock' in the title because, in his romantically inspired linguistic-nationalist view, language boundaries should form the natural borders of a future federal union of the Netherlands and Flanders. Such a union might have come into existence in the sixteenth century, if it had not been for the barrier of the great rivers that prevented Parma from reconquering the North. Geyl's was a more possibilistic approach to history, but at the same time itself not entirely free of a degree of finalism. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century the unity of language between the north and the south had hardly played a role in political discourses and there was little awareness among the population on both sides of the border of their common language. Other weak points in Geyl's narrative were his underconsideration of the role of the francophone territories of the Burgundian lands and his unsatisfactory explanation of the emergence of the eastern border of the Netherlands.<sup>16</sup>

While historians generally accepted Geyl's claim that the revolt in the Netherlands had been a conservative revolution, his critical view of the violent actions of the *zeegeuzen* ('sea beggars') encountered a more mixed reception. The importance of his interpretation lies in the nowadays widely accepted insight that the division of the Burgundian Netherlands was caused by a series of accidental, mostly military, events. These accidents, by the way, were less Parma's inability to cross the great rivers, as asserted by Geyl, than Parma's lack of funds to remunerate his soldiers, as John Huxtable Elliott and Geoffrey Parker have demonstrated clearly since.<sup>17</sup>

Another major point of criticism was Geyl's nationalism. The linguistic nationalism he espoused was a typical nineteenth-century phenomenon,

<sup>15</sup> *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, i, *tot 1609* (Amsterdam, 1930), ii, *1609–1688* (Amsterdam, 1934); iii, *1688–1751* (Amsterdam, 1937). After the war Geyl published *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam, 1751–1798* (Amsterdam, 1959). English edition: *The Revolt of the Netherlands, 1555–1609* (London, 1932); *The Netherlands Divided, 1609–1648* (London, 1936); *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century* (London/New York, 1964).

<sup>16</sup> For a critical view of Geyl's knowledge of the so-called Frisians, Franks and Saxons myth see M. Beyen, 'Natuurlijke naties? Nationale historiografie in België en Nederland tussen een "tribal" en een sociaal-cultureel paradigma', *Volkseigen: Ras, cultuur en wetenschap in Nederland, 1900–1950* (Jaarboek XI Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, NIOD), pp. 95–129.

<sup>17</sup> J. H. Elliott, *Europe Divided, 1559–1598* (London, 1968); G. Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road* (London, 1972) and Blaas, *Geschiedenis en nostalgie*, p. 169.

widely spread and accepted in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. But in the late 1920s these ideas overlapped with German *völkisch* and national-socialist theories about connections between language, race, 'blood and soil' and authoritarian leadership, notions from which Geyl distanced himself clearly and repeatedly.<sup>18</sup> His *stam* idea, based on the notion of unity of language, was founded purely on culture, not on 'race'. In a 1938 lecture at the Rotterdam School of Economics, the predecessor of today's Erasmus University, about the precarious political situation in Czechoslovakia, he even brought himself to declaring that different languages could peacefully co-exist in one state.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to Geyl, his friend and successor on the chair for Dutch history in London, Gustaaf Renier (1892–1962), in his inaugural lecture 'The criterion of Dutch nationhood', rejected language as the most important marker of nationality, instead highlighting the factor of common history, in the words of Ernest Renan: 'avoir fait des grandes choses ensemble et vouloir en faire encore' ('to have done great things together in the past and to want to do them again in the future').<sup>20</sup> Renier's successor, Ernst Kossmann (1922–2003), authored the Oxford *History of the Low Countries*, a joint history of the Benelux states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which he treated Belgium and the Netherlands as separate entities, their partly shared language not a point of particular interest. In the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* ('General History of the Low Countries'), a large-scale historical handbook project initiated after 1945, language again did not play a major role.<sup>21</sup> Instead it was geography that determined the handbook's division into chapters, one of the reasons why Geyl declined to participate.

It is remarkable that Geyl left his own *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* unfinished, ending in 1798. Of course, after 1945 other historical subjects demanded his attention and brought him fame, for example his studies on the relations between the Orange stadholders and the Stuart and Hanoverian dynasties, as well as his study on Napoleon and his public

<sup>18</sup> These disapprovals can easily be found in the published correspondence in *Geyl en Vlaanderen: Uit het archief van Prof. Dr. Pieter Geyl, brieven en notities*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (3 vols, Antwerp, 1973–5) and *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*. Also see the chapters by Fons Meijer and Alisa van Kleef in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> P. Geyl, *Het nationalisme als factor in de moderne Europese geschiedenis* (Santpoort, 1938), republished in Geyl, *Verzamelde opstellen*, iii, pp. 3–21.

<sup>20</sup> G. J. Renier, *The Criterion of Dutch Nationhood: An inaugural lecture delivered at University College, London, on June 4, 1945* (London, 1946). Geyl replied in *History*, N. S. xxxi, pp. 127–40, and in *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, i (1946), pp. 227–30.

<sup>21</sup> *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, ed. J. A. van Houtte, J. F. Niemeijer, J. Presser and H. van Werveke (13 vols, Utrecht, 1949–58).



disputes with Arnold J. Toynbee.<sup>22</sup> But the question imposes itself: had he not himself lost faith in the project?

That said, his views on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which Geyl brought together in his *Stam* – interestingly, he found most of the historical sources for his works in British archives when living in London – are still of some scholarly importance today. Less so the role that Geyl had envisaged for his magnum opus to play in the propaganda for a political Greater Netherlands state.

### ***Political Greater Netherlands***

As mentioned before, Geyl's Greater Netherlands ideology also had a political side to it. The idea of a federal state uniting the Netherlands and Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, appealed to some radical supporters of the Flemish movement. These *Flamingants* comprised two groups that after 1918 reluctantly worked together. The first consisted of Flemish soldiers who while fighting in the Belgian army during the First World War had joined a clandestine organization striving for better conditions for the Flemings after the war. Many of them envisaged a federal Belgium. Similar thoughts were alive among the so-called activists, Flemings who had collaborated with the Germans during the occupation in 1914–18. The activists did not reject the idea of a Greater Netherlands state, but neither was it their preferred solution to what they saw as Flemish grievances in Belgium.<sup>23</sup> It is worth mentioning that ideas of a separation or federalization of Belgium could also be found on the Walloon side.

Separately, the front movement and the activists were fringe groups, but by working together and forming a political party, the *Frontpartij* ('Front Party'), they managed to obtain five seats (out of 186) in the 1919 general elections, giving them the role of a pressure group for Flemish rights in the Belgian parliament.<sup>24</sup> However, their political achievements were small and often undermined by internal conflict. Problems were also caused by activists who in 1918 had asked for asylum in the Netherlands, where they were supported by members of organisations like the *Dietsche Bond* and the *Dietsch Studenten Verbond* ('Dietsch' being an ancient term for Groot-Nederlands).<sup>25</sup> It goes without saying that Geyl's idea of a federal Greater

<sup>22</sup> See the chapters by Reinier Salverda, Mark E. Hay and Remco Ensel in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> D. Vanacker, *De Frontbeweging: De Vlaamse strijd aan de IJzer* (Koksijde, 2000) and D. Vanacker, *Het aktivistisch avontuur* (Ghent, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> For a broad view of the history of Flemish nationalism as a political movement and its development into an extreme-right movement see Bruno de Wever, *Greep naar de macht: Vlaams-nationalisme en de Nieuwe Orde, 1933–1945* (Tielt, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> L. Vos, *Idealisme en engagement: De roeping van de katholieke studerende jeugd in*

Netherlands state was popular in these circles, but one should not lose sight of the fact that these groups consisted of only a few thousand members and were by no means representative of the general Dutch population who, on the whole, did not feel any particular attachment to Flanders. The Dutch government was also strongly opposed to any encroachment on Belgian sovereignty, as, for obvious reasons, was Belgium.

Geyl's ideas might have fallen on fertile soil, but they did not bear fruit. Constant conflicts, heated discussions and a high level of distrust among the various factions of the Greater Netherlands movement dominated the interwar period. Despite Geyl's impatience and sometimes radical language, he tried to moderate between the various factions,<sup>26</sup> and these efforts and his mediation can be explained by his familiarity with the struggle between the Irish republicans and England. As a newspaper correspondent, he had followed this nationalities conflict with great attention and met several Irish nationalists in person, among them moderate, but also radical members of Sinn Féin.<sup>27</sup> Familiarity with this conflict may have brought him to favour moderation in the discussion of national identities. In Geyl's opinion, the Greater Netherlands state was a vision for the distant future and had to be realized by parliamentary action, not by revolution. However, most Flemish activist refugees in the Netherlands and many members of the Front Party saw things differently and sought to dismantle the Belgian state as soon as possible. Geyl usually tried to bring the factions together and pleaded for co-operation between them. Together with Herman Vos, member of parliament for the Flemish nationalist party, and others, he drafted a bill suggesting a federal statute for Belgium in 1929,<sup>28</sup> with the intention of giving the Flemish people more power and influence in the then still-unitary Belgian state. The bill was an outright failure, as the Belgian parliament declined to discuss it and the proposal caused great discontent among the Greater Netherlanders in the north and south. Moreover, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, many Flemish nationalists and Greater Netherlanders in the north radicalized and turned in the direction of fascism, then on the ascendant.<sup>29</sup> Geyl warned publicly against this ideology, but his was a *vox clamantis in deserto*, a voice calling in the wilderness.

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*Vlaanderen (1920–1990)* (Leuven/The Hague, 2011), pp. 21–248; P. van Hees, 'De Groot-Nederlandse studentenbeweging', *Utrechtse Historische Cahiers*, xix (1998), 42–52.

<sup>26</sup> See the letters and notes in *Geyl en Vlaanderen* (first 2 vols) and *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl* (first 3 vols).

<sup>27</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, pp. 65–9, at pp. 243–5.

<sup>28</sup> See for the text of the Federal Statute *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ii, pp. 72–4 and *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, pp. 261–3.

<sup>29</sup> De Wever, *Greep naar de macht*, pp. 95–340.

After the publication of Geyl's letters and notes on the Flemish question in the volumes *Geyl en Vlaanderen* (1973–5) and later in *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl* (1979–81), a discussion about Geyl's 'real' intentions as a *Grootnederlander* started. Louis Vos and Lode Wils in particular argued that Geyl's objective was the dissolution of the Belgian state and that his more moderate statements were only to disguise this, his ultimate aim. Moreover, Wils stated that Geyl shared responsibility for the choice that the Flemish nationalist party made in 1933 when voting for a national-socialist policy. These opinions were countered by Arie W. Willemsen, Ludo Simons, Hermann von der Dunk, myself and others.<sup>30</sup> In fact, by the mid-1930s Geyl was already distancing himself from the Greater Netherlands movement, but in one way or another he still believed in Flanders, for in 1932 he wrote, 'The future of the Netherlandic civilization in Flanders (this is what counts in the end).'<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Second World War and contacts with Flanders after 1945***

Geyl's firm attitude against national socialism started in 1932 at the latest, when he encountered an already completely nazified German student organization at a student congress in Rostock on the Baltic coast of Germany. From then on, he warned publicly, in writings and speeches, against the threat posed by this political movement. His anti-Nazi opinions were well known to the German occupiers who on 7 October 1940 took him hostage and kept him imprisoned until 14 February 1944. After his release, he started to write for *Vrij Nederland*, an underground newspaper of the Dutch resistance, stating his desire to renew contacts with Belgium and Flanders as soon as the war ended.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> L. Vos, 'De eierdans van P. Geyl', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* [BMGN], lxxxix (1975), 444–57 and A. W. Willemsen, 'Geyl als Grootnederlander in de jaren twintig', *BMGN*, xc (1975), 458–73. L. Simons, 'Pieter Geyl en het Vlaams-nationalisme', *Handelingen Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor taal en letterkunde en geschiedenis*, xxx (1976), 189–210, later published under a new title in L. Simons, *Antwerpen–Den Haag: Retour* (Tiel, 1999), pp. 41–73. The discussion continued with L. Wils, 'Gerretson, Geyl en Vos: Spanningen tussen de Groot-nederlandse beweging en de Vlaams-nationalistische', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xli (1982), 95–120, and L. Wils, 'De Groot-nederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, lxi (1983), 322–66, and P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen, 'Leuvens recidivisme: Het gebruik door Prof. Dr. L. Wils van de Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xlii (1983), 44–58, and P. van Hees, review of L. Wils, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland: Mythe en geschiedenis* (1994), *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, civ (1995), 47–55. See also Fons Meijer's chapter in this volume.

<sup>31</sup> See *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, iii, p. 11. The text in Dutch: '[...] de toekomst van de Nederlandse beschaving in Vlaanderen (daarom gaat het toch tenslotte)'.  
<sup>32</sup> 'Een groet aan het Belgische volk' [Greeting to the Belgian people], *Vrij Nederland*, 17 May 1945, and three articles under the title 'Groot-Nederlandsche vooruitzichten'

A political Greater Netherlands, which had never been a realistic prospect before the war, was of course completely unthinkable after 1945. Geyl supported the development of Flemish–Dutch relations via the Technical Commission, an executive committee of the Belgian–Dutch Cultural Treaty of 1947 with the task of promoting cultural exchanges, education, preservation of the Dutch language, exchange of students etc. At the same time, he advocated close collaboration between the socialist, Catholic and liberal parties in Flanders, both in letters and during visits to the country. Throughout his lifetime the results of all these efforts were negligible. One explanation for this might be that Geyl underestimated the antithesis between the clerical and the anti-clerical political camps in Belgium; since the end of the nineteenth century, liberals and socialists had feared the domination of a Catholic Flanders. Another explanation can perhaps be found in his personal contacts in Flanders and in the Netherlands in the interwar-period.<sup>33</sup> Geyl, in his correspondence, lacked long and intensive contacts with leading Catholic, liberal and social-democratic politicians in Belgium.<sup>34</sup> Even in the 1930s, when his friend Herman Vos (1889–1952) became a member of the *Belgische Werklieden Partij* ('Belgian Labourers' Party', BWP), this did not change much, as Vos was not very influential within his party. After Vos's death, Hendrik Borginon (1890–1985) was Geyl's foremost contact in the Flemish nationalist party. Borginon, however, did not have the political clout of Hendrik J. Elias and Staf de Clercq, and Geyl's correspondence with the latter two was limited. With the other party leader of the radical right, Joris van Severen, he entertained no regular contact.

After the war Geyl's relations with important Catholic, liberal and socialist Flemings remained infrequent. A new contact was Henry Fayat (1908–97), a professor at the University of Brussels, member of parliament and several times minister. Fayat was genuinely interested in contacts with the Netherlands, but he did not belong to the leadership of the Belgian Socialist Party. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same also applied to Geyl's contacts with political leaders in the Netherlands. He had some contact with social-democratic politicians after his return to the Netherlands in 1936, but these were not relevant to his political Greater Netherlands ideas.

In conclusion, it is clear that Geyl's views regarding the separation in the Burgundian–Habsburgian states have enriched the interpretation of

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[Greater Netherlandic prospects], *Vrij Nederland*, 19 and 23 June and 28 July 1945.

<sup>33</sup> See also J. Tollebeek, 'Begreep Geyl de Vlamingen?', in *Jaarboek Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden*, 2009–10, pp. 67–81.

<sup>34</sup> A detailed list of Geyl's Flemish and Greater Netherlandic correspondents can be found in *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, iii, pp. 526–40.

the Dutch Revolt and brought about a more possibilistic approach to the past. In politics, the realization of a Greater Netherlands state was always utopian, but as early as the 1930s Geyl saw the possibility of a federalization of Belgium, which eventually became a reality in 1973. He did not live to see this because he passed away on New Year's Eve 1966, a tragedy for a man who said that the Flemish question had dominated his life.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> P. Geyl, 'Terugblik', in P. Geyl, *Studies en Strijdschriften: Bundel aangeboden aan de schrijver bij zijn aftreden als hoogleraar aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht* (Groningen, 1958), p. 495.

### 3. Pieter Geyl and Émile Cammaerts: the Dutch and Belgian chairs at the University of London between academia and propaganda, 1914–35

*Ulrich Tiedau*<sup>1</sup>

The First World War proved to be an important catalyst for the institutionalization of *Neerlandistiek* (Dutch studies) as an academic subject at universities outside the Low Countries. This goes for Germany, where the first lectureships and chairs for Netherlandic studies were created to accommodate intellectual Flemish activists who had collaborated with the Germans during the occupation of 1914–18 and fled Belgium at the end of the war, but also for the United Kingdom, where in 1919, with moral and financial support from the Dutch government and Dutch and South African companies, Pieter Geyl was appointed as first professor of Dutch studies at the University of London, the first such chair in the anglophone world.

While Geyl was widely recognized as an original and prolific scholar, his political views were actually quite close to those of some of his Flemish counterparts in Germany, and his *Grootnederlands*, or ‘Greater-Netherlands’, ideology and personal relationships with Flemish activists made him suspicious enough to the Belgian government for them to support the foundation of a ‘counter-chair’ with a view to balancing out Geyl’s influence on British academia, politics and the public. After a decade of toing and froing and intense Dutch–Belgian altercations in the British press (as well as within the university’s bodies), in 1931 Émile Cammaerts, man of letters and long-time Belgian resident of London, whose wartime patriotic poems had been set to music by Elgar, could be appointed as first chair for Belgian studies at the University of London, marking the pinnacle of what this author likes to call a propagandistic and academic ‘proxy war’

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to express his gratitude to Andrea Meyer-Ludowisy and colleagues from Senate House Library, London, and to Bart Jaski and colleagues from Utrecht University Library for their invaluable help with accessing Cammaerts’ and Geyl’s papers in their respective Special Collections, and to Reinier Salverda for his comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

U. Tiedau, ‘Pieter Geyl and Émile Cammaerts: the Dutch and Belgian chairs at the University of London between academia and propaganda, 1914–1935’ in *Pieter Geyl and Britain: Encounters, Controversies, Impact*, ed. U. Tiedau and S. van Rossem (London, 2022), pp. 27–102. License: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

between Dutch and Belgian interest groups in the British capital that ended only with Geyl's move to Utrecht four years later (1935).

This extended essay analyses the driving forces behind the establishment of the two university chairs against the wider political background of Dutch–Belgian rivalry in the interwar period and the expansion of the University of London to include several ‘foreign chairs’ in that time. It discusses Geyl's and Cammaerts' contributions to scholarship, their ideological differences, and the legacy of their conflict for Low Countries studies in the UK today, before concluding with some general remarks on the relationship between academia and politics in the interwar period and more generally.

What will be examined in this chapter is thus *not just* a conflict between two scholars, which in itself would probably be less noteworthy, as scholars tend to have conflicts with each other all the time, but a wider dispute with three dimensions, a political, a scholarly and a public one, that took place in the institutions of the University of London and in the British political and literary press. On a political level, both Geyl and Cammaerts were semi-official spokespersons for, and had the backing of, the governments of their respective countries of origin, at a time when, in the aftermath of the First World War, the map of Europe was being redrawn and new security arrangements decided at the Paris Peace Conference (1919–20). On a scholarly level, the two protagonists represented two opposing conceptualizations of Low Countries history: the ‘Greater Netherlands’ idea in the case of Geyl, highlighting the cultural unity of the Dutch language area across the border (and possibly even seeking to unite this area politically); and the Pirennean or ‘Belgicist’ interpretation, which stressed socio-economic factors in the development of the Belgian nation, irrespective of language, in the case of Cammaerts. On a public level, the issue at stake was British government and public opinion towards the Low Countries (if this early-modern umbrella term can be used in a twentieth-century context), which was of no little consequence to both countries, as the British empire was still a major world power and London the centre of the global political system, not yet rivalled by the cities of the emerging superpower across the Atlantic. For Britain, the question of who controlled the estuaries across the English Channel, in particular the port of Antwerp, was also of vital strategic interest.

While the issues at contention are no longer of direct relevance today and this story with some justification might be considered a piece of microhistory (although in the sense of approaching big questions through close investigation of well-defined smaller units), they were formative for the development of the academic disciplines of Low Countries history and Netherlandic studies in the UK, and by extension in the anglophone world at large. At the same time, this story is also a case study of the problematic relationship between

scholarship and political activism, of the interrelationship between vested interests and academia and, in times of government-imposed ‘impact’ agendas, the encouragement of academics by research councils to directly and indirectly inform public policy and opinion, almost a moral tale about how this can all play out. It certainly also is a story that helps to explain persistent British attitudes towards Belgium and the Netherlands, two neighbouring countries that often consider themselves to be direct neighbours of the UK, whereas from a British perspective they are often seen as lying in a strange corner off the route to Britain’s direct neighbour France and do not really figure prominently on the UK public’s collective mental map.

Without intending to present a full double-biography of the two protagonists in the Plutarchian tradition, but in line with the well-established practice of contrasting Geyl’s intellectual development with that of other contemporary scholars,<sup>2</sup> this chapter is an attempt at re-examining Geyl’s period in London (1914–35), which in contrast to his later work in Utrecht (1935–66) has attracted much less historiographic attention, at least in its relationship to his host institution and country. At the same time, it aims to re-introduce Geyl’s now largely forgotten opponent Émile Cammaerts, who in the era of the two world wars was a well-known cultural figure and commentator on Belgian affairs in the UK, associated with Britain’s national composer Edward Elgar, into the institutional and disciplinary history of Low Countries studies in Britain, and to reconstruct and analyse their conflict, which became the second academic *cause célèbre* of the interwar period involving so-called ‘foreign Chairs’ at the University of London, after Arnold Toynbee’s involuntary departure from the Koraes chair for modern Greek at King’s College in 1924 that Richard Clogg has famously dissected in his *Politics and the Academy* (1986).<sup>3</sup> Both had similar implications, as we will see,

<sup>2</sup> See eg E. H. Kossmann, ‘Huizinga and Geyl: a portrait of two Dutch historians’, *The Low Countries*, i (1993–4), 130–36; J. Tollebeek, ‘Een ongemakkelijk heerschap: Geyl contra Ter Braak’, *Ons Erfdeel*, xxxii (1989), 21–9, reprinted in J. Tollebeek, *De ijkmeesters: Opstellen over de geschiedschrijving in Nederland en België* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 203–14; H. W. von der Dunk, *Twee historici in hun tijd: Pieter Geyl and Gerhard Ritter* (Amsterdam, 1999); J. Tollebeek, ‘The use of history in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1946–1965: Presentism and historicism in the work of Jan Romein, Pieter Geyl and Leopold Flam’, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxxix (March 2015), 54–73.

<sup>3</sup> R. Clogg, *Politics and the Academy: Arnold Toynbee and the Koraes Chair* (London/New York, 1986), first published in *Middle Eastern Studies* xxi, 4 (Oct. 1985), pp. v–ix, 1–115, hints at the conflict between Geyl and Cammaerts: ‘At the height of the war a Chair of Dutch Studies had been created but this had later occasioned much trouble and when the Belgians had later offered “a rival Belgian Chair” it had been rejected, with very unfortunate results’ (p. 110). Also see R. Clogg, *Greek and Me: A Memoir of Academic Life* (London/New York, 2018).



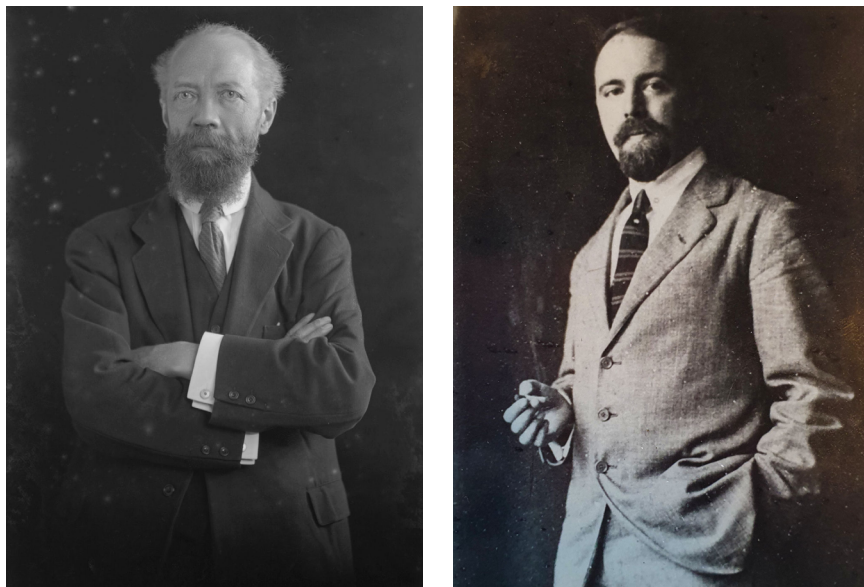


Fig. 3.1: Émile Cammaerts (*left*) by Lafayette (1928), © National Portrait Gallery, London, and Pieter Geyl (*right*) in London (1922), Utrecht University Library, Special Collections.

for questions of academic liberty, the role external funds play in academia and the relationship between scholarship and political activism.

As with regard to sources, there is no shortage of autobiographical writings by Geyl at various stages of his life, among them his pre-1940 memoirs, written in 1942 while in German captivity during the Second World War and posthumously edited and published in 2009.<sup>4</sup> His voluminous papers, including his correspondence, are kept in the Special Collections of Utrecht University Library,<sup>5</sup> and reports he sent to The Hague in the National Archives of the Netherlands located in that city.<sup>6</sup> The fragmented diaries of the less well-

<sup>4</sup> P. Geyl, 'Looking back', in P. Geyl, *Encounters in history* (Cleveland/New York, 1961), pp. 399–424; P. Geyl, 'Levensverhaal (tot 1945)', in P. Geyl, *Pennestrijd over staat en historie: Opstellen over de vaderlandse geschiedenis aangevuld met Geyl's Levensverhaal* (Groningen, 1971), pp. 312–75; P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar, L. Dorsman and P. van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht, Bijzondere Collecties, Collectie Geyl. See also his edited letter collections: *Geyl en Vlaanderen: Brieven en notities*, P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (3 vols, Antwerp/Utrecht, 1973–5) and *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (5 vols, Baarn, 1979–81); and P. van Hees, *Bibliografie van P. Geyl* (Groningen, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Nationaal Archief Den Haag, Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie, inv. no. 2.19.026, nos. 17–26: 'Ingekomen brieven van en minuten van uitgaande brieven aan de

known Cammaerts have not been published but a, very personal, biography by his daughter Jeanne Lindley exists.<sup>7</sup> His papers belong to the underused Belgian collections of Senate House Library, one of the last remnants of the federal University of London,<sup>8</sup> whose constituting colleges already in Geyl's and Cammaerts' time were quite autonomous and have undergone centrifugal tendencies since, turning them into *de facto* separate institutions today.

### *Dramatis personae*

The two dramatis personae are depicted in figure 3.1, a youthful Pieter Geyl (1887–1966) on the right, and the slightly older Émile Cammaerts (1878–1953) on the left. At the outbreak of the war, both of them were already living in London and to varying degrees established in British society.

Born in 1887 in Dordrecht, the Netherlands, Geyl had finished his historical studies in Leiden with a thesis on the relations between the Dutch and Venetian republics,<sup>9</sup> after which for a brief period he worked as a secondary school teacher in the town of Schiedam in South Holland. In 1913, never having been to Britain before, he was offered the post of London correspondent for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, one of the leading Dutch newspapers, with 'all the standing and allure in Holland of the London *Times*'.<sup>10</sup> The 'entrance into the Anglo-Saxon world', in the golden age of Fleet Street, was a liberation for Geyl, as he remembered four decades later, as it allowed him to pursue his political aspirations.<sup>11</sup> In the British capital Geyl quickly gained access to the highest British circles through his membership of the National Liberal Club. One of his most influential articles during the war was an interview with Winston Churchill in 1915, in which the then First Lord of the Admiralty declared that after the war England would not support Belgian claims on Dutch territory, an issue that, as we will see, would become of vital importance in the propaganda battles reported here.<sup>12</sup>

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vertegenwoordiger in Engeland, prof. dr. P. Geyl, hoogleraar Nederlandse studies aan het University College'.

<sup>7</sup> J. Lindley, *Seeking and Finding: the Life of Émile Cammaerts* (London, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Papers Professor É. Cammaerts, Senate House Library Archives, GB96 MS 800.

<sup>9</sup> P. Geyl, *Christofforo Suriano: Resident van de Serenissime Republiek van Venetië in Den Haag, 1616–1623* (The Hague, 1913).

<sup>10</sup> O. Renier, *Before the Bonfire* (Shipston-on-Stour, 1984), p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Geyl, 'Looking back', p. 402.

<sup>12</sup> NRC, 17 July 1915; R. S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill: 1914–1916. Companion*, ii, p. 1046f.; Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 61; P. van Hees, 'Journalist – historicus – hoogleraar: G. W. Kernkamp, P. C. A. Geyl en C. D. J. Brand: Een traditie in de Utrechtse school?', *Geschiedenis in Utrecht: Bestaat er een Utrechtse school in de geschiedbeoefening?* (*Utrechtse Historische Cahiers*), xv (1994), 49–60, at p. 52; P. B. M. Blaas, 'Nederlandse

Independent-minded, the Anglophile journalist from a neutral country regularly got into conflict with his editorial office in Rotterdam that tended to lean towards the German side in the conflict, but also criticized the excesses of wartime chauvinism that he witnessed in London, especially in Lord Northcliffe's press, leading to the British Foreign Office summoning him in 1916 and, unsuccessfully, threatening consequences.<sup>13</sup>

Indicative of Geyl's penchant for nationalist and irredentist movements was his attention to the Irish question. He reported passionately, if not uncritically, from the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, attended Sir Roger Casement's trial in London and interviewed Sinn Féin leader Éamon de Valera for his newspaper. The Irish question informed Geyl's understanding of the Flemish question, and vice versa, as he wrote in his memoirs,<sup>14</sup> but it was the Flemish struggle for emancipation in Belgium that was closest to his heart and became the 'theme of his lifetime'.<sup>15</sup> A distant relative of his, the priest Jan Derk Domela Nieuwenhuis Nyegaard (1870–1955), had introduced Geyl to the Flemish movement at a student conference in Ghent in 1911,<sup>16</sup> as leader of the radical Young Flemish movement (Jong Vlaanderen) during the First World War, Domela had been behind the declaration of independence in 1917, for which he had *in absentia* been sentenced to death in Belgium, a ruling Domela managed to evade by fleeing to the Netherlands. In many ways, the 1911 conference was a formative experience for Geyl, from which also his friendships with the Flemish activists Antoon Jacob, Leo Picard, Hendrik Borginon and Herman Vos originated, as well as with his fellow *Grootnederlander* Frederik Carel Gerretson, who after the First World War would become secretary of the Bataafsche petroleum company in London, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell. While during the war Geyl had abstained from supporting the Flemish activists (in a 1915 article he even apologized for 'a few Dutchmen's [Gerretson's] meddling' in this business and dismissed the

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historici en de eerste wereldoorlog', in M. Kraaijestein/P. Schulten (eds.), *Wankel evenwicht: Neutraal Nederland en de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Soesterberg, 2007), pp. 14–31, at 22f.

<sup>13</sup> 'Undesirable messages from Dr Geyl to Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant. Remonstrance with Dr Geyl. His memo denying allegations', National Archives, Kew, FO 395/24/260557; Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 317; Geyl, 'Levensverhaal (tot 1945)', p. 314; Blaas, 'Nederlandse historici en de eerste wereldoorlog', pp. 21f.

<sup>14</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, pp. 65–7; Blaas, 'Nederlandse historici en de eerste wereldoorlog', p. 23f.; Van Hees, 'Journalist – historicus – hoogleraar', p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> J. Floorquin, *Ten huize van ... [Prof. Dr. P. Geyl, 13 Sept. 1961]*, ii (Eindhoven, 1961), pp. 201–27, at p. 207: 'heeft mijn leven beheerst'.

<sup>16</sup> The student conference was the *VIIIe wetenschappelijk Vlaamsch Studentencongres, ter Vervlaamsching der Gentsche Hoogeschool*. On Domela see L. Buning/P. van Hees, 'Domela Nieuwenhuis, Jan Derk (1870–1955)', *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland* <<http://resources.huysens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn1/domela>> [accessed: 2 Nov. 2019].

activists as ‘a few hotheads’ in his 1919 inaugural lecture at University College London),<sup>17</sup> in the interwar period the Belgian government’s real or perceived intransigence towards legitimate Flemish claims (the vast majority of the Flemish movement had kept their loyalty towards the Belgian state and army) made him side with radical Flemish demands, to the extent that in 1929 and again in 1931 he was declared *persona non grata* and denied entry to Belgium.<sup>18</sup>

Cammaerts, nine years Geyl’s senior, had come to live in London a few years earlier, in 1908. According to the vignette in Ray Jenkins’ biography of Émile’s son Francis (who during the Second World War would become a British Special Operations operative, supporting the maquis in France, a fascinating story in its own right),<sup>19</sup> Cammaerts was born to affluent middle-class parents in 1878 and grew up in the ‘intellectual melting-pot’ of *belle époque* Brussels. When his parents separated he remained with his mother, ‘a demanding early feminist’ who had renounced her Catholic faith and replaced it with ‘wide classical reading, a love of nature, curiosity, music and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’, values she passed on to her son.<sup>20</sup> At the age of sixteen Émile refused to follow his father and brothers into studying law (‘his being now revolted against the whole concept of law as such’)<sup>21</sup> and settled on geography as a subject, a fateful decision because it brought the young Cammaerts under the influence of Jacques Elysée Reclus (1830–1905), a prominent revolutionary, anarchist and life-reformer (vegetarian and anti-marriage) who since 1892 had occupied the chair of comparative geography at the University of Brussels.<sup>22</sup> The appointment of this veteran fighter of the 1871 Paris Commune and friend of Bakunin’s with connections to Auguste Vaillant, who bombed the French National Assembly in 1892, had led to a split in the university, with the Université Nouvelle, with its radical democratic and anti-clerical leaning, breaking

<sup>17</sup> P. Geyl, ‘The Flemish Movement’, *The Daily News*, 11 Nov. 1915, cited in *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, p. 13; *Inaugural Lecture delivered at University College London, on the 16th of October, 1919*, by P. Geyl, Lit. D., Professor of Dutch Studies in the University of London (London, 1919), p. 8; P. van Hees, ‘Journalist – historicus – hoogleraar’, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Florquin, *Ten huize van Prof. Dr. P. Geyl*, p. 210. To Shepard B. Clough from Columbia University, author of *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium* (New York, 1930), who had a similar experience (p. vi); Geyl commiserated on 10 Sept. 1926, writing that ‘The study of nationalism has its exciting moments’; Dartmouth College Archives, Hanover, New Hampshire, Shepard B. Clough papers, ML-6.

<sup>19</sup> R. Jenkins, *A Pacifist at War: the Life of Francis Cammaerts* (London, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins, *A Pacifist at War*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> C. Brun and F. Ferretti, *Elisée Reclus, une chronologie familiale: sa vie, ses voyages, ses écrits, ses ascendants, ses collatéraux, les descendants, leurs écrits, sa postérité, 1796–2015*, (2nd ed., April 2015), <<http://raforum.info/reclus/spip.php?article474>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019] includes a 1905 obituary of Reclus by Cammaerts’ hand on pp. 323–27.

away in 1894<sup>23</sup> and Cammaerts following his teacher and mentor to the new institution. The young and impressionable Cammaerts, in the assessment of Cammaerts' friend Charles van den Borren, later president of the Belgian Academy, still underage at this point, seems to have been rather on the fringes of Reclus's anarchist circle: 'Émile was not an anarchist with his reason; but with his emotions; he was in love with anarchy.'<sup>24</sup> Cammaerts' son recalls: 'Reclus led to my father joining the anarchists for a number of very mettlesome years. They were men who spurned the extreme methods of Russian terror and preached the gospel of social revolution. In his relative innocence, my father wanted to write to kings and presidents and say "we don't need you" – not quite the route to furious change.'<sup>25</sup>

Like Geyl, Cammaerts started earning a living as a teacher in his country of origin, at the Commercial Institute in the mining town of Mons in Hainaut, but retained his literary aspirations. He translated G. K. Chesterton and John Ruskin into French,<sup>26</sup> as well as, together with Charles van den Borren, poems by the Flemish priest-poet Guido Gezelle; he also authored a number of volumes of art criticism and several plays<sup>27</sup> and was one of the driving forces behind the foundation of the Belgian branch of the international PEN-Club.<sup>28</sup> After his first marriage ended in divorce, he met his future wife, the Shakespearean actress Helen Braun, better known by her stage name Tita Brand, on a visit to Stratford-on-Avon. 'Violently in love' with her,<sup>29</sup> he moved to England at the age of thirty in 1908 and 'after wandering through various philosophies from a rank atheism to a vague mysticism, after spending many years tasting various brands of socialism, after trying to reconcile an all-absorbing love of nature and art with a far less absorbing love of men',<sup>30</sup> under the influence of Tita, a Christian Socialist,

<sup>23</sup> F. Noël, *1894: L'Université libre de Bruxelles en crise*, Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1988 <[http://digistore.bib.ulb.ac.be/2010/DL2377563\\_000\\_f.pdf](http://digistore.bib.ulb.ac.be/2010/DL2377563_000_f.pdf)> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; C. Brun, *Elisée Reclus* <<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01146464>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>24</sup> Quoted after Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 32, and Jenkins, *A Pacifist at War*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted after Jenkins, *A Pacifist at War*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *La Clairvoyance du père Brown*, trans. Émile Cammaerts (Paris, 1919); J. Ruskin, *Conférences sur l'architecture et la peinture* (Paris, 1910); J. Ruskin, *Val d'Arno* (Paris, 1911); J. Ruskin, *Les peintres modernes: le paysage* (Paris, 1914).

<sup>27</sup> For details see [É. Cammaerts], *Bibliography*, ed. M. Macdonald; Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, pp. 205–7.

<sup>28</sup> C. Verbruggen, 'Hoe literair internationalisme organiseren? De "verflochten" geschiedenis van de Belgische PEN-club (1922–1931)', *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, vxi (2011), 15–81, at p. 156f.

<sup>29</sup> H. Davignon, *Souvenirs d'un écrivain belge: 1879–1945* (Paris, 1954), p. 245, quoted after Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 101f.

<sup>30</sup> É. Cammaerts, *The Laughing Prophet: the Seven Virtues and G. K. Chesterton* (London,

gradually abandoned his previous convictions for increasingly pious Anglo-Catholicism, becoming 'one of the most active and imaginative laymen in the Church of England'.<sup>31</sup> Working as a writer, dramatist, teacher, translator and journalist, he lived largely in the shadow of the reputation of his wife's family until the moment of his breakthrough in Britain came with the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>32</sup>

### ***'Brave little Belgium': The impact of the First World War***

While the Netherlands, through a combination of careful political manoeuvring and sheer good fortune, was able to avoid being dragged into the war, Belgium (like Luxembourg) became one of its first victims and played a central role in the Great War, not only physically but also in the theatre of cultural propaganda. The violation of Belgium's neutrality (which the German Imperial chancellor infamously called a 'scrap of paper') and, even more so, the atrocities committed in the opening phase of the war, among them the wanton destruction of the university city of Louvain (Leuven) with its famous library, allowed the war to develop into a 'war of minds', an alleged combat between German culture and Western civilization. The 'libricide' of Leuven, in the words of Wolfgang Schivelbusch, became the 'Sarajevo of the European intelligentsia'.<sup>33</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, the 1911 Nobel Prize Laureate in literature from Ghent, declared in Milan that by resisting the German aggression Belgium had saved 'la civilisation latine',<sup>34</sup> and in the English-speaking world 'brave little Belgium' became one of the most prominent symbols in the war's propaganda battles.

Of immense importance, both in military and in propaganda terms, was the figure of King Albert of Belgium, in Cammaerts' words 'the great King of a little country'.<sup>35</sup> Not only did he refuse to give in to the German ultimatum to grant free passage, but by mounting a principled, if ultimately futile, resistance against overwhelming enemy forces, he delayed the German advances just long enough for the Schlieffen plan to be derailed. In this respect, the Belgian military engagement had been decisive and altered the course of the war. Moreover, unlike the government that sought shelter in

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1937), quoted after C. Thicknesse, 'Émile Cammaerts', in Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, pp. xi–xiv, at p. xi.

<sup>31</sup> Canon Hood in *The Times* (London), 6 Nov. 1953; Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. xii.

<sup>32</sup> Verbruggen, 'Hoe literair internationalisme organiseren?', p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> W. Schivelbusch, *Die Bibliothek von Löwen: eine Episode aus der Zeit der Weltkriege* (Munich, 1988); J. van Impe, *The University Library of Leuven: Historical Walking Guide* (Leuven, 2012), p. 23 and *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> *Romain Rolland – Stefan Zweig, Briefwechsel*, i: 1910–1923 (Berlin, 1987), pp. 158f.

<sup>35</sup> É. Cammaerts, 'To the great king of a little country', *Observer*, 15 Nov. 1914, p. 7.

France, establishing itself in Le Havre in Normandy, the king did not leave Belgian territory but stayed in the last unconquered corner of the country, in the seaside resort of La Panne (De Panne), right next to where the French border meets the English Channel. German access to the area west of the river IJzer (Yser) had been blocked by the opening of dykes and sluices to flood the area, and this remained the case throughout the war. The fact that the monarch never left the country also had a morale-boosting effect of utmost importance for the population under occupation and would later move Cammaerts to write the king's biography (1935)<sup>36</sup> as well as, one war down the line, a vigorous defence of Albert's son and successor Leopold (1941), whom a similar behaviour (staying in the country during the Second World War) would serve less well.<sup>37</sup>

But first, under the impression of the devastating news from his country of origin, he set to write patriotic war poems that were published by the *Observer*, one of which, *Chantons, Belges, chantons* (October 1914),<sup>38</sup> was set to music by Edward Elgar, the British Empire's composer laureate. It would become 'one of the most popular songs of the war'<sup>39</sup> and the basis of Cammaerts' subsequent fame. Not without patriotic pathos that was so characteristic of war poetry across Europe at the time, but also deeply informed by the suffering of his home country, it started by reciting the sites of German atrocities:

Chantons, Belges, chantons / Même si les blessures saignent, même si la voix se brise, / Plus haut que la tourmente, plus fort que les canons, / Chantons l'orgueil de nos défaites, / Par ce beau soleil d'automne, / Et la joie de rester honnête / Quand la lâcheté nous serais si bonne / Au son du tambour, au son du clairon, / Sur les ruines d'Aerschot, de Dinant, de Termonde, / Dansons, Belges, dansons, / En chantant notre gloire, / Même si les yeux brûlent, / Si la tête s'égaré, / Formons la ronde! (...)

or in Tita's translation:

Sing, Belgians, sing / Although our wound may bleed / Although our voices break / Louder than the storm, louder than the guns, / Sing of the pride of our defeats / 'Neath this bright Autumn sun, / And sing of the joy of honour / When cowardice might be so sweet. / To the sound of the bugle, the sound of the drum, / On the ruins of Aerschot, of Dinant, and Termonde, / Dance,

<sup>36</sup> É. Cammaerts, *Albert of Belgium, Defender of Right* (London/New York, 1935).

<sup>37</sup> É. Cammaerts, *The Prisoner at Laeken: King Léopold, Legend and Fact*. With a preface by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes (London, 1941).

<sup>38</sup> É. Cammaerts, 'Chantons, Belges, Chantons', *Observer*, 11 Oct. 1914, p. 7; G. Watkins, *Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley/London, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> 'Prof. E. Cammaerts', *Manchester Guardian*, 3 Nov. 1959.

Belgians, dance, / And our glory sing, / Although our eyes may burn, / Although  
our brain may turn, / Join in the ring! (...)

Cammaerts' collaboration with Elgar had come about through an initiative to celebrate the monarch's heroism, and that of his fellow countrymen, conceived by the popular Manx novelist Hall Caine (1853–1931), who had previously edited jubilee books to raise money for Queen Alexandra's charities in 1905 and 1908, and who managed to convince the conservative broadsheet *Daily Telegraph* to come on board. *King Albert's Book* would be published just in time for Christmas 1914 and would be available by subscription, with all proceeds going to the *Daily Telegraph's* Belgian Support Fund. It was Britain's homage to 'brave little Belgium', an anthology of tributes by almost 250 high-profile contributors from around the world.<sup>40</sup> It enjoyed huge popular success and shaped British public opinion about Belgium to no little extent; in the recent celebrations of the First World War's centenary it was commemorated both by the *Daily Telegraph* and in a three-part series broadcast on BBC Radio 4 (2014–15).<sup>41</sup> Contributors included representatives of British and international public life, among them the writers Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, Edith Wharton, G. K. Chesterton and Maurice Maeterlinck; the composers Claude Debussy, Camille Saint-Saëns and Edward Elgar; artists and scholars such as Claude Monet, Sarah Bernhardt and Henri Bergson; as well as political and religious figures as diverse as Herbert Asquith, Winston Churchill, Emmeline Pankhurst, the Aga Khan and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The anthology, which also appeared in French and Dutch editions, with Italian and Russian ones planned, would earn Caine the title of Officer in the Order of Leopold, the highest decoration possible in Belgium for a foreigner; later on in the war he would also be knighted for his services to allied propaganda in the (then still neutral) United States.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *King Albert's Book, a Tribute to the Belgian King and People from representative men and women throughout the World*, ed. H. Caine (London, Christmas 1914): 'Sold in aid of the Daily Telegraph Belgian Fund.'

<sup>41</sup> S. Rainey, 'Britain's homage to "plucky Belgium"', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Dec. 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-one/11295047/Britains-homage-to-plucky-Belgium.html>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; I. Hewett, 'Long live Belgium! When the *Telegraph* enlisted Monet, Hardy and Pankhurst', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Dec. 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/11283133/Long-live-Belgium-When-The-Telegraph-enlisted-Monet-Hardy-and-Pankhurst.html>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; P. Dodgson, *King Albert's Book*, 3 episodes, BBC Radio 4, 19 Dec. 2014–2 Jan. 2015 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04vwkvs>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>42</sup> M. Derez, "'The land of Chimes': De overzeese promotie van de Belgische beiaard", in *De beiaard: Een politieke geschiedenis*, ed. M. Beyen, L. Rombouts and S. Vos (Leuven, 2009), 187–208, at p. 189; V. Allen, *Hall Caine: Portrait of a Victorian Romancer* (Sheffield, 1997), pp. 356–8.





Fig. 3.2: Émile Cammaerts' poem 'Carillon' ('Chantons, Belges, chantons!') set to music by Edward Elgar, 1914, © The British Library Board, Digital Store h.3930.l.-7; *Anglo-Belgian Notes* from July 1928 with prose by Émile Cammaerts, © The British Library Board.

When approached by Caine, Elgar remembered having read Cammaerts' poem in the *Observer* and through Marie Brema, Tita's mother, who in 1900 had been a soloist in the first performance of his *Dream of Gerontius*, managed to secure the rights to use it. Translated into English by Tita, Elgar renamed it 'Carillon'<sup>43</sup> after the mechanical bell chimes so characteristic of Low Countries towns, where they had functioned as 'the first musical mass medium in history.'<sup>44</sup> As such the poem fitted in well with Thomas Hardy's contribution to the volume, the sonnet 'On the Belgian expatriation', in which Hardy used the same allegoric symbol for the country's suffering and resilience:

I dreamt that people from the Land of Chimes / Arrived one autumn morning  
with their bells, / To hoist them on the towers and citadels / Of my own  
country / [...] / I awoke; and lo, before me stood / The visioned ones, but pale  
and full of fear; / From Bruges they came, and Antwerp, and Ostend, / No

<sup>43</sup> *Carillon (pour grand orchestre) pour accompagner 'Chantons, Belges, chantons!'*. Poème d'Émile Cammaerts. Musique par Edward Elgar, O. M., Associé de l'Académie Royale de Belgique; *King Albert's Book*, pp. 84–92.

<sup>44</sup> L. Rombouts: *Singing Bronze: a History of Carillon Music* (Leuven, 2014), p. 11.

carillons in their train. Vicissitude / Had left these tinkling to the invader's ear /  
And ravaged street, and smouldering gable-end.<sup>45</sup>

A highly atypical arrangement in that it was not a sung version of the poem but a spoken recitation with orchestral accompaniment,<sup>46</sup> Elgar's 'Carillon' suited the simultaneously solemn and elated spirit of the time. Consequently it 'caused a real hype',<sup>47</sup> and became the 'concert-hall hit of the year',<sup>48</sup> featuring prominently in the Proms and elsewhere. 'Music of this kind is rare', reports the *Manchester Guardian* of the premiere: 'few composers of real ability have been willing to allow the poet an equal share of credit. Strauss has done it and there are three not well-known but extremely fine examples of Schumann. "Carillon" stands somewhat apart from these, in so far as it depends in great part upon the extraordinary wealth of its orchestral colour. It is not intended for a family circle, but for a large assembly and a great occasion. Its effect is bound to be more intense at the present moment, but its merit will keep it alive long after the event which inspired it has ceased to be the focus of all interest.'<sup>49</sup> The performance itself also met with great praise: 'The poem was recited by Mme. Tita Brand Cammaerts with spirit, and the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Edward Elgar, acquitted itself most creditably in the novel task of providing the background for a reciter.'<sup>50</sup>

Cammaerts, 'the Belgian equivalent of Rupert Brooke',<sup>51</sup> went on to compose many more war poems, two of which, 'Une voix dans le désert' (1916) and 'Le Drapeau Belge' (1917), Elgar adapted to music in similar ways, the latter on the occasion of King Albert's birthday in 1917. Cammaerts' collected war poetry, along with some of his earlier lyrics, were published under the title *Chants Patriotiques et autres poèmes* in 1915; successive volumes followed in 1916 and 1918.<sup>52</sup> They are what he is 'remembered best [for], though perhaps they are dated now', as the *Manchester Guardian* wrote in its

<sup>45</sup> T. Hardy, 'On the Belgian expatriation', in *King Albert's Book*, p. 20; M. Derez, 'The land of chimes', p. 197f.; Rombouts, *Singing Bronze*, p. 196.

<sup>46</sup> S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), p. 37 f.

<sup>47</sup> M. Derez, 'The land of chimes', 188.

<sup>48</sup> P. Arblaster, *A History of the Low Countries* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 212.

<sup>49</sup> F. B., 'Elgar's "Carillon"', *Manchester Guardian*, 8 Dec. 1914, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> F. B., 'Elgar's "Carillon"', p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> M. Morpurgo et al., 'Untold stories of the war', *Guardian*, 26 July 2014. The children's book author who is perhaps best known for writing *War Horse* is Cammaerts' grandson.

<sup>52</sup> É. Cammaerts, *Belgian Poems: Chants patriotiques et autres poèmes ...* trans. T. Brand-Cammaerts (London, 1915); É. Cammaerts, *New Belgian Poems: Les Trois rois et autres poèmes ...* trans. by T. Brand-Cammaerts (London/New York, 1916); É. Cammaerts, *Messines, and other poems ...* trans. by T. Brand-Cammaerts (London/New York, 1918).

obituary of Cammaerts in 1959, ‘instinct with deep religious feeling, which were inspired by Belgium’s sufferings in the First World War’ (fig. 3.2).<sup>53</sup>

### *Anglo-Belgian Union*

‘Chantons, Belges, chantons’, the original title of which was ‘Après Anvers’, had been written after the fall of Antwerp, the last stronghold of the Belgian army, in October 1914, which led to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Belgian refugees to the UK, France and the Netherlands. Many of them were soon living in makeshift refugee camps in public buildings such as Alexandra Palace and the Earl’s Court exhibition centre.<sup>54</sup>

Along with the refugee stream came some government officials, among them Henri Davignon (1879–1964),<sup>55</sup> a novelist and playwright from a prominent family of Belgian politicians and diplomats; his father, Julien, had been the Belgian foreign minister at the outbreak of the war. Davignon and Cammaerts, as Cammaerts’ daughter Jeanne Lindley reports, ‘so different in background and upbringing, were both writers and needed little but their common impotent agony at their country’s suffering to draw them close as friends’.<sup>56</sup> It was Davignon’s responsibility to regularly report on developments in Britain and the British press to the Belgian government-in-exile in Normandy. His *Bureau de Propagande et de Documentation*, located at 10 Finsbury Square, became the semi-official London branch of the Le Havre-based *Office de la Propagande belge*,<sup>57</sup> although it needs to be kept in mind that at this point the term ‘propaganda’ had not yet acquired the negative connotation it carries today. Aided by Britain’s War Propaganda Bureau in Wellington House, the Belgian bureau produced,

<sup>53</sup> ‘Prof. E. Cammaerts’, *Manchester Guardian*, 3 Nov. 1953, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> In the absence of reliable statistics, particularly for the first months of the war, it is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the total number of Belgian refugees. According to P. A. Tallier, it is generally estimated that there were about 150,000 to 200,000 in Great Britain at the beginning of Nov. 1914 (172,298 in Aug. 1917, and 125,000 in Nov. 1918); P. A. Tallier, *Inventaire des archives du Comité officiel belge pour l’Angleterre (réfugiés belges en Angleterre), 1914–1919* (Brussels, n. d.), p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Henri Davignon’, *Nouvelle Biographie nationale*, viii (Brussels, n. d.), pp. 81–3. *Henri Davignon* <<http://www.arlfb.be/composition/membres/davignon.html>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; ‘Henri Davignon, écrivain belge’, *Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures*, xxxvi, ed. Sr M. F. Inial (Washington, D. C., 1948); R. Poulet, *Billets de sortie* (Paris, 1975), pp. 79–81; H. Davignon, *Souvenirs d’un écrivain belge, 1879–1945* (Paris, 1954).

<sup>56</sup> J. Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 101.

<sup>57</sup> M. Amara, *La Propagande belge durant la Première Guerre Mondiale, 1914–1918* (ULB, mémoire de licence inédit), p. 23; M. Amara, ‘La propagande belge et l’image de la Belgique aux États-Unis pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale’, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine*, xxx (2000), 173–226.

translated, published and distributed works that presented to the world Belgium's sufferings and created publicity for the Belgian cause, for example a document edition entitled 'La Belgique et l'Allemagne' (1916).<sup>58</sup> From December 1917 onwards, it also regularly reported to the Belgian government in Le Havre on the evolution of British public opinion regarding Belgium in biweekly notes based on the English press. In his autobiography, *Souvenirs d'un Écrivain Belge* (1954), Davignon remembers:

One day shortly after I had finished this work, Émile Cammaerts walked into my office. He was about my age. We had met for the first time in the corridors of the *Théâtre du Parc* in Brussels. One of his plays, all fantasy and folk-lore, had been staged there shortly after one of mine. He had been violently in love with a young English actress, Brema's daughter, whom he had seen in Shakespeare, at the Stratford-on-Avon Theatre. Before she had consented to marry him, Tita Brand had transformed his whole outlook. By following the path of Franciscan idealism, this pupil of the anarchist Élysée Reclus had gradually turned towards Christianity. Baptised and become an ardent Anglican, Cammaerts was settled with his wife in London and had embarked on a career as a writer and teacher. When war broke out, he tried to join the *home defence* but contracted pleurisy there. When more or less recovered, he came to me to ask if he could be of any help. I offered him the job of being the link between my work and the British public. This was the beginning of a collaboration which, for four years, was as close as our friendship.<sup>59</sup>

Cammaerts' daughter reports on the working method of this unofficial press office: 'All the news which reached the little "bureau" was mulled through by the two friends with the historical expert [Léon] van der Essen. In addition to this, they scanned the columns of the British press. Nothing untrue was allowed to pass in so far as it was related to Belgium and could be checked against their other sources of information.'<sup>60</sup> Cammaerts, with his language skills and social standing, became the face and voice of this Belgian publicity work, as Davignon confirms:

With his practical experience of English journalism, Cammaerts was my guide. His reputation as a literary figure, his quality as a poet, helped by his distinctive

<sup>58</sup> H. Davignon, *La Belgique et l'Allemagne: textes et documents précédés d'un avertissement au lecteur* (London, 1915); V. D'Hooghe, *Inventaire des archives du Belgian Relief Committee de la délégation de Londres de la Commission d'Enquête sur la violation de règles du droit de gens, de lois et des coutumes de la guerre et du Bureau de propagande et de documentation, 1914-1919 (Inventaires 555)* (Brussels, 2013), p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Davignon, *Souvenirs d'un écrivain belge*, p. 245, quoted from Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 101f. Also see H. Davignon, *Souvenir sur É. Cammaerts*, SHL MS 800/II/3ii.

<sup>60</sup> Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 102; the original *Notes hebdomadaires d'Henri Davignon concernant l'opinion publique britannique, 1917-1919*, Archives de l'État en Belgique, Bruxelles, BE-A0510.1398 (1413-1419).

appearance, were references for him in themselves. A letter to a famous paper signed by him had every chance of being printed. We all used him as our line of communication when we needed to clear up some detail or explain some policy.<sup>61</sup>

Two of Cammaerts' major works in support of the Belgian cause at this time involved collaboration with the famous war caricaturist Louis Raemaekers. This Dutch political cartoonist, who used to publish his brilliant and acrimonious caricatures in the Amsterdam *Telegraaf*, had been made to leave the neutral Netherlands for London, due to Dutch unease about his campaigning for the country's entry into the war on the Allied side and the resulting German pressure on the Dutch government. The propaganda value and impact of his graphical works – according to *The Times*, Raemaekers was one of the few people outside the circle of statesmen and military leaders that had a decisive influence on the course of events<sup>62</sup> – in combination with Cammaerts' popularity with the British public at the time can hardly be underestimated. In *The Adoration of the Soldiers* (1916), Cammaerts and Raemakers paid tribute to the Belgian army in the form of an illustrated mystery play in the manner of the old medieval French and English nativity plays.<sup>63</sup> *Behind the Iron Bars: Two Years of German Occupation in Belgium* (1917) depicted life in the occupied country after the military conquest and focused on the economic exploitation of Belgium by the occupier as well as on German attempts to use the Flemish movement as a means of sowing division (fig. 3.3).

Around Davignon's wartime office grew the Anglo-Belgian Union of 1918, a bilateral association with offices in Mayfair's Albemarle Street, a famous address with links to Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde. In the form of the Anglo-Belgian Society, the result of a merger in 1983 with the *Cercle Royal Belge de Londres* in 1922 with similar aims, it is still in existence.<sup>64</sup> The organisation was

<sup>61</sup> H. Davignon, *Souvenirs d'un écrivain belge*; quoted from Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 102.

<sup>62</sup> 'Mr Louis Raemaekers' [obituary], *The Times*, 27 July 1956, p. 13. After the war, Geyl would write to Raemaekers trying to get him to disassociate himself from Cammaerts because of the latter's support for Belgian claims on Dutch territories; Hoover Institution, Stanford, Calif., Louis Raemaekers papers, box 4, folder 5. For the most recent and complete interpretations of Raemaekers' work see the richly illustrated publication by A. de Ranitz, *Louis Raemaekers: 'Armed with Pen and Pencil': How a Dutch Cartoonist Became World Famous during the First World War* (Roermond, 2014) and my late friend Richard Deswarte's 'Europe under threat: Visual projections of Europe in Raemaekers' First World War cartoons', in *Visions and Ideas of Europe during the First World War*, ed. M. d'Auria and J. Vermeiren (*Ideas beyond Borders: Studies in Transnational Intellectual History*) (London/New York, 2020), pp. 198–218.

<sup>63</sup> É. Cammaerts, *The Adoration of the Soldiers (L'Adoration des Soldats)*. With illustrations by Louis Raemaekers (London, 1916).

<sup>64</sup> Anglo-Belgian Union, *Proceedings at first meeting of the foundation members, July 20th, 1918, held at the Savoy Hotel, London* (London, 1918), SHL MS 800/III/1286.

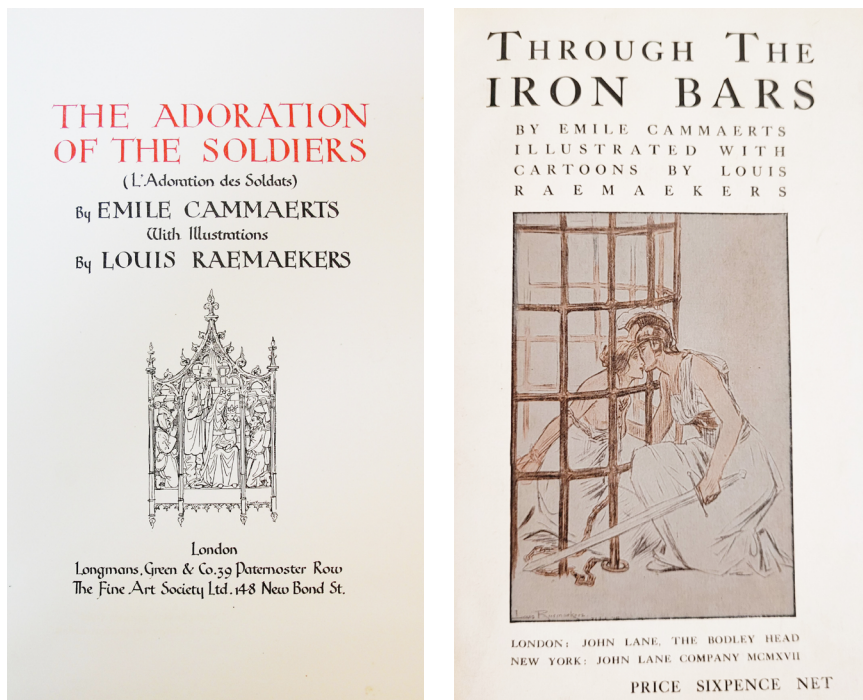


Fig. 3.3: Émile Cammaerts' publications with Louis Raemaekers, © Louis Raemaekers Foundation and the British Library Board. Reproduced with kind permission.

born out of the 'brotherhood in arms' of the First World War, as its (bilingual) constitution of April 1918 points out right at the beginning:<sup>65</sup> 'The object of the Union is to maintain and develop feelings of friendship between the British and Belgian peoples, to promote more intimate relations between the two nations, and to commemorate the brotherhood in arms which arose from their mutual loyalty to the treaty of 1839' (Art. 1).

The patrons of the Anglo-Belgian Union were none less than the two monarchs, King George and King Albert, its first president the liberal member of parliament Herbert Samuel (of later fame for his involvement in Middle East affairs), the vice-president the Comte de Lalaing (whenever the president was a Briton, the vice-president had to be from Belgium, and vice versa). They were supported by a provisional committee that on the British side was headed by Herbert Gladstone, the youngest son of the nineteenth-

<sup>65</sup> Anglo-Belgian Union/Union Anglo-Belge, *Constitution/Statuts* (London/Brussels, 1918).

century prime minister, and on the Belgian side by Comte Eugène Goblet d'Alviella, a liberal senator and rector of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB). The organization's honorary vice-presidents included many notable politicians, including Asquith, Balfour, Cecil, Austen Chamberlain, Bonar Law and Lloyd George on the British, and Charles de Brocqueville, Paul Hymans, Carton de Wiart and Émile Vandervelde on the Belgian side, as well as the Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck and Émile Cammaerts himself. In practical terms, Henri Davignon and Algernon Maudslay acted as general secretaries.

Maudslay (1873–1948), one of the driving forces behind the initiative to establish a chair for Belgian studies, was a prominent yachtsman and philanthropist of independent means, who in the 1900 Summer Olympics in Meulan, France, had won two gold medals racing keelboats for the UK. Much of his life was devoted to the British and International Red Cross and other relief organizations, and in 1919 he was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his work with the Belgian War Refugees Committee, for which from 1914 to 1924 he served as honorary secretary. Later, in 1927, he would also be appointed a Grand Officer of the Order of the Crown of Belgium in recognition of his services.<sup>66</sup>

From its inception in April 1918 the Anglo-Belgian Union was committed to 'includ[ing] among its objects the formation of a fund which will be available for providing each year a course of study for an equal number of Belgian and British young men in order that they may enter into residence in Universities in Belgium and Great Britain [...] The Council shall also do all in their power to encourage the interchange of professors and lecturers between the two countries' (Art. 4.3). It also sought to foster Anglo-Belgian relations by 'promot[ing] each year in an important city in one or both of the two countries a series of Conferences or Lectures, on the history, literature, art, and the political and economic life of the two countries' (Art. 4.4).<sup>67</sup>

In addition to its endeavours in the field of education, the Anglo-Belgian Union also engaged in public diplomacy, its most successful enterprise in the interwar period being the organization of a high-profile exhibition in 1927 of Flemish and Belgian art from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century at the Royal Academy of Arts, which I have published about elsewhere. It

<sup>66</sup> See the entry on Maudslay in *Olympedia* <<https://www.olympedia.org/athletes/62939>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019], P. Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War: Mobilizing Charity* (London, 2014), p. 95, and Maudslay's correspondence with Lord Gladstone, 1914–34, British Library, Add MS 46013. There used to be a close link between the Anglo-Belgian Society and the Royal Yacht Club, who until a few years ago shared the same premises in Knightsbridge.

<sup>67</sup> Anglo-Belgian Union/Union Anglo-Belge, *Constitution/Statuts*.

was the first such large-scale international loan exhibition in London, with the royal couples of both countries as patrons, and established the format for a series of similar exhibitions of ‘national’ art in the Royal Academy, tellingly setting off an ‘arms race’ in arts-supported public diplomacy with the Anglo-Batavian Society, who trumped it by organizing an exhibition of Dutch art on an even grander scale at the same venue two years later.<sup>68</sup>

***Soft diplomacy: the foundation of the department of Dutch studies***

The developments were paralleled on the Dutch side. The first Dutch language courses at the University of London were offered by Dame Margaret Tuke (1862–1947), Bedford College’s principal, in the 1914/15 academic session, largely driven by imperial interests in South Africa, but also under the impression of the wave of refugees from Belgium, and the first undergraduate degree programme was instituted by Bernardus Proper (1874–?), founding head of the department of Dutch at Bedford College, in 1916.<sup>69</sup> But the main impetus for a wider scheme came from a Dutch expat organization. As Dame Margaret remembers:

[A]t the same time a scheme was set on foot for raising funds for a Reader in Dutch to take charge of the department. Two years later [1918], however, this scheme was superseded by one with a wider scope under the aegis of the University, in which Bedford joined with University College in founding a centre of Dutch Studies in London [comprising both a professor- and a lectureship as well as a Dutch library]. A strong Committee for the promotion of the scheme was formed by the Senate of the University and an appeal sent out which met with a good response.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art 1300–1900, Organized by the Anglo-Belgian Union* (London, 1927); U. Tiedau, ‘Dutch and Belgian artistic and intellectual rivalry in interwar London’, *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies / Revue Canadienne d’Études Néerlandaises (CJNS/RCÉN)*, xli (2021), 1–26.

<sup>69</sup> William Woods, former editor of the *Bedford College Association Journal*, by letter to the author. See also M. J. Tuke, *A History of Bedford College for Women, 1849–1937* (London/New York/Tokyo, 1939), p. 231f; T. Weevers, ‘The beginnings of Dutch studies in the University of London’, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxv (April 1985), 85–9, at p. 86. Dutch was also championed and strongly supported by the professor of German language and literature at the University of London, J. G. (John George) Robertson, who ‘between 1903 and 1933 played the chief part in making London into the leading centre for German studies in Britain’ and in 1924 would also become the second director of the department of Scandinavian studies, as successor to William Paton Ker, who founded the department in 1917; F. M. L. Thompson, *The University of London and the World of Learning, 1836–1986* (London, 1986), p. 70; ‘Memorial to the late Professor W. P. Ker’, *Review of English Studies*, i (1 April 1950), pp. 221–2; G. Foster, ‘W. P. Ker’, *English Studies*, v (1923), pp. 153–5.

<sup>70</sup> Tuke, *A History of Bedford College*, p. 231f.



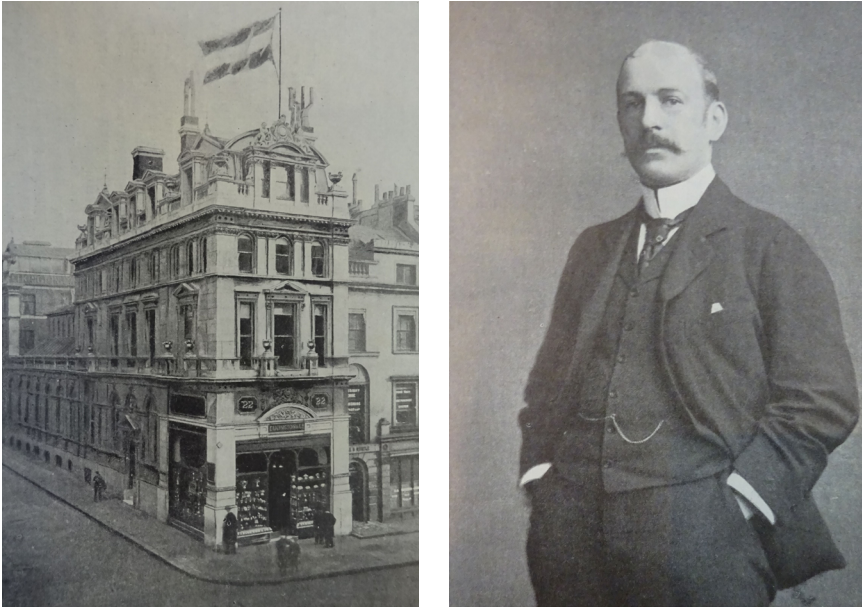


Fig. 3.4: Club House of the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen* on Sackville Street and its president F. C. Stoop, from *Eigen haard: Geillustreerd Volkstijdschrift*, no. 10 (5 March 1898), pp. 157 and 159, © The British Library Board.

These larger plans were greatly facilitated by the fact that within the Dutch business community in London a sense of urgency had arisen about the reputation of the Netherlands, whose neutrality during the war was widely, if not necessarily correctly, seen as having been more favourable to Germany.<sup>71</sup> This Dutch business community was centred around the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen* ('Dutch Association in London'), a gentlemen's club for Dutch expats with offices first on Regent Street, then on Sackville Street, Piccadilly (fig. 3.4a).

The club had been founded in 1873 by E. H. Crone, but the driving force behind it was very much Frederick ('Freek') Cornelius Stoop (1854–1933), who only two years after the association's foundation was elected into its committee and from 1886 continuously served as its chairman until 1932 (fig. 3.4b).<sup>72</sup> A banker, stockbroker and financier by profession, descended

<sup>71</sup> E. H. Kossmann, *Familiearchief: Notities over voorouders, tijdgenoten en mijzelf* (Amsterdam, 1998), p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> Tuke, *A History of Bedford College*, p. 314; J. Reyneke van Stuwe, 'Hollandsche feesten te Londen', *Neerlandia*, xvii (1913), 30–31; J. Reyneke van Stuwe, 'Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen', *Neerlandia*, xvii (1913), 57; J. Reyneke van Stuwe, *De Nederlandsche Vereeniging te*

from an old family of patricians in Dordrecht, he had moved to England in 1873, became naturalized in 1878 and settled in West Hall near Byfleet, Surrey, using his considerable wealth for philanthropic purposes and to build up a growing art collection (Van Gogh and Picasso were among his acquaintances).<sup>73</sup> According to a vignette in the biography of Stoop's son Adrian, a much-revered gentleman rugby union player for the Harlequins, whose training ground in Twickenham still bears the name 'The Stoop', and captain of the English national team, Frederick had made his fortune in the early days of oil exploration, as the London-based managing director of the *Dortsche Petroleum Maatschappij* set up by his elder brother, Adriaan, on Java in 1887. Clever investment in their own refinery had allowed the Stoop brothers to control the full production cycle of their product. By 1910 they were the last remaining independent oil producers in the East Indies, before in 1911, through an exchange of stock, being merged into Royal Dutch Shell, itself the result of the 1907 merger between two rival Dutch (*Koninklijke Oliemaatschappij*/Royal Dutch) and English (Shell) companies.<sup>74</sup>

Another influential member of the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging* provided the link to the academic world: Lord Reay, the Right Honourable Donald James Mackay (1839–1921), the most famous Anglo-Dutch statesman of his day. Like Stoop, this Dutch-born British liberal politician (in the Netherlands known as Donald Jacob, Baron Mackay, heer van Ophemert en Zennewijnen) had been naturalized, in 1877, after inheriting his Scottish title. He had served as Governor of Bombay (1885–90) and Undersecretary of State for India in Lord Rosebery's liberal administration from 1894, before being elected president of the Royal Asiatic Society (1893–1921) and founding president of the British Academy (1901–7). A member of the council of University College London since 1881, he became UCL's vice-president in 1892 and its president in 1897. In this position, which he held until his death in 1921, he advocated 'the necessity of a University organisation in London on a scale in accordance with the greatness of London as the capital of this country and as the capital of the Empire' and played a leading role in reforming the

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*Londen, 1873–1923: Aangeboden door den president van de Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen bij gelegenheid van haar vijftigjaar bestaan* (Amsterdam, 1923), p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> W. Frijhoff, *Stoop* <<https://www.regionaalarchiefdordrecht.nl/biografisch-woordenboek/familie-stoop/>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; Byfleet Heritage Society, *Stoop Memorial Blue Plaque* <<http://www.byfleetheritage.org.uk/Stoopplch.htm>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; I. Wakeford, *The Death of Frederick Cornelius Stoop in 1933 (or 1934)* <<http://wokinghistory.org/onewebmedia/161014.pdf>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; F. C. Gerretson, *History of the Royal Dutch*, ii (Leiden, 1958), pp. 202–27.

<sup>74</sup> I. Cooper, *Immortal Harlequin: The Story of Adrian Stoop* (Stroud, Glos., 2004; *Rugby Stadiums: The Twickenham Stoop* <<http://www.rugbystadiums.co.uk/stadium/thestoop.php>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

federal structure of the University of London, which so far had largely been confined to examinations, by filling it with real academic life.<sup>75</sup>

In his autobiography of 1942, Geyl remembered the atmosphere in which his appointment took place:

After the war the climate was very much in favour of international cultural exchange between the peoples [of Europe], and [the University of] London back then tried to become a large international centre in this respect. University chair after university chair was founded for the language, literature and history of one country after another. We [the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging*] did not want to miss out and formed a committee to raise funds: at that time money was easily available and we managed to raise substantial funds.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed a great number of so-called ‘foreign’ chairs were founded at this time, the best-known examples being the London School of Oriental Studies (today’s School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS) in 1916, championed by Lord Reay,<sup>77</sup> and the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), founded by Robert William Seton-Watson and inaugurated by Tomáš Masaryk in 1915. There were also numerous European language departments at the constituent colleges of the university, such as the Scandinavian department at UCL (1917), the Cervantes and Camões chairs for Spanish and Portuguese (1916) and the Korae chair for modern Greek and Byzantine history, language and literature (1918) at King’s College London.<sup>78</sup> The endowments for these chairs often came from the governments of the countries in question, from binational friendship associations or expat communities, which would lead to its own set of problems, as exemplarily shown by Richard Clogg in his study of the other contemporary academic *cause célèbre* at the University of London of this

<sup>75</sup> P. Geyl, ‘Levensbericht van Lord Reay’, *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde, 1921–1922* (Leiden, 1922), pp. 90–100, at pp. 98–99, and Reyneke van Stuwe, *De Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen*, p. 39. An oil portrait of Lord Reay (1919) by the hand of Dutch painter resident in London Antoon Abraham van Anrooy (1870–1949), presented to UCL during a commemoration of Lord Reay on 6 Dec. 1921, a copy of a painting made two years earlier for the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging*, is still part of the collections of the UCL Art Museum, Accession No. 5620 <<http://artcat.museums.ucl.ac.uk>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>76</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 85.

<sup>77</sup> Geyl, ‘Levensbericht van Lord Reay’, 98–9.

<sup>78</sup> F. J. C. Hearnshaw, *A Centenary History of King’s College London, 1828–1928* (London, 1929), pp. 466f.; I. W. Roberts, *History of the School for Slavonic and East European Studies, 1915–1990* (London, 1991); N. Harte and J. North, *The World of UCL, 1828–2004* (London, 2004), p. 183; N. Harte, *The University of London 1836–1986* (London/Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1986). From 1947 to 1967 the Camões chair would be held by the historian Charles Boxer (1904–2000), famous for his *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* (London, 1965) and many other works.

time, the controversy between Arnold Toynbee and the donors of his Koræes chair for modern Greek (Toynbee, with whom Geyl would spar frequently after 1945, was in 1924 effectively dismissed by King's College because of his reporting on the Greco-Turkish war in Asia Minor, which displeased the chair's donors, with all the implications this had for academic liberty and related ethical questions).<sup>79</sup> Similar issues, if in a different constellation as we will see, would arise in the conflict between the Dutch and Belgian chairs reconstructed here.

On 20 June 1917 the Senate of the University appointed a committee for the promotion of Dutch studies, reporting jointly to the University College committee and the Bedford College council. Presided over by the Netherlands envoy (and former foreign minister) Jhr. René de Marees van Swinderen (1860–1955), and with Stoop serving as chairman and treasurer, in 1918 the committee issued an appeal for funds and managed to raise a total sum of £21,000 (about £1.2 million in today's terms) for the endowment of the scheme.<sup>80</sup> Among the list of principal contributors, headed by Stoop himself, three main groups can be distinguished. First, Stoop's own Anglo-Dutch petroleum business: not only was he the main contributor himself, but he also managed to enlist his fellow Royal Dutch Shell magnates Sir Marcus Samuel, founder of the Shell company; Sir Henry Deterding, the 'Napoleon of oil' and one of the most influential businessmen in the first half of the twentieth century (and board member of the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging* since 1913);<sup>81</sup> and Arnold J. Cohen Stuart, the first managing director (1907–15) of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, a subsidiary of Shell Transport and Trading, as principal contributors to the Dutch Studies funds. It may also have helped that Geyl's friend Carel Gerretson had since 1 August 1917 been Deterding's (and Hendrikus Colijn's) secretary at the company.<sup>82</sup>

The second group of principal donors came from shipping and transport: the Union Castle Mail Steamship Company, the Ocean Steamship Company, the *Stoomvaart Maatschappij 'Nederland'*, the Rotterdamsche Lloyd and the *Koninklijke West Indische Maildienst*. As Geyl gratefully notes in his

<sup>79</sup> Clogg, *Politics and the Academy*.

<sup>80</sup> University of London, Senate Minutes (S. M.), 20 March 1918. Also see the summary of the history of the Dutch Studies committee provided by the secretary [s. n.] to the principal, Senate House on 20 June 1955, UCL Spec. Coll. D/14/1/34. Historical currency calculation, like all calculations in this chapter, after: <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>81</sup> In 1920 Deterding received a knighthood of the British Empire for his service to Anglo-Dutch relations, although his supplying the Allies with petroleum during the war will have been the decisive factor. Reyneke van Stuwe, *De Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen*, p. 99. See P. Hendrix, *Henri Deterding: De Koninklijke, de Shell en de Rothschilds* (The Hague, 1996).

<sup>82</sup> F. C. Gerretson, *History of the Royal Dutch*, English trans. (4 vols, Leiden, 1953).

autobiography, he had the privilege to travel for free on the ferries between the two countries. The name of Ernst Heldring (1871–1954) is important in this context. A ship owner and later president of the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (the modern successor to the Dutch East India Company), he directed two of these companies and was also involved with the third. In his diary, he writes about the occasion he first made acquaintance with Geyl, ‘the talented correspondent of the “Rotterdammer”’,<sup>83</sup> at a dinner at Van Swinderen’s embassy on 8 November 1918, in presence of, among others, the High Commissioner of South Africa, William P. Schreiner. And from that dominion of the British empire came the third set of contributors: the National Bank of South Africa,<sup>84</sup> the Standard Bank of South Africa, as well as Sir Otto Beit, a friend of Cecil Rhodes, and the Rhodes Trustees, of which Beit was the administrator. The theme of Anglo-Dutch reconciliation, now that the wounds inflicted by the Boer War were beginning to heal, played a big role here, as Geyl’s friend Jacob Reyneke van Stuwe, who had been Louis Botha’s secretary during the conflict, before starting a career as London correspondent of *Het Vaderland*, while also being affiliated with the *Algemeen Nederlandsch Verbond*,<sup>85</sup> wrote in the celebratory volume published on the occasion of the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging*’s fiftieth anniversary in 1923.<sup>86</sup>

Apart from ‘the effective support of H. E. the Minister of the Netherlands to Great Britain, Jonkheer van Swinderen’ and ‘the enthusiasm and generosity of Mr F. C. Stoop’, the appeal and the scheme owed their success more generally to the expert help and advice of John Abraham Jacob de Villiers (later Sir John de Villiers), cartographer and deputy keeper of maps at the British Museum (1863–1931), and author of *The Dutch in South Africa*, who also advised the Foreign Office on colonial border conflicts.<sup>87</sup> The Dutch

<sup>83</sup> E. Heldring, *Herinneringen en dagboek*, ed. Johan de Vries, i (Utrecht, 1970), p. 260: ‘den bekwamen correspondent van de “Rotterdammer”’.

<sup>84</sup> See also ‘University and educational intelligence’, *Nature*, cii, 78–9 (26 Sept. 1918): ‘University of London. – The sum of 1000 *l.* has been given to the University by the National Bank of South Africa for the promotion of Dutch studies.’

<sup>85</sup> Reyneke van Stuwe, *De Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen*, p. 27. On Jacob Reyneke van Stuwe and his South African connections see V. Kuitenbrouwer, ‘A newspaper war? Dutch information networks during the South African War (1899–1902)’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden – Low Countries Historical Review*, cxxviii (2013), 127–50. Jacob (1876–1962) was the brother of the Dutch novelist Jeanne Reyneke van Stuwe (1874–1951).

<sup>86</sup> The only principal contributor on the list not falling into these three categories is the Harrisons & Crosfield Tea trading company. As the income from these funds was still insufficient for the purposes in mind, Stoop did not hesitate to contribute a further £1,000 (£63,000 in today’s money) from his own fortune to make good the deficiency in income; Secretary [s. n.] to the principal, Senate House, 20 June 1955, UCL Spec. Coll. D/14/1/34.

<sup>87</sup> J. A. J. de Villiers, *The Dutch in South Africa* (London, 1923). A prize (of originally £10)

government itself, according to a document summarizing the history of the Dutch studies committee from 1955, does not appear to have contributed at this stage; only later, ‘some time before the [Second World] war’, when the fund had run into financial difficulties, did The Hague start to subsidize the enterprise.<sup>88</sup> As pointed out by Reyneke van Stuwe, Geyl’s appointment was one of the most important achievements of the organization:

End of July of the same year [1918] was a very important event for our colony, the establishment of the Chair in Dutch Language, Literature and History at London University. Many of the notables in the colony cooperated until it was established and the ‘Dutch Studies Committee’ includes our Envoy as well as the President of the Association F. C. Stoop and Mr A. J. Beaufort. Our talented fellow, Dr P. Geyl, was appointed professor and numerous public lectures are given by him, which are always attended by a multitudinous audience of students and others interested, and contribute greatly to the increasingly good name of our country abroad.<sup>89</sup>

There does not seem to have been any serious competitor to Geyl for the post. While it was impossible to locate the university files from the recruitment process, a letter exchange between Walter Seton, the honorable secretary of the committee, and Hendrik Clemens Muller, the Amsterdam philhellene freethinker and social democrat, who had expressed his wish to be considered for the position, preserved in the archives of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, indicates that at least five other candidates must have been in the running.<sup>90</sup> Geyl himself writes in his letters to The Hague that the only other *realistic* candidate for the post had been Adriaan Barnouw, who instead in 1919 would become lecturer in Dutch at Columbia University, New York, where, a few years later, in 1923, he was promoted to Queen Wilhelmina Professor for Dutch Studies.<sup>91</sup> Geyl’s historical-political approach towards Dutch studies seems

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donated in memory of his mother, Hanna de Villiers, for the best student of Dutch of the year, is still in existence today, although the name has been lost; Tuke, *A History of Bedford College*, p. 232.

<sup>88</sup> Secretary of Dutch studies committee [s. n.] to the principal, Senate House, 20 June 1955, UCL Spec. Coll. D/14/1/34.

<sup>89</sup> Reyneke van Stuwe, *De Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen*, p. 47.

<sup>90</sup> In his letter of 22 Nov. 1918 Stoop replied that the choice would be made from the six applications the committee had received so far and that Muller’s would be taken into account as a matter of course; Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis Amsterdam (IISG), Archief Hendrik C. Muller (ARCH 00911.5.19), Stoop to Muller, 22 Nov. 1918; P. J. Meertens and J. M. Welcher, ‘Muller, Hendrik Clemens’, *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging*, i (1986), pp. 85–7.

<sup>91</sup> On Barnouw’s parallel career to Geyl’s in New York see H. Edelman, *The Netherland-America Foundation, 1921–2011: a History* (New York, 2012), *passim*; H. Krabbendam,

to have tipped the balance in his favour. If we can trust Geyl's version of the events as reported to The Hague, he even self-assuredly suggested to the committee that Barnouw was a better philologist than he himself, and that if the emphasis of the chair was meant to lie on literature, they should go with his competitor.<sup>92</sup>

Geyl knew that the appointment was not in the smallest degree a political one, and that his journalistic writings positioned him well to assert the Netherlands' place in the post-war order. As he writes in his memoirs, his mentor P. J. Blok had confirmed to him that Geyl's 1919 article 'Nederland tusschen de mogendheden' ('The Netherlands between the Great Powers'), a review of Joost Adriaan van Hamel's *Nederland en de mogendheden* published in the leading Dutch cultural-literary-political magazine *De Gids*, had fallen on fertile soil: 'Actually they had me in mind for the post from the beginning.'<sup>93</sup> Coming from the same city as Stoop, the main sponsor and driver of the initiative (Dordrecht), and being a member of the same club (*Nederlandsche Vereeniging*) cannot have hurt his chances either; he was part of the inner circle, as Heldring's diary entry on the dinner at the embassy has already shown. The Leiden literary scholar Gerrit Kalff, who at the time advised against the appointment of Geyl, instead advocating Barnouw, was taken aback by the panel's unanimous decision in his favour ('met algemene stemmen').<sup>94</sup> As Geyl's replacement as London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, Geyl's friend and fellow *Grootnederlander* Pieter Nicolaas van Eyck was appointed; later he would also become a member of the Dutch studies committee.<sup>95</sup>

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C. A. van Minnen, G. Scott-Smith, *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations, 1609–2009* (New York, 2009), p. 437; A. Lammers, 'Barnouw, Adriaan Jacob (1877–1968)', *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland* <<http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn2/barnouw>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019]; G. Homan, 'Adriaan J. Barnouw's cultural work in the US, 1919–1960', *AADAS 2005 Biennial Conference Dutch Immigrants on the Plains*, summarized by Richard Harmes in *AADAS News [Association for the Advancement of Dutch-American Studies]*, vi (spring 2006), p. 4; Columbia University Libraries. Archival Collections, *Adriaan Jacob Barnouw Papers, 1895–1967* <[http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd\\_4078950](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_4078950)> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>92</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 17.

<sup>93</sup> P. Geyl, '[Review of] J. A. van Hamel, *Nederland tusschen de mogendheden*, Amsterdam: Holkema en Warendorf, 1918', *De Gids*, lxxxiii (1919), 127–44, reprinted in P. Geyl, *Studies en stridgeschriften: Bundel aangeboden aan de schryver bij zijn aftreden als hoogeleraar aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht* (Groningen, 1958), pp. 453–68; Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 85; Blaas, 'Nederlandse historici en de eerste wereldoorlog', 25f.

<sup>94</sup> L. H. Maas, *Pro Patria: Werken, leven en streven van de literatuurhistoricus Gerrit Kalff (1856–1923)* (Hilversum, 1998), p. 233f.

<sup>95</sup> It is striking that interwar London was a real centre of the *Groot-Nederland* idea. In addition to Geyl at University College, his friend Frederik Carel Gerretson (also known

In his autobiography of 1942 Geyl would not look back on his benefactors very gratefully; his issues with the Dutch studies committee seem to have been mostly concerned with what he saw as undue interference in his own remit:

In my opinion that Dutch Studies Committee was a practical joke. That the donors unduly assumed the right to stay involved with academic affairs, after they had provided their dutiful service [by providing the funds], I simply felt as a slap in my face. The chairman was Stoop, a petroleum millionaire, the model of a dim-witted but self-conscious moneybag, although also not that hopelessly thick that he did not realize it on occasion.<sup>96</sup>

Dame Margaret Tuke, the founder of his department, of whom Geyl thought highly ('a resolute elderly lady, Principal of Bedford College, who could not stand the autocratic style of [UCL Provost Gregory] Foster and was man enough not to be cajoled by him'),<sup>97</sup> saw it quite differently, remembering Stoop as 'one of the three Dutch representatives on the University Committee, of which he was for some time Chairman and at all times a most wise and considerate member'.<sup>98</sup>

The establishment of the department of Dutch studies at the University of London was thus the result of two initiatives complementing each other: an academic one that sought to institutionalize Dutch studies in the aftermath of the First World War, which (along with the imperial interest in South Africa) had raised British interest in Belgian and Dutch affairs in Europe; and a cultural-diplomatic, if not cultural-propagandistic one (to use a more contemporary term), by Dutch interest groups that provided the funds for the enterprise. The character of Geyl's appointment, like that of Cammaerts, as we will see, was thus a double-faced one, with the purely academic side gaining prominence only over the course of time; initially, the political dimension was doubtlessly dominant.

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under his literary pseudonym Geerten Gossaert) worked for a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, and Pieter Nicolaas van Eyck became Geyl's successor as London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*. In the early 1930s the three *Groot-Nederlanders* collaborated in publishing *Leiding*, a cultural-literary counter-journal to the opinion-leading *De Gids*; see P. van Hees, 'Het tijdschrift *Leiding*, 1930–1931', in *Geschiedenis en Cultuur: Achttien opstellen*, ed. E. Jonker and M. van Rossem (The Hague, 1990), pp. 199–211.

<sup>96</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 89.

<sup>97</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 120.

<sup>98</sup> Tuke, *A History of Bedford College*, p. 314. Geyl certainly knew how to benefit from Stoop personally, for he wrote to him asking for help with mortgage problems.



***Geyl's double life as 'silent press attaché'***

In this sense, Geyl was the ideal candidate for the post, as he combined these two fields seamlessly in him and never clearly distinguished between them. He was also affiliated with a clandestine propaganda institution of his own. Around the same time of his appointment as chair of Dutch studies at University College London, he had been contacted by the *Stichting Voorlichting omtrent Nederland* (Foundation Enlightenment about the Netherlands), an initiative by the Dutch liberal politician and member of the Upper House of the Dutch parliament Fredericus J. W. Drion (1874–1948) to counter the predominantly negative image of the Netherlands abroad.<sup>99</sup> While formally independent and initially mostly privately financed, the foundation's executive branch, the *Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie over Nederland* ('National Office for Documentation about the Netherlands'), based in The Hague, worked very closely with the Dutch Foreign Office (*Buitenlandsche Zaken*, BZ) and it soon became a thinly veiled government institution. BZ increased its financial stake over time, providing the majority of the organization's budget from 1927 onwards.<sup>100</sup>

The intelligence (*voorlichting*) on public opinion of the Netherlands abroad operated in two ways: first through the distribution of copies of important articles from the foreign press (the so-called *bulletins*), and second by employing a network of international correspondents, Geyl being the most prolific among them, to submit regular confidential reports about the developments in their respective host countries. These correspondents, internally called 'silent press attachés', operated clandestinely; their contractual working relationship with a semi-official Dutch government organization was unknown to their regular employers, let alone to the public. The office had correspondents in London, Paris, Brussels, Rome, Berlin<sup>101</sup> and New York,<sup>102</sup> as well as some less formal collaborators, including in Lausanne, Geneva, Stockholm and Vancouver. The reports were usually distributed to high officials in the Foreign Office and the Dutch ambassadors in countries with 'silent press attachés', and to other ministers and officials,

<sup>99</sup> NA, inv. nos 2.19.026.17–26: Ingekomen brieven van en minuten van uitgaande brieven aan de vertegenwoordiger in Engeland, prof. dr. P. Geyl, hoogleraar Nederlandse studies aan het University College, 1919–1935; Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, pp. 90–92.

<sup>100</sup> For this and the following A. R. M. Mommers, *Inventaris van het archief van het Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie over Nederland, 1919–1936* (The Hague, 1951).

<sup>101</sup> P. Stoop, *De geheime rapporten van H. J. Noorderwier, Berlin 1933–1935* (Amsterdam, 1988).

<sup>102</sup> Like Geyl, Adriaan Barnouw, the first chair for Dutch at Columbia University, New York, was a correspondent of the office (NA, inv. no. 2.19.026.46 Ingekomen brieven en minuten van uitgaande brieven aan de vertegenwoordiger te New York, prof. A. J. Barnouw, 1927–1935).

as and when necessary. Lastly, the office had the task of influencing public opinion in the foreign press, partly overtly, by distributing the *Gazette de Hollande*, a daily, later weekly, newspaper founded in 1912 by the Foreign Office and the Ministry for Colonies to spread information about the country and her overseas possessions, and partly covertly, by the discreet exertion of influence on journalists and opinion-makers.

Geyl thus led a double life throughout his time at UCL. While holding his academic position he was also on the payroll of The Hague, with an annual salary of £300 (1919) to £650 (1935) according to Geyl's (imprecise) recollections of 1942, not negligibly salaried,<sup>103</sup> and never informed his employer University College about his sideline. In his dispatches to Drion he reported on developments in British academia, press and politics, including details from personal correspondence, and also provided character portraits of individuals, including many of his university colleagues, assessing their usefulness for the organization's cause, not fundamentally unlike a Stasi (HVA) informant, even though Britain and the Netherlands were, arguably, friendly countries at the time. Retrospectively, after the Second World War, he acknowledged this role in London repeatedly and seemingly remained proud of it:

There was something else in London. In addition to my professorship, I was a representative of the *Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie*. It was my job to follow the reports about the Netherlands in the English press and, if necessary, to steer them in the right direction. Soon this private organisation was taken over by the Foreign Office. *De facto*, if not formally, I was press attaché of the Dutch legation in London. It was often exciting and time-consuming work, especially in the years of the bitter dispute with Belgium over the Scheldt issue. I was at home on Fleet Street, where I knew many editors who I tried to make write in our spirit. I also wrote articles myself, under my own name or under a pseudonym, often also on the Flemish question. Political again!<sup>104</sup>

His scholarly and propagandistic activities were also closely intertwined and informed each other, and Geyl himself did not draw a clear distinction between the two, which has led to later generations of scholars questioning

<sup>103</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 91. Compare this with Geyl's annual salary as a UCL professor (£800–£1,000). According to P. Stoop, *Historiker und Diplomat: Pieter Geyl als Niederländischer Presseattaché in London 1919–1935*, in *Interbellum und Exil*, ed. S. Onderdelinden (Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1991), pp. 42–54, at p. 53 (fn. 10), Geyl's salary from The Hague was lower, *hfl.* 300 per month (1933), still a substantial sum, roughly €34k per annum in today's terms. Currency calculations in guilders after Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (IISG), *De waarde van de gulden/euro* <<http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/calculate-nl.php>> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>104</sup> In an interview with J. Floorquin: *Ten huize van Prof. Dr. P. Geyl*, 1961.

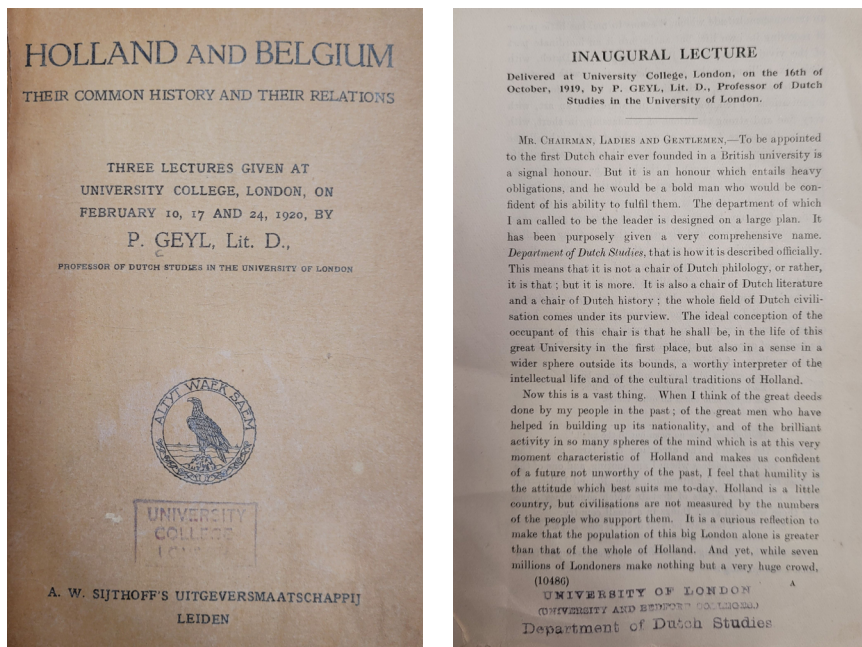


Fig. 3.5: Pieter Geyl, *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations: Three Lectures Given at University College London on February 10, 17 and 24, 1920* (Leiden, 1920) and first page from his inaugural lecture, 16 October 1919 (UCL Special Collections, College Collection DG 39 and STORE o6-1123)

the motivation behind his historiography. In other words, they were asking whether Geyl's scholarship was largely a cover for his activism or a continuation of propaganda by other means, an interpretation put forward in particular by Belgian critics in the late 1970s and 1980s, which has led to what can be called a veritable Dutch–Belgian *Historikerstreit*.<sup>105</sup> While the author of these lines would not want to go that far, as Geyl's reinterpretation of the sixteenth-century partition of the Low Countries

<sup>105</sup> For syntheses of this debate see J. Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin: Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 328–32 (which includes a full list of about twenty contributions to this debate in fn. 19 on p. 373); N. van Sas, 'The Great Netherlands controversy: a clash of great historians', in *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts: Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, ed. T. Frank and F. Hadler (London, 2011), pp. 152–74; and Fons Meijer's chapter in this volume. Some of the most important articles critical of Geyl have been bundled and republished as L. Wils, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland: Mythe en Geschiedenis: Historische opstellen, gebundeld en aangeboden aan de schrijver bij het bereiken van zijn emeritaat als hoogleraar aan de K. U. Leuven* (Leuven, 1994).

has certainly had an enriching effect on subsequent scholarship, in spite of the somewhat problematic motivation behind it, it is difficult not to see this other aspect of his London period as ethically highly questionable, not just in connection with his Greater Netherlands activism but also in relation to his host country and institution.

At any rate, Geyl outlined his plans for the department of Dutch studies in his inaugural lecture at University College London on 16 October 1919, in the presence of the Dutch envoy (fig. 3.5b). Pointing out the 'original and weighty contributions to Dutch philology' that scholars had made in Germany, where 'the importance of Dutch studies has been recognised long ago', for example by August Hoffmann von Fallersleben and Johannes Franck, 'who published the [then] best etymological dictionary of the Dutch language', he regretted that up until this moment 'there [was] no work at all of English scholars in this field to be set against this', before optimistically setting out his hopes: 'but what is not, may be in the future'.<sup>106</sup> He also declared his intention not to confine his chair to either history or literature, saying that 'the whole field of Dutch civilisation comes under its purview',<sup>107</sup> and hastened to add that this by no means meant restricting himself geographically to the Netherlands:

But when I say Holland, I am understating the case. The Dutch language is a key which opens more doors than that to the civilisation of my own native country. Dutch is spoken in two other countries. There is Belgium in the first place. It is a fact which the war has made widely known in England that the language of a majority of the Belgian people is not French, but Flemish, but I think that even now the exact relationship between Flemish and Dutch is little understood [...] And then there is South Africa.<sup>108</sup>

In both countries he saw the Dutch language 'engaged in a life-and-death struggle' with more powerful languages, English in South Africa and French in Belgium; only in the Netherlands the character of Dutch was protected against the influence of the three most powerful languages in the world at the time (English, French and German), in between which the country was located.<sup>109</sup> Geyl further expanded on his programme in three public lectures that he gave at UCL in February 1920, published together as *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations* in the same

<sup>106</sup> *Inaugural lecture delivered at University College London, on the 16th of October, 1919 by P. Geyl, Lit. D., Professor of Dutch Studies in the University of London* (London, 1919), p. 11.

<sup>107</sup> Geyl, *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> Geyl, *Inaugural Lecture*, pp. 6–8.

<sup>109</sup> Geyl, *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 8; N. Garson, 'Pieter Geyl, the Diets Idea and Afrikaner Nationalism', *South African Historical Journal*, xlvii (2002), 106–40, at p. 114.

year (fig. 3.5a). The central idea that he would later work out in detail in his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (1930–59) is already contained in these lectures. Applying John Robert Seeley's observation that historians are liable to a 'curious kind of optimistic fatalism', which in a British context would make them feel bound to interpret the loss of the American colonies not only as inevitable but even as fortunate, to the Low Countries, he stressed that neither the sixteenth-century partition of the old Burgundian lands, nor the secession of Belgium from the Netherlands in 1830 had been inevitable and that existing national grand narratives, principal among them Henri Pirenne's magnum opus *Histoire de Belgique* (1900–32), but also what he called the *kleinnederlandsche* ('lesser Dutch') historiography in the Netherlands were, in his view, impermissibly projecting contemporary realities back into the past. With financial support from the Dutch studies committee, the brochure was distributed to all professional historians in the UK,<sup>110</sup> enabling Geyl to set out his stall.

***Belgian containment strategy: the first attempt at establishing a Belgian chair, 1919/21***

Since its inception in April 1918 the Anglo-Belgian Union had been committed to strengthening Anglo-Belgian exchanges in higher education, independently of Geyl's agitation. The original plans for a Belgian chair had actually been inspired by the foundation of the Cervantes and Camões chairs for Spanish and Portuguese at King's College in 1916 and developed in parallel with the foundation of the Anglo-Belgian Union. The earliest correspondence in the archives stems from November 1917, when M. Smeesters, the secretary of the *Comité Officiel Belge pour l'Angleterre*, which was involved in founding the Union, suggested a similar academic representation for Belgium to Baron Moncheur, the Belgian ambassador.<sup>111</sup> Preliminary discussions were held with Ronald Burrows, the principal of King's College, in March, and an Anglo-Belgian committee to take the scheme forward was formed under the auspices of Paul Lambotte, the director of fine arts in the Belgian Ministry of Science and Arts and honorary secretary of the Union's Belgian section, in June 1918.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>110</sup> P. Geyl, *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations. Three Lectures Given at University College, London, on February 10, 17 and 24, 1920* (Leiden, 1920), p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> Smeesters to Baron Moncheur, 23 Nov. 1917; Baron Moncheur to Smeesters, 24 Nov. 1917; Archives Générales du Royaume (AGR), Brussels, inv. no. BE-A0510/T476, Anglo-Belgian Union, 65.

<sup>112</sup> Burrows to Maudslay, 11 March 1918; Maudslay to Smeesters, 17 June 1918; Smeesters to Carton de Wiart, n. d.; Lambotte to Hall Caine e. a, 13 Dec. 1917; AGR, Brussels, inv. no. BE-A0510/T476, Belgian Relief Committee, 296.

It is doubtful that much would have come out of these discussions in the economically challenged interwar period, had it not been for the Greater Netherlands propaganda emanating from the Dutch chair. As Bryce Lyon writes in his biography of Geyl's principal historiographical adversary Henri Pirenne:

Some of his [Geyl's] work was so polemical and so anti-Belgian [in character] that successive Belgian ambassadors to the Court of St James, concerned with its deleterious effects on British public opinion, suggested to their foreign ministers that Pirenne be sent to England to deliver lectures on Belgian history in order to neutralize Geyl's propaganda.<sup>113</sup>

Given the reputation he had earned with his journalistic work for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, it should come as no surprise that the newly appointed Dutch chair's inaugural lecture was also attended by representatives of the Belgian embassy and the Anglo-Belgian Union, among them Émile Cammaerts, who, alarmed by the programme set out by the journalist turned professor ('journaliste, bombardé professeur à l'Université de Londres'<sup>114</sup>), reported back to Brussels:

Setting out his educational programme, M. GEYL recalled that medieval Dutch literature was mainly composed in Belgium and concluded that this was the reason why Belgium needed to be covered in his courses. He described the progress Flemish literature had made in recent years and *announced the imminent triumph of Flemish demands* [emphasis in the original]. Finally he promised to offer a course on relations between Belgium and Holland. All this affects Belgium in an unpleasant way, especially as Dr GEYL as London correspondent of the 'Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant', has written articles unfavourable to the Allies [of the First World War].<sup>115</sup>

What added insult to injury in the eyes of the observers and turned this into an incident that demanded diplomatic attention was that the Dutch envoy, De Marees van Swinderen, also addressed the audience on this occasion and did not hide his country's satisfaction at being put in the limelight by the University of London.<sup>116</sup> Familiar with the British university system but assuming his diplomatic contacts were not, Cammaerts advised the embassy that in the British system universities were independent institutions upon

<sup>113</sup> B. Lyon, *Pirenne: a Biographical and Intellectual Study* (Ghent, 1974), p. 423.

<sup>114</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 157.

<sup>115</sup> Foreign minister Paul Hymans to the chargé d'affaires in the London embassy, Maskens, 27 Dec. 1919; SHL, MS 800/IV/6/ii.

<sup>116</sup> *Note sur les allusions faites aux intérêts belges a la leçon d'ouverture du Dr. GEYL comme Professor of Dutch Studies, University College, London, à la rentrée d'Automne 1919*, accompanying a letter by Hymans to Maskens, 27 Dec. 1919; SHL, MS 800/IV/6/ii.

which government intervention would have little, if not an adverse, effect, hence the need to contain the problem with a counterinitiative:

Because the University College is autonomous and the Chair of 'Dutch Studies' (we would prefer to translate it as Netherlandic or Hollando-Belgian Studies) has been created with the help of a private funds mainly from South Africa, the English government bears no responsibility and has no control of the matter.<sup>117</sup>

In response to Cammaerts' report, which the *chargé d'affaires* sent on to Brussels, Paul Hymans, the Belgian foreign minister, replied on 27 December 1919:

Without doubt you will be able to agree with M. Cammaerts to let the Rector [Provost] of University College or other personalities from the academic world know how unpleasant Dr *Geyl's* statements are for our country. This communication should however be of an informal and discreet nature. It would be desirable to take advantage of the appointment to put forward, as a personal suggestion, the idea of creating a Chair for the history of Belgium – a chair that would be entrusted to a Belgian professor. I would be interested to know the response to this by the Rector of University College.<sup>118</sup>

Pursuing this suggestion, Cammaerts drew up a scoping document for the proposed department of Belgian studies, which was passed on to the university through various channels. Following Hymans' suggestion to focus on history (necessary, if the Belgian chair was to function as an antidote to Geyl's influence), it set out the proposed chair's multidisciplinary remit as follows:

The ground to be covered by the department of Belgian studies would necessarily include the history of the origins and development of Belgian nationality from the early Middle Ages until now with special reference to the great periods of artistic and intellectual efflorescence such as the Age of the Communes, the Burgundian period, the late Renaissance and the Modern Movement. The latter movement would naturally bring in the study of Belgian contemporary literature in Flemish and in French.

Such studies would show that though Belgium has no particular language, she has a distinct civilisation partaking of the qualities of the two groups forming her population. The study of this civilisation is of special interest to British students owing to the frequent political, intellectual and economic intercourse between the two countries throughout history. Special stress would be laid on these relationships. Belgian art and architecture would be considered more

<sup>117</sup> *Note sur les allusions faites aux intérêts belges.*

<sup>118</sup> [Paul] Hymans, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, à Monsieur [Charles] Maskens, chargé d'Affaires, ambassade de Belgique, Londres. Bruxelles, le 27 décembre 1919. N° d'ordre 1816; SHL, MS 800/IV/6/1.

from the point of view of national development than from that of the History of Art. The object of the department should be the study of Belgian civilisation rather than the political history of Belgium.<sup>119</sup>

On the practicalities of the proposed chair, Cammaerts added that it would be easy to find a person sufficiently competent in history, art and literature to deal with the subject adequately but thought it advisable to set aside a small pot of money for a complementary annual lecture series on contemporary Belgian literature, written either in French or Flemish, for which specialists and men of letters could be brought in from the outside. In order to avoid any overlap with Geyl's existing Dutch department, the Belgian department would not deal with Dutch history, or literature, from the time of the sixteenth-century partition of the Low Countries onwards.

In his role as secretary of the Anglo-Belgian Union, Cammaerts also visited the academic registrar of the University of London, Sir Philip Joseph Hartog. At a higher level, Algernon Maudslay and Sir Cecil Hertslet, the latter a former British Consul General for Belgium from a family of influential Foreign Office librarians,<sup>120</sup> had a meeting with the vice-chancellor of the University of London, Sir Edwin Cooper Perry. An undated letter from the two men to the ambassador specifically made the point that the establishment of the Belgian chair should be seen not just as an end in itself but also as a containment strategy against Geyl's activities. In particular they pointed out that:

As long as such a foundation does not exist, it may seem difficult to limit the scope of Professor Geyl's lectures, though his project of dealing specifically with Dutch–Belgian relations, if correctly reported, appears at least timely. The mere fact that the holder of the Dutch chair is giving so much importance to purely Belgian questions seems to prove that he would be the first to recognize the necessity of Belgian teaching in the University.<sup>121</sup>

The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm by Cooper Perry. Busy with the wider reorganization of the university along regional ('area studies') lines, as part of which many 'foreign' chairs were founded, the vice-chancellor responded in a confidential letter of 15 March 1920:

I quite sympathise with the feeling of a Belgian that Belgian History is being taught to the English by a Dutch professor, and I suppose that later on we

<sup>119</sup> Minutes of Academic Council, no. 636 (1 March 1920), 'Proposed establishment of a chair of Belgian studies'. SHL, MS 800/IV/7/II.

<sup>120</sup> On Cecil Hertslet KBE of Ramsgate, England (1850–1934), see 'Sir Cecil Hertslet', *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 1934, p. 2 and *The Rotarian*, April 1934, p. 39.

<sup>121</sup> [Maudslay] to [Baron de Moncheur, Ambassador of Belgium], n. d.; SHL, MS 800/IV/6/2.



shall have the question of nationality in an acute form if we should establish any Chair specially concerned with the Croatians, Serbians, or Yugo-Slavs. I imagine that some weeks will elapse before all these Boards have had time to report, and I will let you know what is happening later.<sup>122</sup>

An enclosed extract from the minutes of the academic council, the central body of the university, showed that Cammaerts' memorandum had been considered and referred to the five relevant boards of studies whose remit the proposed interdisciplinary chair would straddle (the faculty assemblies in history, medieval and modern languages, economics, fine art and architecture), with a request for advice on whether the foundation of a chair of Belgian studies at the university would be desirable and, if so, under which conditions and with what general scope.<sup>123</sup>

Maudslay expressed his gratitude and great satisfaction to Sir Edwin that the project of the creation of a Belgian chair was now under consideration by the university, but had to wait until the summer for Hartog, the academic registrar, to confirm that the Senate, in its meeting of 21 July 1920, had considered Cammaerts' memorandum favourably and subsequently resolved that it:

would desire in every way possible to further the studies in this country of Belgian history, institutions, art and literature, but they are of the opinion that the field is too wide to be covered by a single Chair. If the necessary funds could be provided they would welcome the establishment in the University of a Chair [with a reduced remit] of Belgian *History and Institutions* [emphasis in the original].<sup>124</sup>

The Senate was further of the opinion 'that the field of literature, including literature both in Flemish and in French, could perhaps be most suitably be dealt with by the establishment of a supplementary fund to provide lectures on those subjects, to be given by lecturers appointed annually' and suggested fundraising as the appropriate way to take the scheme forward, as the funds for the establishment of chairs of Spanish, modern Greek, Russian and Dutch studies had been collected by special committees set up for this purpose.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>122</sup> E. C. Perry to Maudsley, 15 March 1920; SHL, Cammaerts papers, SHL, MS 800/IV/7/1 [also: MS 800/IV/37/2].

<sup>123</sup> University of London, Academic Committee [AC], 1 March 1920, minute 636 f.; SHL, MS 800/IV/37/1.

<sup>124</sup> [Maudsley] to Sir Edwin Cooper, 16 March 1920; SHL, MS 800/IV/7/2.

<sup>125</sup> Hartog to Cammaerts, 22 July 1920, SHL, MS 800/IV/8.

In October 1921 the good news was announced in the Anglo-Belgian Union's organ, *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, and a call for donations issued to put the agreement into practice:

The Senate of the University of London has approved the foundation of a Belgian Chair at the University of London and we are awaiting the result of various negotiations to obtain the necessary funds. Nothing would be of greater help than the stepping forward of a generous donor, whose example would most certainly be followed by others. It is sad to think that while most countries, including Holland and Denmark, have chairs at the University of London, for lack of funds Belgium is not represented.<sup>126</sup>

As so often, the archives shed more light on the decision-making process than the published minutes. In his letter to the subject boards, Hartog had stressed the urgency of the matter because it had

been brought forward by the 'Anglo-Belgian Union', not only on grounds of academic interest, but for reasons of a more public character. It has been pointed out that the creation of a Chair of Dutch Studies in the University, dealing with Dutch History and the common history of Holland and Belgium has given rise to some misapprehension in Belgium, and it has been suggested that the best way of removing that misapprehension would be to found and endow a Chair of Belgian Studies in the University.<sup>127</sup>

Whereas the Romance languages board in its meeting held at King's College on 11 March 1920, chaired by Margaret Tuke, was of the opinion that 'on the Francophone side Belgian literature & language were covered by the [existing] syllabus in French, but that they would view with favour the establishment of a Chair of Belgian *Culture* [emphasis added]',<sup>128</sup> the board of history caused more of a problem. Having discussed the Belgian proposal on 12 and 20 March 1920,<sup>129</sup> it summarized its concerns as follows: First and foremost, the historians felt that the restructuring of the university along regional lines should be governed by general principles rather than by *ad hoc* decisions that would anticipate and bias future developments in a haphazard way. Their dislike of the new interdisciplinary form of organization had already become

<sup>126</sup> 'Foundation of a Belgian Chair at London University', *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, i (Oct. 1921), p. 14.

<sup>127</sup> Hartog, academic registrar, to subject boards, n. d., SHL, Univ. of London archive, AC 8/27/10/6 (chair of Belgian studies), 1920.

<sup>128</sup> Meetings of the Romance languages committee II, SHL, Univ. of London archive, AC 8/38/1/2, p. 6.

<sup>129</sup> SHL, Univ. of London archive, AC, 8/27/10/6 (chair of Belgian studies), 1920, board of studies in history, proposed chair of Belgian studies, draft report of the board of studies in History.

apparent on the occasion of Geyl's appointment the previous year and the board now specifically referred to the ongoing foundation, expansion and integration of the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (SSEES) into the University.<sup>130</sup> Its objection was very much 'to binding up diverse academic studies in nationalist bundles', and its position was that 'the Belgian claim could be better met by the establishment of professorships, readerships, or lectureships in the different branches of knowledge and associating them with their appropriate academic departments', not without adding:

But this principle should be applied impartially and Dutch Studies should be encouraged to develop on the lines they are naturally following: i.e. the Professor is confining himself to history and a Reader has recently been appointed to deal with language and literature. The title 'Professor of Dutch Studies' has already become anomalous in practice as it always was in principle.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, as per the university's original plan, in 1920 the department of Dutch had been strengthened by the addition of a reader, Pieter Harting (1892–1970),<sup>132</sup> a philologist originally specializing in Sanskrit, who took over the Dutch linguistic and literary side of the department, while Geyl, deviating from the plan he had set out in his inaugural lecture, concentrated on Low Countries history.<sup>133</sup> The board further objected in strong terms against the broad remit of the proposed Belgian chair:

<sup>130</sup> SHL, Univ. of London archive, AC 8/27/10/6. For the history of SSEES, founded around the same time by Robert Seton-Watson, Bernard Pares and Tomáš Masaryk and experiencing similar inner-institutional problems, see I. W. Roberts, *History of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1915–1990* (London, 1991); M. Pearton, 'The History of SSEES: The Political Dimension', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, lxxi, 2 (April 1993), 287–294.

<sup>131</sup> SHL AC, 8/27/10/6 (chair of Belgian studies), 1920.

<sup>132</sup> P. N. U. Harting (1892–1970) also taught Dutch at Oxford (1923–25), before in 1924 becoming professor of English and Sanskrit in Groningen. An Anglo-Dutch student exchange programme at UCL, set up shortly after the Second World War, still bears his name ('Harting student exchange'); R. D., 'Professor P. N. U. Harting', *English Studies*, lii (1971), p. 95.

<sup>133</sup> The two never got along well and after a major conflict that almost cost Geyl his position (apparently Harting had conspired with Gregory Foster, UCL's provost, to replace Geyl on the occasion of the Dutch scheme's initial five-year review in 1924), the decision was taken to split the department into two, with a view to resolving the interpersonal tensions. The remit of Geyl's department was formally reduced to 'Dutch history and institutions', whereas Harting took charge of the department of 'Dutch language and literature', both safely separated by the distance between Gower St and Regent's Park, where UCL and Bedford College were then located. Stripped of a departmental structure of his own, the developing Institute of Historical Research (IHR) became Geyl's new field of activity and one behind which he threw himself with fervour, before Geyl's friend Neale arranged for the one-man 'department of Dutch history and institutions' to be folded into the UCL history

To the proposal, as defined in the application of the Anglo-Belgian Union, the Board conceives that the Senate could hardly return any but a negative answer. The spirit, if not the letter of Statute 88 [that governs academic appointments] would seem to preclude the University from appointing (or even recognizing) a single teacher in such diverse branches of knowledge as history, literature, and art. It could hardly fail to produce a lowering of the standard of university teaching.<sup>134</sup>

However, because Cammaerts' proposal was marked as tentative, they were not willing to reject it without giving the Anglo-Belgian Union an opportunity to modify it. If the reorganization of the university along area studies lines was not to be prevented, the board further noted that, in spite of its general scepticism, it had been

somewhat reluctantly driven to the conclusion that the University will not be able permanently to resist the various movements towards an alternative re-integration of University studies on what are called 'regional' lines [...] But it is unanimously of the opinion that it should not proceed on purely nationalist lines and that the 'regions' selected should in no case correspond with any particular national State. It would deprecate the institution of a Department, an Honours School, or a Board of English, French, German, Italian, Russian or Belgian Studies.<sup>135</sup>

In the meantime, it would recommend that the application put forward by the Anglo-Belgian Union should not, in its present form, be accepted and that the Senate should inform the organization of the grounds for its decision, indicating that it would 'welcome other proposals for the provision of further teaching on academic lines, in Belgian history, economics, and art.'<sup>136</sup>

The archives also contain a memorandum in Geyl's handwriting on University College paper giving evidence of his attempt to hijack the initiative for his purposes, by suggesting to insert an additional point into the board's statement:<sup>137</sup>

The Board fails to see why the existence of a Chair of Dutch Studies should create misapprehension in Belgium. In view of the close connection between Dutch & Belgian history, especially as regards those periods which are of more than a local interest; in view also of the fact that the sources of Belgian history in so far they are not written in the world language French are, like those of Dutch history,

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department after Geyl's departure for Utrecht (1936). See Stijn van Rossem's chapter in this volume.

<sup>134</sup> SHL, AC 8/27/10/6 (Chair of Belgian studies), 1920.

<sup>135</sup> SHL, AC 8/27/10/6.

<sup>136</sup> SHL, AC 8/27/10/6.

<sup>137</sup> SHL, Univ. of London archive, board of studies in history: correspondence, vi: chair of Belgian studies, 1920 (AC 8/27/10/6): Memorandum (in Geyl's handwriting on University College paper).

written in the Dutch language, – the Board is of the opinion, on the contrary, that the study of Belgian history in a more special sense can only usefully be promoted in close collaboration with the existing Dept. of Dutch Studies, which could easily be developed into a Dept. of Netherlandic Studies in a wider sense.<sup>138</sup>

Geyl's suggestion, however, was rejected by the board, which pointed out that the question of a national language could hardly be decisive, as Switzerland preceded Germany, Italy and even the Netherlands as a nation state, despite not having a single national language. Neither could American studies be classified as English, in spite of the common language: 'Discriminations between claims to national Departments cannot be based solely on language, which is only one element in nationality. Belgian history is not less important than Dutch, and the remark is probably also true of Belgian economics and art.'<sup>139</sup>

Shortly after the receipt of Hartog's letter, the Anglo-Belgian Union began forming a fundraising committee for the 'Chair of Belgian History and Institutions', as the academic registrar had suggested in his letter, to be presided over by the Belgian ambassador. After a year of prolonged enquiries, they had to come to the realization, however, that owing to the unfavourable economic circumstances in both countries at the time, it would be impossible to raise the required endowment and the foundation of the chair would, sadly, have to be postponed. But the organization, as Maudslay wrote to Sydney Russell Wells, Cooper Perry's successor as vice-chancellor of the university, on 28 November 1921, gladly took up the university's second suggestion to provide a complementary, smaller fund for the purpose of organizing regular lectures on Belgian literature.

An enquiry by Maudslay as to whether, in the absence of the centrepiece of the proposed department of Belgian studies, the chair of Belgian *history* and institutions, the Senate would approve extending the scope of such lectures provisionally to include history (which was needed to directly counter Geyl's influence),<sup>140</sup> received a negative response from Sir Edwin Deller, Hartog's successor as academic registrar, who restated the Senate's position that the supplementary fund should be limited to 'the field of literature, including literature both in Flemish and in French'.<sup>141</sup> Despite the disappointing reply, the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* could report in April 1922:

The furtherance of Belgian and British studies in British and Belgian Universities respectively is again being considered, and various plans are being made in

<sup>138</sup> SHL, University of London Archive, AC, 8/27/10/6 (Chair of Belgian studies), 1920.

<sup>139</sup> SHL, AC 8/27/10/6.

<sup>140</sup> Maudslay to Russell Wells, 28 Nov. 1921; SHL, MS 800/IV/9.

<sup>141</sup> Maudslay to Russell Wells, n. d. [1922]; SHL, MS 800/IV/18.

that direction, notably for regular Belgian lectures at London University. While waiting to put the matter on a permanent basis, the Union, [in the] meantime, organised three lectures on Belgian Literature, by Mr Jethro Bithell, at London University (Birkbeck College) during January. They attracted a considerable number of serious students, and were well reported in the Press. Other lectures given since Christmas include two on the Belgian Congo by Sir Alfred Sharpe, at Kingston and Manchester; two by Mr Fagg, on Belgian Art, in London and Southend; five by Sir Cecil Hertslet (three in London and two in the provinces), and four by M. Cammaerts (London, Brighton and Yorkshire).<sup>142</sup>

Thus far, therefore, the attempt to establish a Belgian chair had been unsuccessful, with only a limited provision of lectures on Belgian subjects having been established. While the Anglo-Belgian Union's strategy to contain Geyl's influence had met with approval in principle by the university, the necessary means to put it into practice were lacking. Moreover, some confusion had been created with regard to the disciplinary remit of the chair and the unresolved request for a revision of the proposal by the history board of studies, which apparently had either never been properly communicated to the Anglo-Belgian Union or was not considered urgent by them, given that the necessary funds were unforthcoming, would come back to haunt the initiators, as well as the federal university, almost a decade later.

### *Press war in the 1920s*

According to his posthumously published memoirs, written in 1942 when he was being held hostage by the Germans, Geyl, who was known for his outspoken and often bluntly open views, did not take the Belgian initiative seriously. Showing the same contempt with which he held Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique*, its 'epigones' and the Belgian state, he characterized Cammaerts as follows:

I had an opponent: Cammaerts, a Belgian propagandist from Brussels, doubtlessly salaried by the Belgian government. He was well connected in London's literary circles, a famous personality with many abilities, a bit older than me. My Chair had not existed for long when attempts were made to also found a Belgian Chair whose first incumbent Cammaerts should become. I found the idea risible. After all [this is still Geyl] 'Belgian history' is a construct by Pirenne; since when does Belgium exist? I was treating a large part of so-called Belgian history as a natural part of Dutch history. And [calling the Chair] 'Belgian language and literature' was completely laughable. In the university

<sup>142</sup> [n. n.], 'Activities of the A. B. U. British section', *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, i (April 1922), 73.

negotiations about the proposal to found such a Chair, I have defended this position in no uncertain terms. This was very early on, in 1921?<sup>143</sup>

Self-critically reflecting on his life in a situation in which he could not expect ever to be able to publish his memoirs, he added:

Doubtlessly I did so back then a bit too intensely and lost sight of the fact that English colleagues must have viewed me as ‘partisan’ in the matter. Like in the Lyde matter [a separate occasion on which Geyl’s temper knew no bounds] I certainly gave the impression of being a bit of a wild man and [in doing so] have played into the hands of [Sir Gregory] Foster [the then provost of UCL (1904–29), who tried to end Geyl’s contract in 1924]. I do not remember precisely why on this occasion nothing came out of [the initiative to establish] a Belgian Chair. Surely my criticism will have had an impact. But a year or so later the plan resurfaced and this time my criticism was only taken in so far into account that University College London declined to host the recently accepted Chair, that finally (its establishment no longer being preventable) was established at the [London] School of Economics (or was it King’s College?). It did not really account for much though.<sup>144</sup>

But even when his opponent had not yet achieved the academic status of professor, Geyl engaged in many press battles with Cammaerts throughout the 1920s.<sup>145</sup> In his memoirs he continues:

It should be interesting to see how Cammaerts characterizes me in his memoirs. Not only academically but also in the press did we cross pens innumerable times and often under pseudonyms (but without doubt he recognized me

<sup>143</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 156.

<sup>144</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*. Later addition: ‘My acting on this second occasion is truthfully and objectively described in my letters to Drion. I had already matured a good bit more by then and the impression that my approach made was one of complete self-control and tact. It is clear from the whole affair that I had doubtlessly earned respect in professorial circles.’

<sup>145</sup> Also see Geyl’s characterization of Cammaerts in a report on *England and the Flemish Movement* that he sent to the British Foreign Office in Feb. 1922 in an attempt to garner British support for the Flemish nationalists: ‘There is, for instance, the Anglo-Belgian Union. The Belgians with whom Englishmen fraternise in that society are anti-Flamingant almost to a man. Its able secretary, Mr Cammaerts, a Brusseler, who years ago translated some Flemish poetry into French, but who answered a Dutch letter of mine in English, confessing that his Flemish was not good enough, has more than once written articles in English newspapers and periodicals in which he represented the Flemish movement in very false colours, particularly attempting to deny that it had any special significance for Belgium’s foreign relations’; P. Geyl, *The Flemish Movement and England*, typescript with hand-drawn map of the Low Countries from June 1921 and an amendment from June 1924, bound by the Foreign Office and since 2007 on permanent loan to King’s College London’s Maughan Library, Foyle Special Collections, f. 2596.

as well as I recognized him). I like to believe that I ‘won’ on quite a few of these occasions. At any rate, I can say with certainty that I always put the facts straight, whereas the Belgian position, for example about the complaints of Antwerp and even more about the Flemish Question, was always highly tendentious and rhetorical, etc. Also I do know for certain that my articles in the whole spectrum of the British press, in *The Manchester Guardian*, in *The Nation*, in *The Morning Post* etc., over the years had considerable impact. As a consequence of my actions, because I was pretty much the only person writing about these matters, a certain understanding of the main facts of the Belgian–Dutch conflict and of the nationalities question in Belgium began to develop both in political and journalistic circles. Nobody in [the Dutch government in] The Hague wanted to regard the latter issue as something in our national interest, a view that I have never accepted but confronted straight on. But the former was justifiably one of my greatest achievements [‘een pluim op mijn hoed’], something I was particularly proud of. It was noticed immediately and explains why I was in the Dutch ministry’s good books and why I had some pull with them in the other matter.<sup>146</sup>

As Geyl indicates, his interventions had indeed been instrumental in fending off Belgian claims on Dutch territory during the Paris Peace Conference and especially in the subsequent Dutch–Belgian negotiations about international arrangements regarding traffic on the River Scheldt. One of the longest-running conflicts in European history – ever since the sixteenth-century partition of the Low Countries the port of Antwerp could only be accessed via Dutch territory – Belgium had thought the time ripe to redress the issue in Versailles by laying claim to Zeeuws Vlaanderen, the river’s Dutch southern bank, as well as to the Limburg appendix around the city of Maastricht, causing outcries in the Netherlands, which had been neutral during the war.<sup>147</sup> In intemperate statements in Robert Seton-Watson’s journal *The New Europe*, which the editor presented with a commentary on the role of small nations among the big powers at the peace conference,<sup>148</sup> as well as in a public podium discussion in the National Liberal Club, Geyl had also directly clashed with Cammaerts on the issue

<sup>146</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 157.

<sup>147</sup> On the Scheldt question, see Geyl’s student Stanley Thomas Bindoff’s *The Scheldt Question to 1839* (London, 1945); [G. W. Prothero], *Question of the Scheldt* (Handbooks prepared under the direction of the Historical Section of the Foreign Office, no. 28) (London, 1918); S. Marks, *Innocent Abroad: Belgium at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Chapel Hill, 1981); H. P. Tuyl van Serooskerken, *Small Powers in a Big Power World: The Belgian–Dutch Conflict at Versailles, 1919* (History of Warfare) (Leiden/Boston, 2017).

<sup>148</sup> É. Cammaerts, ‘The revision of the 1839 treaties’, *The New Europe*, cxli (31 July 1919), 53–7; P. Geyl, ‘Holland and Belgium’, *The New Europe*, cxlvii (14 Aug. 1919), 112–16.



in the summer of 1919, and the altercations continued throughout the 1920s in discussions about the Dutch–Belgian treaty on the Scheldt.

A further instance of Geyl’s anti-Belgian activities, quoted in Bryce Lyon’s biography of Pirenne, is a report by Baron Émile de Cartier de Marchienne, the Belgian ambassador in London, to the Belgian foreign minister, Paul Hymans,<sup>149</sup> which summarized a public lecture Geyl had given at Morley College, University of London, entitled ‘State and nationalities in modern views of Netherlandic history’. In this talk, according to the report, Geyl proclaimed ‘Belgium an artificial state, asserted that Holland and Flanders should comprise one state, and that they did not was disastrous. Its conclusion was that Pirenne’s thesis had no solid foundation.’<sup>150</sup> Hymans urged Pirenne, the most famous Belgian historian of his time, who in his magnum opus *Histoire de Belgique* (1900–32) had argued that the *civilisation belge* had, irrespective of language, taken shape through shared socio-economic factors in the medieval southern Low Countries, enabling the country to act as a mediator between the Romance and Germanic parts of Europe, to give some lectures at London and Cambridge so as to dissipate the influence of Geyl.<sup>151</sup>

On one of these occasions, the 1930 Creighton lecture,<sup>152</sup> ironically held in Bedford College, home of the Dutch department, Pirenne spoke about the Belgian revolution of 1830. The prestigious Creighton memorial lectures, instituted in the year 1907 in memory of the scholar and bishop Mandell Creighton (1841–1901), ‘reflect changing interests and priorities within British historiography’, as Richard Evans writes in his longitudinal analysis of this cornerstone of the historical profession in the UK.<sup>153</sup> It is indicative of the great respect that Pirenne enjoyed in Britain that, in the centenary year of the Belgian revolution, he was allowed to give his lecture in French, the only Creighton lecture ever delivered in a language other than English. In his report to The Hague of 22 November 1930, Geyl gives a detailed account of the event.

Yesterday, Pirenne spoke here, in Bedford College, over *La Revolution belge de 1830*. It was the Creighton Lecture. The Belgian Ambassador (we only have an ‘Envoy’) presided. There was a large turnout, including a number of prominent

<sup>149</sup> Cartier de Marchienne (1871–1946) had succeeded Ludovic Moncheur (1857–1940) to the post of Belgian ambassador at the Court of St James in 1927. Hymans, during his time as ambassador in London, also had a turn as president of the Anglo-Belgian Union.

<sup>150</sup> Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, p. 423, fn. 10.

<sup>151</sup> Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, p. 423.

<sup>152</sup> Institute for Historical Research, *Making History: The Changing Face of the Profession in Britain: Creighton Lectures, 2007–2016* <[http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/creighton\\_lectures.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/creighton_lectures.html)> [accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

<sup>153</sup> R. J. W. Evans, ‘The Creighton century: British historians and Europe, 1907–2007’, *Historical Research*, lxxxii (May 2009), 320–39, at p. 325.

historians. Pirenne, the ambassador reminded us, held honorary doctorates of Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews and Manchester. We [the Netherlands] have nobody with whom we could make a similar impression. At the same time he is a man of the world: excellent speaker, full of energy and spirit, and skilful. No Dutch historian manages to achieve the same. I have listened to him with true joy and real admiration, and also observed him because his body language was highly entertaining.<sup>154</sup>

Geyl's report continued with a ferocious assault on his historiographical adversary, in which he accused Pirenne of exploiting his fame and being careful to hide from his audience that in reality he was partisan and proclaiming only highly controversial and heavily contested theses:

For an unsuspecting audience, and most English listeners are of course completely ingenuous, this all makes an excellent impression. How impartial, isn't it? Even [George Peabody] Gooch, who chaired my lecture [on the same subject] in May, and has published it since in his journal, was surprised. He did not see how, under those jovial, gallant and witty manners, Pirenne hid his normal Belgicist nationalist propaganda. [...] One has to be naïve to believe it and it was quite obvious that the display of a proper scholarly approach and courteousness was calculated, to let the conclusion 'It was a truly national revolution' come across even more forcefully. At the very last he added an elaborate expression of thanks to England and reminded [the audience] of 1914: something like this redoubles the applause of course.<sup>155</sup>

With his combination of respect for what he saw as skilful propagandistic deception and a scathing critique on the subject (after all, Geyl had timed the publication of the first part of his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* so that it would coincide – or interfere – with Belgium's centenary celebrations in 1930),<sup>156</sup> one cannot escape the impression that Geyl was looking at an

<sup>154</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen* 22 November 1930. Strikt vertrouwelijk (strictly confidential).

<sup>155</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4. In his lecture on the same topic, published a few months before (P. Geyl, 'The foundation of the Kingdom of Belgium', *Contemporary Review*, cxxxviii (July 1930), pp. 588–97), Geyl went even further, citing 'the official Belgian view of the matter, which has been most ably presented by Professor Pirenne, one of the great modern masters of historical construction' (p. 595). Pirenne's Creighton lecture has sadly not been published. On Geyl's battle with Pirenne in a wider context see L. Wils, "Ik gruwde van het wetenschappelijk misdrijf dat hier gepleegd was": Pieter Geyl tegenover Henri Pirenne' in F. W. Lantink, *Nationalisme en historiografie rondom Pieter Geyl: Afscheidsbundel vor Piet van Hees, Utrechts Historische Cahiers*, xxiv (2003), pp. 19–31 and E. Kossmann, 'Eender en anders: De evenwijdigheid van de Belgische en Nederlandse geschiedenis na 1830', in E. Kossmann, *Politieke theorie en geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 1987), pp. 373–87.

<sup>156</sup> Also see É. Cammaerts, 'Geyl (P.), *The Revolt of the Netherlands, 1555–1609*', *Revue belge de Philologie et d'histoire*, xiv (1935), 496–8.

image in a darkened mirror, projecting his own practice on to his opponent. This is also evident in his view of Cammaerts as a mere promoter of Pirenne's scholarship in Britain, for example when reporting to Drion on 2 April 1921:<sup>157</sup>

Regarding Pirenne's theses about Belgian nationality, Cammaerts doubtlessly does fantastic work in popularising them here. It is just that the historians do not accept them. I had already noticed this on the occasion of my *Holland [and] Belgium*, and just recently a colleague [Neale], with whom I am only vaguely acquainted, told me that he had to review Van der Linden's Belgian history (translated into English) for *History* and expressed doubts about the tenability of all the Pirenning [‘al dat gepirenningiseer’], which the new popular accounts of Belgian history are engaged in. He added that he also had to review my *Holland [and] Belgium* and that he found that ‘an excellent antidote’.<sup>158</sup>

It is also evident in the quote used earlier, when he had the audacity, and hypocrisy, to accuse Cammaerts of being ‘a Belgian propagandist from Brussels, doubtlessly salaried by the Belgian government’,<sup>159</sup> while being himself in the service of the *Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie* in The Hague.

Pirenne continued to take a great interest in the establishment of the Belgian chair in London. He would become one of the principal academic sponsors of the scheme, as well as a member of the selection committee (not that, apart from his ‘old friend’<sup>160</sup> Cammaerts, there had been other candidates) and in 1934 would use his influence to request additional funds from the *Fondation Francqui*, a private foundation formed by the Belgian philanthropist Émile Francqui and the American president Herbert Hoover with the aim of furthering Belgian research two years before.<sup>161</sup>

## ***Second (successful) attempt, 1929/31***

### *A gentleman's agreement*

The second, this time successful, attempt at establishing the Belgian chair in London, the circumstances of which Geyl could not remember in 1942, can now be reconstructed from Cammaerts' papers, Geyl's reports to The

<sup>157</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Verkort overzicht der rapporten van onze vertegenwoordigers tot 14 mei 1921. Zeer vertrouwelijk*, p. 1f.

<sup>158</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Overzicht der rapporten van onze vertegenwoordigers tot 2 April 1921*, p. 3.

<sup>159</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 156.

<sup>160</sup> Lindley, *Seeking and Finding*, p. 148; George Peabody Gooch, *Under Six Reigns* (London/New York, 1958), p. 214.

<sup>161</sup> Note by Émile Cammaerts, 22 Feb. 1936, SHL, MS 800/IV/47. During the First World War Francqui and Hoover had organized the food supply to Belgium, heading the *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation* and the Commission for Relief in Belgium respectively.

Hague and the university archives. The level of detail the sources from both sides provide offers a rare opportunity for the study of academic politics and academic intrigue in the period. They reveal a *mélange* of propagandistic deception and behind-the-scenes manipulation of university bodies on all sides and, like in the case of the Toynbee incident, raise important questions about the role donors and external funds play in academia, the relationship between scholarship and activism and also the principle of academic liberty.

Towards the end of 1929 the drive to establish the Belgian chair had gathered new momentum as the necessary funds had finally started coming together. The Anglo-Belgian Union's Belgian section, which over the years had organized a series of concerts and theatrical performances for this purpose, had provided the bulk of the funding, while the British section was able to help with a substantial donation and in negotiating the details of the foundation with the university.<sup>162</sup> In three letters from 5, 6 and 11 December to Count Guillaume de Hemricourt de Grunne in the *Département des Affaires Etrangères* in Brussels, all marked as personal, Cammaerts discussed his possible appointment to the academic position.<sup>163</sup> Apart from the salary Cammaerts would receive as professor, a major point of discussion that reveals a lot about the dual character of the academic post to be created was the relationship between the new chair and the Belgian propaganda bureau, which Cammaerts had never considered leaving. On the question of suitable remuneration, Cammaerts explained why he was suggesting a salary higher than the £800 per annum he had written into the proposals from 1921 onwards, giving two reasons, one of a general and one of a personal nature. On a general level, the cost of living in London had increased considerably in the decade that had passed, and his understanding was that no professor at the university at that point in time (1929) received less than £1,000, so the Anglo-Belgian Union would have to ask the university to make an exception in order to appoint a new chair for less, a proposition that was conceivable to succeed but would hardly be a good start for the enterprise. More importantly, on a personal level, Cammaerts knew:

from a good source that no professor can enjoy a regular side income without special permission from the Senate – that is, from the Assembly of Professors [he confuses the university's Senate with UCL's professorial board here], where Mr Geyl and his friends sit. You know enough of the English mind to know that such a request regarding [work for] an official propaganda office would be

<sup>162</sup> 'Chair of Belgian Studies', *Anglo-Belgian Union: Report for the Year 1931* (London, 1932), p. 2.

<sup>163</sup> Émile Cammaerts to Comte Guillaume de Grunne, *Département des Affaires Etrangères*, Brussels, 5 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/14; 6 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/15; and 11 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/16/21.

disastrous. It is therefore necessary, if I accept the Chair, that I should renounce any salary paid for from the *Bureau's* budget.<sup>164</sup>

Elaborating on his proposal, Cammaerts explained that he was currently receiving a salary of £470 from the bureau, which in a personal capacity he managed to almost double with lectures, articles, courses and related freelance activities, and this was likely to increase further in a couple of years' time.<sup>165</sup> As a professor he would probably have to give up the majority of these sidelines, because the professorial board was known to be quite strict and university professors had to observe a rigorous etiquette. Under these circumstances, a salary of £800 would not constitute sufficient remuneration for him.<sup>166</sup>

When de Grunne suggested to the ambassador that they reduce Cammaerts' salary at the bureau by £10 a month (so from £470 to £350 per annum) and put the sum towards the income still lacking for the chair, the idea came to Cammaerts, who was present and listening in on the conversation, that by giving up his salary from the bureau entirely and increasing the remuneration of the chair accordingly, the difficulties deriving from both the general and personal reasons would be solved. If as holder of the chair he received the sum of £1,000 instead of the budgeted £800, this would still be less than the £1,150 he would receive if his salary at the bureau was reduced by £10 a month, as suggested by de Grunne (to £350), and the income of the chair remained fixed at £800.

Apart from the fact that Cammaerts forgot to factor in pension costs to his salary here, the fundamental problem remained that the raised funds were not yet sufficient; only £720 of income for ten years had been secured in subscriptions so far, leaving £280 to be found. However, in order to avoid having to wait for further fundraising successes, Cammaerts was prepared to accept a cutback of the annual operating budget of his bureau, and suggested reducing it from £900 to £600 per annum, delivering an annual saving of £300 for the department that could be used to meet the shortfall.<sup>167</sup> The budget the *Département des Affaires Etrangères* had allocated to his bureau, originally set at £1,200 per annum (including his salary) in 1919, had been gradually reduced to £600 per annum during the financial crisis of the 1920s, continued Cammaerts, and only recently, in 1928, been raised again to £900 per annum, so going back to the funding level of the

<sup>164</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 5 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/14.

<sup>165</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 6 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/15.

<sup>166</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 5 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/14.

<sup>167</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 5 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/14.

1920s, while not ideal, would be feasible.<sup>168</sup> Importantly, it went without saying that he would

of course, continue to work in the *Bureau*, but I would not be accountable to the University since I would not receive any salary. I would simply continue to take advantage of my office and my secretary, which are indispensable to me, both from the point of view of my work for the Anglo-Belgian Union and for the work I am doing for the Embassy.<sup>169</sup>

In other words, little would change on the ground, but Cammaerts' continued association with official Belgian authorities would effectively be concealed, muting potential opposition within the university as well as in Belgium (Flanders) herself: 'After discussing this question with the Ambassador at length, we cannot find any satisfactory solution which will completely shelter me from malicious criticism coming either from my colleagues at the University or from hostile Belgians.'<sup>170</sup> But while 'the necessity, in which I found myself unfortunately, of having to safeguard my interests'<sup>171</sup> had preference (Cammaerts had a large family, after all), he still lobbied and tried to negotiate with his ministerial contact an eventual increase of the bureau's allowance, including funds for systematically building up a Belgian library.<sup>172</sup>

In his letter to the ministry of 6 December 1929, Cammaerts formally declared his candidature, having been encouraged to do so by the ambassador.<sup>173</sup> In line with the multidisciplinary scoping document that he had devised almost a decade ago, Cammaerts pointed to his 'rather important work on the history of Belgium, from the invasion of the Romans to the contemporary period [...], which has been strongly appreciated here as well as in Belgium (notably by Messrs. Pirenne and Van der Essen)' for his historical expertise, enclosing a copy,<sup>174</sup> and to his *The Treasure House of Belgium*, published in 1924, on Belgian literature of French expression and Flemish expression, related to Belgian art, for his literary and artistic knowledge.<sup>175</sup> Indeed his

<sup>168</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 6 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/15.

<sup>169</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 5 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/14.

<sup>170</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 11 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/16/2i.

<sup>171</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 11 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/16/2i.

<sup>172</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 6 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/15. After the Second World War and Cammaerts' retirement in 1947, the Belgian library would become part of the collections of University of London Library (today's Senate House Library).

<sup>173</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 6 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/15.

<sup>174</sup> Émile Cammaerts, *A History of Belgium: From the Roman Invasion to the Present Day (The Story of the Nations)*. (London, 1921).

<sup>175</sup> É. Cammaerts, *The Treasure House of Belgium: Her Land and People, Her Art and Literature* (London, 1924).

Belgian history had been reviewed favourably in the British press, including by Geyl's friend and colleague John Ernest Neale, Astor Professor of English History, who, while not failing to point out the 'Pirenist' orientation of the publication, was full of praise for its readability and called it 'the best of the recently published histories of Belgium that the war had spawned'.<sup>176</sup> On the basis of this publication, Cammaerts had also been elected a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, the main organization of the historical profession in the United Kingdom. He was also a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, had received an honorary LL. D. from the University of Glasgow in 1928,<sup>177</sup> and given a great number of public talks at the Royal Institution as well as at the universities of London and Cambridge, among others across the country.

In the same letter Cammaerts informed de Grunne about the improbability of the university picking any other candidate for the position than the one proposed by the Belgian trustees of the newly endowed chair. In theory the appointment would of course depend on the university, but in practice it would be very unlikely that the institution would oppose a candidate put forward by the trustees. And in the unlikely case this should happen, the Anglo-Belgian Union could still refuse to transfer the funds, as the principal had accepted that the fund administration remain in the hands of the organization: 'It seems to me that we are immune to surprise. The worst that could happen is that the Chair remains unoccupied for lack of funds, and we are certain that the capital will not be used to subsidize the teaching of a professor who would not represent [Belgium] worthily.'<sup>178</sup>

### *An extraordinary mistake*

Having resolved these internal issues amicably, the Anglo-Belgian Union took up the dialogue with the university again. On 9 December 1929 Algernon Maudslay contacted the principal, continuing the open thread from 1921. Eight years had passed since and the post-war spirit of Anglo-

<sup>176</sup> In an omnibus review of new literature on Belgium in *History*, the journal of the Historical Association, widely read by history teachers in the UK: J. E. Neale, '[Review of] *Belgium: from the Roman Invasion to the Present Day* by Émile Cammaerts; H. van der Linden and S. Jane, *Belgium: the Making of a Nation*; L. van der Essen, *A Short History of Belgium*; P. Geyl, *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations*; *Atlas de Géographie Historique de la Belgique*. Fascicule 6, Fascicule 7 by L. van der Essen, F. L. Ganshof, J. Maury and P. Nothomb', *History*, N. S., vi (Jan. 1922), 273–5.

<sup>177</sup> University of Glasgow. Honorary Doctors of Law [1928], SHL, MS 800/II/1101. Indeed, the honorary degree from one of the leading Scottish universities, albeit in laws and not in literature, was bestowed on him in recognition of 'his contributions to letters, and for his interpretation of the Belgian spirit'.

<sup>178</sup> Cammaerts to de Grunne, 6 Dec. 1929, SHL, MS 800/IV/15.

Belgian brotherhood-in-arms had dissipated,<sup>179</sup> but the university leadership under the new principal Sir Edwin Deller felt intrigued by the unexpected possibility that the Belgian chair might become a reality after all and the Senate of the federal institution duty-bound by their decision (in principle) of 1920 to accept the proposal.<sup>180</sup>

A deed of foundation, in which the Anglo-Belgian Union made itself responsible for sufficient funds to guarantee an income of £915 for a period of ten years, was submitted for the seal of the university committee in February 1930 and in light of these circumstances, the Senate approved the establishment of the chair for the period covered by the guarantee, namely for ten years from 30 July 1930. The financial arrangements were signed off by the university court, the financial board of the university, in early December 1930, and a decade after the initiative had started the Belgian chair was finally ready to be filled.<sup>181</sup> Or so it seemed.

On 12 December 1930 Cammaerts had to enlist the help of Lord Burnham, the former owner of the *Daily Telegraph*, who had been interested in Anglo-Belgian affairs ever since his newspaper's *King Albert Book* initiative of 1914 and had become one of the trustees of the chair.<sup>182</sup> In a confidential letter Cammaerts explained what he saw as an administrative mistake at university headquarters in South Kensington. Reminding Burnham of the fact that 'at their meeting of July [19]21, the Senate had passed a Resolution stating that 'they would welcome the establishment in the University of a Chair of Belgian History and Institutions', as well as the establishment of 'a supplementary fund to provide lectures on Belgian literature', Cammaerts pointed out that:

It was for such a Chair of Belgian History and Institutions therefore, that the appeal for funds was made, and when Mr Maudslay wrote again to the Principal, on December 9, 1929, he was careful to remind him of Mr Hartog's letter defining the scope of the Chair. In spite of this, some extraordinary mistake was made at headquarters, and the foundation was dealt with, not as

<sup>179</sup> Belgian claims on Dutch territory at the end of the war, the Franco-Belgian military accord of 1920 and Belgian participation in the occupation of the Ruhr (1923–5), all of which the British government disapproved of, played a role here, as did improved Anglo-German relations since the 1925 Locarno Treaty and Germany's admission to the League of Nations in the year after.

<sup>180</sup> University of London, Senate Minutes (S. M.) 4190–93 of July 1920.

<sup>181</sup> Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 12 Dec. 1930, SHL, MS 800/IV/17ii.

<sup>182</sup> Like Cammaerts a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Burnham had taken an interest in the foundation of the chair of Belgian studies since the beginning and in 1927 received an honorary doctorate from Ghent University for his commitment. He also served as vice-president of the Anglo-Belgian Union and financed its publication organ, the quarterly *Anglo-Belgian Notes*; 'Editorial', *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, i (July 1921), p. 1.



a Chair of History, but as a Chair of Language and Literature. The Board of Studies in Romance Languages was asked to report on the location of the Chair and to recommend external experts [for the selection of the Professor].<sup>183</sup>

As soon as the Anglo-Belgian Union became aware of this, Maudslay wrote to the principal reminding him that, according to the previous resolution of the Senate and the wishes of the donors, history had to be central to the remit of the post, and that 'if the essential character of the Chair were to be altered, the Council of the A. B. U. would be placed in a difficult position'. Answering on behalf of Deller, who was on a business trip in the United States, S. J. Worsley, the academic registrar, responded with an evasive letter, mentioning that some misunderstanding must have occurred, but without saying that anything would be done to set the matter right.<sup>184</sup>

The blunder had of course not been a blunder, but Deller's attempt to circumvent the problems the initiative had encountered on its first attempt in 1920 and to paper over serious disagreements about the newly endowed chair within the university, which, as a federal institution, consisted of a complex arrangement of semi-independent colleges and fiercely independent-minded subject boards that, at the time, cut across the colleges. With the hostile response of the board of history of March 1920 in mind, the principal this time, apparently deliberately, and quite probably unaware of the donors' priorities, had sent the proposal to the board of studies of Romance languages only, which once again, as in 1920, duly approved the development.

### *Stormy meetings*

Geyl got wind of the developments in late 1930. The Senate had recommended hosting the new chair at University College, given the fact that similar 'foreign' chairs, his own included, were already located there. Along with John Ernest Neale, head of the department of history; Louis Brandin, the chairman of the board of Romance languages; and Raymond Wilson Chambers, the dean of the faculty of arts, Geyl was asked into the office of the provost (the college's administrative head), Sir Allen Mawer, Foster's successor, in mid-November to discuss the university's proposal to establish the new Belgian chair at UCL:

Ten years ago, there had already been talk of the chair; more than once have I heard from Flemish friends in the meantime, who assured me that money was still collected and that Cammaerts seemed to be destined for the post. Now, all of a sudden, the case had been sealed [...] The peculiarity of the case was that the

<sup>183</sup> Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 12 Dec. 1930, SHL, MS 800/IV/17.

<sup>184</sup> Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 12 Dec. 1930, SHL, MS 800/IV/17.

University appeared to have accepted the offer at once. Ten years ago, the Board of Studies (the Faculty Assembly) in History was asked for its opinion, which was not very favourable, but it was also not needed at that stage. However, this faculty has not been consulted this time, neither has that of Germanic languages; only that of Romance languages, and they are now in favour.<sup>185</sup>

Neale, a close friend of Geyl's, was deeply outraged that the board of studies in history had been passed over and, as a matter of principle, vehemently opposed the proposal of a chair for multidisciplinary 'studies' encompassing history, literature and art. He also suspected that the intention behind the initiative was not a purely scholarly but also at least partially a propagandistic one. Geyl noted that among the list of personalities sponsoring the new chair were only francophone Belgians, among whom 'of course Pirenne', and not a single Fleming.<sup>186</sup> When Brandin, the only scholar positively inclined towards the proposal in the round, responded that francophone Belgian literature would be the main remit of the new post but that nothing would hinder the new colleague from also covering Belgian literature in Flemish, Geyl protested because Flemish literature was part of the existing Dutch department's remit. The provost, averse to affronting the federal university, argued that since the chair had been accepted by the university, the only question to be debated was whether to attach it to University College or not. Chambers, the dean of faculty, agreed with all the objections that had been put forward, but thought it better to accept the chair at UCL, where collegial influence could be exerted on the new appointee, a reasoning with which Geyl towards the end of the meeting reluctantly went along when he realized that, in light of the fact that the university had committed itself already and the provost seemed disinclined to refuse, the appointment could no longer be prevented.

At any rate, the meeting on this day had no decision-making powers; the professorial board – the full assembly of all professors and the main lecturers of UCL, representing its academic voice – would have the final say. In his confidential reports to The Hague, Geyl also provides a detailed account of the stormy meeting of that college body that took place on 25 November 1930:

There were a good 40 members present (out of maybe 70). After the Provost had initiated the case, Neale took the floor and contested the proposal for scholarly

<sup>185</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 26 Nov. 1930.

<sup>186</sup> The full list of sponsors of the Belgian chair were Professor Jules Dechamps, East London College (today's Queen Mary, University of London); Professor C. H. Collins Baker, National Gallery, London; Professor Wilmotte, Brussels; Professor Pirenne; Professor Paul Lambotte; Professor Charlier.

reasons. He added that Belgian history was an extremely controversial subject, that the Pirennist direction, which the new professor would certainly advocate, had a political tendency and was anti-Flemish, that the postholder would undoubtedly be a dilettante, and that as head of the department of history he refused to take responsibility. You understand that I listened with enthusiasm and waited for what was said by an Englishman so sharply. After Neale, Professor [Harold E.] Butler, Latin, spoke, a highly regarded man who branded the whole thing as propaganda and noted that Flemish literature was already taught (by [Jacob] Haantjes); before ending with 'We are better without it.'<sup>187</sup>

Next, Geyl took the floor himself. Pointing to the fact that the university had consulted only the board of Romance languages, whereas the board of Germanic languages had been ignored, while at the same time being told that if the appointee so wished, he could also deal with Flemish literature, Geyl elaborated:

Now this involves us in all sorts of difficulties. Flemish literature is a branch of Netherlandic literature, and as Prof. Butler said, provision has been made for the study and teaching of it at this College by the institution of the Readership of Dutch Language and Literature. Dutch here is the translation of *Nederlandsch*, Netherlandic, which in this context includes both Holland-Dutch and Flemish. The Dutch Reader, Dr Haantjes, actually lectures, and has always lectured, on Flemish Mediaeval and Modern writers as well as on Dutch, and he could not do otherwise. This interpretation is the only possible one, and it is in fact the generally accepted interpretation both in Dutch and in Belgian Universities.<sup>188</sup>

Geyl also raised the spectre of reputational damage. Warning of the impact on public and academic opinion in Flanders, he told the assembly that he knew Belgium almost as well as his country of origin, that the political situation there was very polarized and that everything tended to be looked upon as either pro- or anti-Flemish. However, it was not political opinion that he was (pretending to be) worried about but Flemish scholarship as for example represented by the Royal Flemish Academy in Ghent, which he expected would resent the appointment.<sup>189</sup> According to Geyl's account, his reasoning was heard in breathless silence, interrupted only by laughter when he assured that at least there would be no repercussions in Holland. When Chambers, the dean, suggested the offer be accepted, if only to keep the Belgian chair

<sup>187</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 26 Nov. 1930.

<sup>188</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 26 Nov. 1930. On Jacob Haantjes, in 1924 Harting's successor as reader for Dutch language and literature, see the biography in Frisian language: Jelle Hindriks Brouwer, *Oantinkens oan Jacob Haantjes, 1899–1956, meast út syn briefwiksel* (Ljouwert, 1960).

<sup>189</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 26 Nov. 1930.

under control, as by rejecting it the board would simply send it to another college within the university, Geyl abstained from commenting.

What followed, as in the case of Toynbee's dismissal from the Koraeis chair for modern Greek at King's College (1924),<sup>190</sup> soon became a fundamental debate about the touchy subject of academic freedom. The provost, retreating in light of the forceful opposition from the faculty assembly, suggested that if the board were seriously contemplating rejecting the offer, good reasons would need to be given at least, and that it was impossible for a decision already taken by the university to be branded as propagandistic or not scholarly enough in nature, whereupon Neale took it upon himself to state, according to Geyl's account, that this would rob the professorial board of all freedom of decision. His intervention apparently struck a chord in the audience, already distrustful of the university leadership. An attempt by a few junior board members to allow the provost a face-saving retreat with the suggestion of rejecting the proposal under the pretext of lack of office space, was turned down by senior members and it was put on the record that important principles such as academic liberty must also be defended against university authorities.<sup>191</sup>

Finally, George Barker Jeffery, a mathematical physicist, proposed a motion that delegated the drafting of a response note declining the offer to host the Belgian chair at UCL to a new subcommittee of the professorial board, to which, along with Brandin and Chambers, all the main opponents of the proposed chair were appointed, including Neale, Geyl and J. G. Robertson, the chairman of the board of Germanic languages (who had been absent from the meeting), to be discussed and voted upon at the board's next regular meeting. Concluding his report to Drion, Geyl added his assessment of the situation:

[I]t is of great importance to me for various reasons. This whole Belgian-chair plan has been directed against me like a *counterblast* [he uses this English term in the Dutch original]. There is no doubt that Cammaerts has the intention of drawing the available £800 for ten years, professing an academic title and promoting propagandist activity. To participate in education, as I do, as does Haantjes, who teaches the language [does not occur to him], according to the Provost he would earn his salary with 'a few public lectures'.<sup>192</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Clogg, *Politics and the Academy*; W. H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: a Life* (New York, 1989), pp. 92–120.

<sup>191</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 26 Nov. 1930.

<sup>192</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 26 Nov. 1930.

Two weeks later, in his next report to The Hague, of 13 December 1930,<sup>193</sup> Geyl could report that the subcommittee meeting had gone entirely according to his wishes. He had prepared a response note for the professorial board accepting the chair at University College under the condition that it would be limited to 'Belgian literature of French expression', based on the fact that only the board of Romance languages had been consulted and that the list of external experts to help in selecting the candidate had been drawn up by that board, but could steer the discussions in a way that a motion quite similar to what he had envisaged emerged and he did not have to produce the one he had prepared as a back-up. In his report Geyl notes that 'Brandin was strangely quiet and the Provost extremely obedient' during this meeting, which indicates that Geyl sensed that something was going on but did not know precisely what. At any rate, left to themselves, in his opinion, the committee would probably not have accepted the limitation of the chair's remit so easily. In its next meeting the professorial board would now be presented with a motion to accept the proposed chair on the assumption that the field of study would be circumscribed as 'mainly Belgian literature of French expression',<sup>194</sup> an outcome that Geyl considered very satisfying, although the 'mainly' qualifier allowed the proposal to be a bit less strict than the one he had prepared. However, this was outweighed by the fact that he was not seen as the instigator of the limitation. While it was now certain that his Belgian nemesis would equal him in academic status, and according to Geyl's verdict 'on a very thin scholarly basis, as a kind of decoration of his propagandistic activity', this could not have been prevented because of the federal university's precipitate acceptance of the chair, but 'at least now it will be very difficult for [Cammaerts] to venture into my field, history, and he will have to leave Flemish literature to my colleague Haantjes; while the College's general attention has been drawn to the possibility of a propagandistic abuse of his position.' As Geyl reported to Drion, 'It is almost impossible that anything will be changed.'<sup>195</sup>

#### *Anglo-Belgian countermeasures*

The Anglo-Belgian Union in the meantime had continued its efforts to rectify the situation in its favour. Realizing the importance of the professorial board's weight in the university's decision-making process, and that it was 'very likely be favourable to the foundation of a Chair of

<sup>193</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 13 Dec. 1930.

<sup>194</sup> Motion in the annex to NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 17 Dec. 1930.

<sup>195</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 13 Dec. 1930.

Belgian Studies – that is to say of Belgian Literature of French expression – at University College’, a formulation that was completely unacceptable to the organisation, Cammaerts felt ‘that some steps ought to be taken to avoid such a decision, which might be difficult to rescind.’ He arranged a meeting with Worsley, the academic registrar, at the same time asking Lord Burnham ‘to have a word with [Worsley] on the telephone, in order to prevent the Professorial Board of University College from taking a final decision, or to persuade them to postpone the whole matter pending some alteration of the Terms of Reference.’<sup>196</sup>

Lord Burnham responded on 16 December 1930, saying that he ‘was much perturbed at any variation of the original terms of acceptance’, but that Mr Maudslay had told him on the telephone that morning that, as far as he could tell, he had put the matter right with the registrar, ‘who in turn will communicate with the Professorial Board of University College in time for them to make their report,’<sup>197</sup> possibly the intervention that Geyl had sensed but had not been able to put his finger on during the last board meeting. Cammaerts and Maudslay also called on the Belgian ambassador, who was:

strongly of the opinion that the essential character of the foundation cannot be altered, not only because it would be contrary to the wishes of the donors, but also because the scope of the Chair would be far too limited and would encroach on the department of the Chairs of French and Dutch Literature. We must also foresee that Flemish opinion in Belgium would look askance at the foundation of a Chair of Belgian Literature in a foreign country, in which Flemish literature would not be adequately treated. I presume that, at their next meeting, the Senate may, on the strength of our protest, modify their recommendations, but it would perhaps be easier for them to do so if the Professorial Board of University College had not delivered their opinion.<sup>198</sup>

Consequently, in his next report, of 17 December, Geyl had to inform Drion that ‘the question of the Belgian Chair’ was far from over after all. At the meeting of the professorial board the day before, the provost had reported that on the morning of that very day, in response to a copy of the draft motion that the board was about to adopt and that he had sent in confidence to university headquarters as a courtesy, he had received a cautionary reply notifying him of the contract concluded between the university and the Anglo-Belgian Union. In it the title of the chair was given as ‘Belgian *studies* and institutions’, which made the limitations the

<sup>196</sup> Cammaerts to Burnham, confidential, 12 Dec. 1930, SHL, MS 800/IV/17iv.

<sup>197</sup> Lord Burnham to Cammaerts, 16 Dec. 1930, SHL, MS 800/IV/18.

<sup>198</sup> Reported in Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 12 Dec. 1930, SHL, MS 800/IV/17iv.

professorial board was trying to impose extremely difficult to implement, and, to Geyl's horror, described the remit of the post in even broader terms, now even including the unfortunate expression 'the language of Belgium' in the singular. The contract with the Anglo-Belgian Union, with this title for the chair, had indeed been finalized earlier that month and, as a deed of trust, was impossible to be revised without the counterparty's approval.<sup>199</sup>

In response to the central university apparently ignoring University College's objections, whether as a result of another miscommunication or in response to the Anglo-Belgian Union's or the ambassador's interventions (the sources do not establish this definitively),<sup>200</sup> the provost, recognizing the irreconcilability of the two positions, now decided that in these circumstances he felt unable to move the subcommittee's draft proposal. Instead he put forward his own motion, which was to regretfully decline the offer altogether, not by using the subcommittee's arguments but on the grounds of the Senate's decision of 1920; while having approved the Belgian chair in principle, the Senate had at that time also referred the proposal back to the Anglo-Belgian Union for revision, a process which apparently had not taken place.<sup>201</sup>

The provost's suggestion caused much of a sensation in the assembly. Professor Jeffery, the physicist who at the board's previous meeting had proposed delegating the issue to the subcommittee, now argued that rejection, and on such grounds, would be a very serious matter, since presumably it would prevent any other college from hosting the Belgian chair and thus upset the Anglo-Belgian Union (and presumably Belgian public opinion) in a harsh and unintended way. To prevent this from happening, he proposed an amendment to the provost's motion, suggesting that further consultations should be held before taking such a radical decision, not with South Kensington, the university's headquarters, where the confusion had

<sup>199</sup> Deed between the university and the managing trustees (Lord Granville, the British ambassador to Belgium; Baron Cartier de Marchienne, the Belgian ambassador to the Court of St James; Lord Burnham, Lord Ebbisham, Edmond Baron Carton de Wiart and Professor van Langenhove) 'with the object of founding in the University of London a Chair of Belgian Studies and Institutions for the furtherance and maintenance of the existing good relations between Great Britain and Belgium'; 'Chair of Belgian studies and institutions', SHL, MS 800/IV/43 and 44.

<sup>200</sup> According to Geyl's report, Brandin, the only member of the subcommittee positively inclined towards Cammaerts, was 'strangely quiet' in the subcommittee meeting, when the limitation to literature of French expression was imposed, whereas in the board meeting of 16 Dec. he was furious about the developments, which would be consistent with Brandin having had knowledge of the title of the role used in the deed document, but this is of course only speculation.

<sup>201</sup> *Record of Previous Proceedings of the Professorial Board in Relation to the Proposed Chair of Belgian Studies*, SHL, MS 800/IV/42iii-vi; NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 17 Dec. 1930.

been created, but with the Anglo-Belgian Union directly, in the hope that a change in the terms of the deed might be obtained. For this purpose, he suggested once more delegating the issue to the subcommittee. Jeffery's amendment passed 'with a good 20 votes' (in Geyl's recollection, many board members had already left because of the advanced time, including fierce opponents of the plan as a whole), whereas Geyl abstained and four or five voted against, among them the philosopher John Macmurray, who in the discussions had argued that 'apparently nobody really wanted the Chair and that new deliberations could only lead to a revival of something that was apparently essentially unhealthy.'<sup>202</sup> In result, the subcommittee would have to reconvene after the Christmas break in the new year.

In the meantime, the principal, Deller, had returned from America and, still trying to attach the chair to UCL, as proposed by the Senate, explained to Maudslay in a meeting with him and Allan Mawer, the UCL provost, on 19 January 1931 that if he had stressed the literary side of the professor's activities, it was because he wished to avoid any competition to the Anglo-Belgian Union's choice of candidate. Given Cammaerts' strong literary profile, other candidates could be expected to come forward 'if the Chair assumed a historical character and [...] Mr C. might not be elected'. In fact, as Cammaerts writes, 'Mr Maudslay was faced with the alternative of agreeing with the change of scope of the Chair from History to Literature, or of risking the failure of the Union's candidate', adding himself that 'Mr C. would be the last man to call himself a historian.'<sup>203</sup> Deller's explanation was probably a retrospective rationalization of his autocratic manoeuvre to bypass the historians in an attempt to quickly seal the deal, but after long discussions, a compromise formula emerged, calling the post 'Chair of Belgian Studies, mainly Literature of French expression', so as to allow the university to save face and to leave the professor some scope in other directions, something that Deller also put into writing to Maudslay:

I am still in pursuit of a formula which may perhaps save delay and inconvenience [...] The point is this. I gather that the reference to 'French expression' may prove difficult from your point of view, as quite naturally you may have to be thinking of both the French and the Flemish elements. I wonder whether it would be satisfactory from your point of view if we merely referred to the Chair as a Chair 'mainly of Belgian Literature'. That would not exclude either History or Flemish, although it makes no specific reference to them; and a formula of this kind might, I think, help matters.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>202</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 17 Dec. 1930.

<sup>203</sup> É. Cammaerts, *Memorandum on Chair of Belgian Studies at University of London*, 20 Jan. 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/39ii.

<sup>204</sup> Deller to Maudslay, n. d., SHL, MS 800/IV/19.



When the result of this conversation was reported to the ambassador he expressed deep regret that such a modification should be found necessary and suggested that difficulties might be minimized if, instead of installing the chair at University College, the foundation were to take place at King's College (as originally envisaged at the beginning of the initiative during the First World War). Deller, in a telephone conversation with Maudslay on 20 January, had to inform the Belgians that the difficulties would be just as great there as at UCL.<sup>205</sup>

### *Last act of the drama*

In Geyl's subsequent report of 25 February 1931, the silent press agent details the last act of the drama around the Belgian chair, as far as UCL was involved. The subcommittee had met again in his and Neale's absence – Geyl had been in the Netherlands and his ally Neale could not attend because of a bereavement in the family. Finding the committee's report on his desk to be signed on his return, Geyl was unpleasantly surprised to discover that of the two limitations the subcommittee had tried to impose on the remit of the new chair ('studies' limited to literature, and 'Belgian' to 'Belgian of French expression') the latter, after negotiations with the Anglo-Belgian Union, had been omitted. Feeling betrayed by his colleagues on the subcommittee, including his 'good friend' Robertson, Geyl refused to sign and informed the secretaries of the professorial board of his intention to propose an amendment to reinsert the words 'of French expression' at the next board meeting.

Apparently the subcommittee, in the absence of the two members who had been the strongest opponents in the case, had been swayed into dropping the limitation on the grounds of loyalty to the federal university, helped by the fact that the Anglo-Belgian Union had consented to the principal's compromise formula 'Chair of Belgian Studies, mainly Belgian Literature', having heard of Deller's explanation (unbeknown to Geyl) that Cammaerts otherwise might not be elected.<sup>206</sup> Exemplary of this position is Harold E. Butler, the professor of Latin, who apparently stated that he felt no more for the chair than for its opponents, but, as Geyl quotes, 'thought that the promise of 1920, to be explained by the post-war climate, should be honoured and that the College should not let the University down.'

<sup>205</sup> É. Cammaerts, *Memorandum on Chair of Belgian Studies at University of London*, 20 Jan. 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/39ii.

<sup>206</sup> Cammaerts to Deller, 27 and 30 Jan. 1931, reproduced in the appendix of NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 25 Feb. 1931, pp. 11f.

While Geyl furiously tried to reinstate the linguistic limitation, the deliberations of the professorial board took a different turn when Neale deduced from the Anglo-Belgian Union's letters, in which Cammaerts had accepted the principal's compromise formula, that in spite of the focus on literature in the title of the role, the donors were still thinking, and probably even predominantly, of history. Indeed, the Anglo-Belgian Union had assented to the compromise formula with the qualification 'provided that all facilities would be given to the holder of the Chair to deal with historical and other subjects of Belgian interest' and the expectation that the chair would be attached to more boards of studies than that of Romance languages alone.<sup>207</sup>

Neale therefore objected on this ground and proposed a change in the draft 'Statement of Duties and Terms of Appointment' for the new post. The draft introduced the duties of the 'Professor of Belgian Studies (mainly of Belgian Literature)' as 'to give courses and to hold classes in Belgian Literature', but the following clause added that he 'may, however, lecture on Belgian History, Institutions and Art in relation to Belgian Literature.' It was this clause which Neale suggested to be deleted.<sup>208</sup>

In the discussion of Neale's amendment, several board members again pointed out sharply that it was not appropriate to drop conditions which the board thought necessary from an academic point of view on the direction of the donors. 'Not one academic argument', according to Geyl, 'had been made to justify the omission of "of French expression"'. Only the provost had (in a speech that was, to be fair, purely explanatory, not a plea) an argument of the donors, which was apparently political: the reluctance to recognize that the Belgian nation was twofold.' Whereas 'this recognition inevitably takes place in Belgian academic and scientific life: it is, after all, a fact of nature: Belgian universities do not teach Belgian, but either French or Dutch literature [...] And here they do not want to admit the divorce, but they do want to place everything under French patronage by exclusively French-speaking advisers, etc.'<sup>209</sup>

When Neale's amendment was passed by twenty-five to five votes (the latter almost all members of the unfortunate subcommittee, who felt

<sup>207</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 25 Feb. 1931, pp. if.

<sup>208</sup> University of London, University College. University chair of Belgian studies (mainly Belgian literature). Statement of duties and terms of appointment, reproduced in the appendix of NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 25 Feb. 1931, pp. 4f.

<sup>209</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 25 Feb. 1931, pp. 4f.

bound by their signature on the previous report), the provost considered it preferable, given the certainty that the Belgians would not be satisfied with this stipulation, that the board move to vote on the amended motion and reject the proposal altogether, which the board did almost unanimously, a bombshell decision that did not fail to reverberate throughout the university.

The embarrassment for the university leadership could hardly have been greater. Deller's high-handed handling of the matter, committing the institution before having secured full academic approval and at the same time alienating the donors by single-handedly changing the remit of the proposed chair in an attempt to circumvent expected opposition, had hit a wall and been exposed as autocratic. 'So difficult it is here to refuse money,' as Geyl commented to Drion,<sup>210</sup> in a slightly unfair swipe at the principal, as accepting additional resources was not an end in itself but fitted into the university's wider plans of a reorganization along regional lines. Geyl's manipulations then came on top of this, and it was not too difficult to exploit the weaknesses and contradictions of the Anglo-Belgian Union's proposal, which the organization, having been preoccupied by the financial arrangements for a decade, had neglected to revise.

### *Contingency plans*

In an effort at damage limitation, Deller, in an emergency meeting to discuss the fallout of UCL's decision, was anxious to reassure the Anglo-Belgian Union that the development would 'in no way interfere with the resolution of the Senate concerning the foundation of the Chair of Belgian Studies.' Doubtlessly the extraordinary news had gone round in university circles, as the principal 'appeared somewhat reluctant to open negotiations with King's College under present circumstances,' as Cammaerts reported to Lord Burnham.<sup>211</sup> The blow had indeed been a major one, as the future association of the Belgian chair with UCL had already been reported in the press.<sup>212</sup>

As a contingency plan Deller eventually proposed that 'if the Union agreed, it might be possible to establish the Chair under the direct authority of the University and to give it provisional headquarters in the London School of Economics' (LSE).<sup>213</sup> The offer was sweetened by the promise that this arrangement might only be temporary as 'the Belgian Chair would be placed on the same footing as other foreign Chairs as soon as the new

<sup>210</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 17 Dec. 1930.

<sup>211</sup> Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 23 March 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/20.

<sup>212</sup> For example 'A chair of Belgian studies (by our own correspondent)', *Observer*, 7 Dec. 1930. MS 800/IV/48/9.

<sup>213</sup> Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 23 March 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/20.

buildings in course of construction on the Bloomsbury site [Senate House] should be completed'<sup>214</sup> and '[t]he professor would also be given facilities to lecture in other colleges, and would receive full professorial status.'<sup>215</sup> The LSE, not an obvious host institution given its focus on the economic and social sciences, was selected because its director, William Pember Reeves, had shown great interest in the Belgian cause during the First World War, when his institution had accepted a large number of refugee students from Belgian universities, and knew Cammaerts from that time.<sup>216</sup> While in the 1930s it may not have had the full status and reputation that it enjoys today (as arguably one of the finest such institutions in the world), the disciplinary misplacement of the Belgian chair was what caused the Anglo-Belgian Union major concern. As Cammaerts wrote confidentially to Deller:

I trust that my last letter did not give you the impression that the status of the London School of Economics, as a centre of social studies, is not fully appreciated by my colleagues and myself. But the Belgian Chair will also deal with literary subjects, for which we thought that one of the other colleges would seem to be more suitable as a permanent home. This appears to be confirmed by the fact that similar foreign Chairs are established at either King's College or University College, and we are naturally anxious to avoid disparaging comparisons. It is therefore with great pleasure that I learn from your letter of March 25 that the University would be prepared to undertake that the establishment of the Chair at the London School of Economics should only be provisional. This will no doubt obviate all objections on that point.<sup>217</sup>

Of course, the arrangement would eventually become a permanent one, lasting until Cammaerts' retirement in 1947 (and not just because Senate House, the new university headquarters in Bloomsbury, was used to house the Ministry of Information during the Second World War), but at least the disciplinary limitations that UCL had tried to impose on the Belgian chair could be largely ignored now. In July 1931, the Senate passed the resolution that Cammaerts be appointed to the university chair of 'Belgian Studies and Institutions' (an exact copy of Geyl's professorial remit) from 1 September 1931, although still attached only to the board of studies in

<sup>214</sup> The new headquarters of the University of London (Charles Holden's Senate House) were still under construction and, tragically, Deller was to lose his life in an accident during a visit to the building site a few years later (1936); 'Death of Sir Edwin Deller', Anglo-Belgian Union, *Report for the Year 1936* (London, 1937), pp. 10f.

<sup>215</sup> Cammaerts to Lord Burnham, 23 March 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/20.

<sup>216</sup> Pember Reeves to the Belgian ambassador, Count de Lalaing, 30 October 1914; AGR, Brussels, inv. no. BE-A0510/T476, Belgian Relief Committee, 296, Comité Officiel Belge pour l'Angleterre, 75.

<sup>217</sup> Cammaerts to Deller, confidential, n. d. [March 1931], SHL, MS 800/IV/21.



Fig. 3.6: Émile Cammaerts, Jean Lerot (lawyer), C. H. Williams (head of history department, King's College London) in November 1943, SHL, MS 800/I/162

Romance languages and literatures,<sup>218</sup> and on 29 October 1931 he could finally present his inaugural lecture at the LSE, in the presence of the Belgian ambassador. His oration, on ‘The development of Belgian culture’,<sup>219</sup> started with a reminder to the audience of the seminal importance of the First World War for the perception of Belgium in Britain and went on to discuss a series of manifestations of Belgian culture that challenged common linguistic, geographical or historical conceptions. Geyl does not seem to have attended the occasion but, if we can trust his account, expected to confront Cammaerts on the occasion of a brief lecture series that he was due to present at the LSE around the same time, arranged before Geyl knew that

<sup>218</sup> Deller to Cammaerts, 16 July 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/40. In a personal letter, the Belgian ambassador also congratulated Cammaerts on the final success and called him ‘the right man in the right place’, Cartier de Marchienne to Cammaerts, 17 July 1931, SHL, MS 800/IV/23.

<sup>219</sup> É. Cammaerts, ‘The development of Belgian Culture’, manuscript, SHL, MS 800/II/1346/1–18 and MS 800/II/1348/1–25; also published in an abridged version in *Contemporary Review*, cxli (Jan. 1932), 172–80.

Cammaerts would join ‘the School’,<sup>220</sup> as he derisively called the institution. Its subject, ‘the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, 1814–30’, could hardly have been a more contentious topic for a confrontation between the two professors from the Low Countries, but Cammaerts returned the favour of not turning up to Geyl’s ‘raid into the enemy’s country’.<sup>221</sup>

In spite of the setback with regard to the home institution, the Anglo-Belgian Union’s plans to develop a full department of Belgian studies as it was now conceived continued to be high. As *The Times* reported on 5 December 1930, it was hoped that ‘it might become financially possible in the future to further the project by the establishment of lectureships, scholarships, and prizes.’<sup>222</sup> Looking back on the first twenty years of its existence in 1936, the organization would regard the inauguration of the chair of Belgian studies as its greatest success, ‘its most precious dream come true’ (fig. 3.6).<sup>223</sup>

### ***Between scholarship and activism: conclusion***

How can this episode of academic politics and intrigue intersecting with conflicting national propaganda operations that this author likes to call an ‘academic proxy war’, between Dutch and Belgian interest groups in interwar London, be summarized? First of all, it is pretty clear that while both chairs produced respectable academic *œuvres*, neither of them was able to *fully* part with the propagandistic roots out of which their academic careers grew, Geyl certainly not during his time in London. He indicates as much in 1942 when thinking back to this time, writing, ‘I have missed few occasions to argue and spent those years immersed in polemics, right up to the 1930s. Then my *Nederlandsche Stam* volumes were published, which aimed to be constructive, whereas I had been critical until then, but still I did not shy away from polemics if I had to.’<sup>224</sup> But even with that opus, the first two volumes of which were written in London (1930 and 1934; English translations were published in 1932 and 1936), he was aware that he ‘was creating a work with a broader scope than historiography alone. I also provided a foundation for the Greater Netherlands idea in a political sense.’<sup>225</sup> The gradual, if incomplete, shift from political activist to scholar of the subject of his activism had partly been a consequence of the

<sup>220</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 23 Jan. 1932.

<sup>221</sup> NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 4: *Rapport van onzen vertegenwoordiger te Londen*, 23 Jan. 1932.

<sup>222</sup> ‘University News’, extract from *The Times* (London), 5 Dec. 1930. SHL, MS 800/IV/48/11.

<sup>223</sup> ‘Vingt ans après’, Anglo-Belgian Union, *Report for the Year 1936* (London, 1937), 16–21, at p. 20.

<sup>224</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 158.

<sup>225</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 202.

Foster incident, when in 1924 he came close to losing his academic post and Geyl's subsequent internalization of the 'publish or perish' paradigm, and partly due to the realization that in order to compete with Pirenne's grand synthesis *Histoire de Belgique*, polemics alone were not enough; rather, he had to produce a counternarrative of similar format and standing. As he recalled in 1942, 'This book has added inches to my stature.'<sup>226</sup>

Its dual character, namely the question of whether the political intention behind it devalues its scholarly innovation, would lead to some very different assessments of Geyl's magnum opus, right up to the present day, but there can be little doubt that at the time his reinterpretation of the Dutch Revolt, which scrutinized and challenged previous national-teleological interpretations of Low Countries history (Johan Huizinga saw it as a 'valuable corrective to the existing national views of history', even if he disapproved of Geyl's bellicosity),<sup>227</sup> had a lasting impact on later research on the Dutch Revolt, especially in the anglophone world, even if significant reservations have emerged since<sup>228</sup> and 'there may only be a few historians left who accept it with all its implications' nowadays.<sup>229</sup>

Nor was Geyl's dismissive attitude towards Cammaerts' academic achievements justified. In 1935 the Belgian chair's comprehensive biography of *Albert of Belgium, Defender of Right* appeared; the king had tragically passed away in a mountaineering accident the year before. It was followed in 1939 by *The Keystone of Europe: History of the Belgian Dynasty, 1830–1939*, and in 1941 by his biography *The Prisoner of Laeken: King Leopold, Legend and Fact*, a staunch defence of Albert's son and successor's wartime record, which after 1945 would lead to a major political crisis in the country, the *Question Royale*, throughout which Cammaerts would continue to defend Leopold, although the francophone part of Belgium had largely turned against the king.<sup>230</sup> For a long time a contentious issue, this was also the reason why Cammaerts' papers were unavailable until after Leopold's death in 1983. While his works are not completely free of hagiographic tendencies, Cammaerts was certainly the most distinguished biographer of the Belgian dynasty up to that date. He also continued to publish literary

<sup>226</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 202.

<sup>227</sup> J. Tollebeek, 'At the crossroads of nationalism: Huizinga, Pirenne and the Low Countries in Europe', *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire*, xvii (2010), 187–215, at p. 199.

<sup>228</sup> N. Garson, 'P. Geyl, the Diets idea and Afrikaner nationalism', p. 140; N. van Sas, 'The Great Netherlands controversy', p. 162f.

<sup>229</sup> E. Kossmann, *The Low Countries, 1780–1940* (Oxford, 1978), p. 644.

<sup>230</sup> E. Cammaerts, *Albert of Belgium: Defender of Right* (London/New York, 1935); E. Cammaerts, *The Keystone of Europe: History of the Belgian Dynasty, 1830–1939* (London, 1939); E. Cammaerts, *The Prisoner at Laeken: King Léopold, Legend and Fact* (London, 1941).

works as well as Christian writings and, as the annual reports of the Belgian chair to the trustees of the Anglo-Belgian Union show,<sup>231</sup> continued to deliver a great number of talks, not just at the LSE and other colleges of the University of London but also, as in his pre-professorial practice, in various cities across the country, on a wide variety of Belgian subjects, and not as oblivious to the Flemish side of Belgian culture as Geyl had made him out to be, as also Cammaerts' translations of a selection of Guido Gezelle's poems into English show.<sup>232</sup>

The 'academic proxy war' described here, which can probably also be interpreted as a late effect of the 'mobilisation of scholarship' during the First World War,<sup>233</sup> was defused after Geyl's nomination as professor of Dutch history in Utrecht in 1935, an appointment which his old friend Gerretson had made possible and in which Geyl had to obligate himself to the Dutch government to refrain from intervening politically in Belgian affairs,<sup>234</sup> a stipulation that Geyl by and large respected, allowing his scholarly reputation to outgrow his activist side. Intensely nationalistic, Geyl had increasingly come to regard London as kind of an exile and after two decades in the British capital was longing to return to the Netherlands as his natural field of activity. There he continued to build his reputation as an eminent historian, the foundations for which he had laid in Britain – even his later works, such as *Oranje en Stuart* (1939, published in English translation in 1969), rely to a large extent on research in the Public Record Office undertaken during his London years.

At UCL and Bedford College, Geyl was succeeded by his former student and assistant Gustaaf Renier, who, born in Flushing (Vlissingen) to Belgian

<sup>231</sup> *Note on the Activities of Professor Cammaerts since 1931*, SHL, MS 800/IV/51/1: 'Soon after the foundation of the Chair of Belgian Studies, it was realised that the work of the holder of the Chair should be inter-collegiate, and should deal with all subjects concerning Belgian culture which were most likely to be useful in British students. From 1931 to 1939 Professor Cammaerts was able to organize, with the help of his colleagues, an average of 28 lectures each year, including from five to eight public lectures'; individual reports, with details about the courses and lectures held per year, are held in SHL, MS 800/1/1075–1076, and reproduced in the annual reports of the Anglo-Belgian Union.

<sup>232</sup> 'Bibliography of English translations of Gezelle', in *Poems of Guido Gezelle: a Bilingual Anthology*, ed. P. Vincent (London, 2016), p. 229.

<sup>233</sup> M.-E. Chagnon and T. Irish, *The Academic World in the Era of the Great War* (London, 2018).

<sup>234</sup> Although apparently mostly as a gesture to allow Queen Wilhelmina, who had opposed his appointment for months, a face-saving retreat. Wilhelmina's opposition had not been on the grounds of Geyl's Greater Netherlands activism but because of his anti-Orangist works critical of her ancestors, especially his *Willem IV en Engeland* (1924); Von der Dunk, 'Pieter Geyl: History as a form of self-expression', p. 212 (fn. 26).



parents, considered himself a francophone Zeeuw.<sup>235</sup> Having started his historical studies in Ghent, he moved to London at the outbreak of the First World War and completed them under Geyl in London with a thesis on *Great Britain and the Establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 1813–1815* (1930).<sup>236</sup> Serving the Dutch government-in-exile under prime minister Gerbrandy as literary adviser in the Second World War,<sup>237</sup> and as part of this producing a monograph on *The Dutch Nation* (1945), which he himself translated into Dutch as *De Noord-Nederlandse Natie* (1948), it was perhaps inevitable that Renier, who revered his first academic teacher, Henri Pirenne, would come to liberate himself from Geyl's Groot-Nederlandism, but they managed to part academic ways without it affecting their friendship.<sup>238</sup>

Like the new incumbent of the Dutch chair, Cammaerts during the Second World War was also close to his government-in-exile and played a major role in the *Institut belge de Londres* on Belgravia Square, led by Jules Dechamps from East London College (today's Queen Mary, University of London). As his chair had been established only for a limited amount of time and the endowment had been largely exhausted, no successor was appointed on his retirement in 1947,<sup>239</sup> but the 'Belgian chair' continued its life, on to the present day, as a rotating scholarship for professorial visitors to the University of London from Belgium. Its significant Belgian library became part of the collections of Senate House Library, although sadly something less than the entire collection seems to have been preserved in the decades since. The wider political climate that made continued funding of this beacon of Belgian cultural diplomacy seem redundant was not just the absence of Greater Netherlands propaganda from the Dutch chair that had triggered the foundation of the Belgian counterchair in the first place, but the shared fate and far-reaching communality of interests between the two countries during and after the Second World War, which found its most visible expression in the development of the Benelux Union (also including Luxembourg), concluded by the governments-in-exile while still in London in 1944 and implemented in 1948, in stark contrast to the interwar rivalry between the two neighbours.

<sup>235</sup> E. H. Kossmann, *Familiearchief*, p. 157.

<sup>236</sup> G. Renier, *Great Britain and the Establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 1813–1815: a Study in British foreign policy* (London, 1930).

<sup>237</sup> 'Prof. G. J. Renier: the Dutch and the English', *The Times* (London), 6 Sept. 1962, p. 12.

<sup>238</sup> See also P. van Hees, 'Utrecht–Londen: De briefwisseling tussen Pieter Geyl en Gustaaf Renier', *Maatstaf*, xxxv (1987), 162–8.

<sup>239</sup> See the letter exchanges between Cammaerts and the university in SHL, MS 800/IV/31–33.

The altercations between the Dutch and Belgian chairs in the institutions of the University of London were doubtless another unfortunate academic *cause célèbre* of the interwar period involving ‘foreign’ chairs. As in the case of Arnold Toynbee having to resign from the Koraes chair for modern Greek at King’s College London in 1924,<sup>240</sup> having displeased the donors of his chair with his publications about the conduct of the Greek war in Asia Minor, important questions were raised about the influence of external benefactors on internal academic decisions, as well as about academic self-governance and the relationship between faculty and management. While the anatomy of the two conflicts differed, with two ‘foreign’ chairs (and their donors) pitted against each other in the case of Geyl and Cammaerts, with neither losing his post in the end (although Cammaerts’, arguably, suffered reputational damage), rather than the incumbent of a ‘foreign chair’ against its donors as in Toynbee’s case, leading to the termination of his tenure, the stand-off between the federal university and University College that could be seen here demonstrates that the tension between intellectual freedom as the fundamental value of academe and the basic economic principle that they who pay the piper call the tune was, once more, almost irresolvable. While UCL and its professorial board, although not without having been manipulated behind the scenes by Geyl, could claim to wear the principled defence of academic liberty on their sleeve as a ‘badge of honour’ more in opposition to the autocratic decision-making of the university leadership than against the luckless Belgian proposal itself, the ‘Byzantine’ form of organization within the institution, as hellenicist Richard Clogg called it, allowed the central university to place the new post under its direct control, outside of the collegiate structure, in an attempt at damage limitation, and to console the Anglo-Belgian Union by ‘temporarily’ housing the Belgian chair at the LSE, in spite of the glaring disciplinary mismatch with the new host institution.

It was a conflict that did not just reflect the underlying Dutch–Belgian rivalry of the interwar period for British opinion of the Low Countries, which also played out on the public level through rival large-scale loan exhibitions of Belgian and Flemish (1927) and Dutch art (1929) respectively at the Royal Academy of Arts, organized by the Anglo-Belgian Union and the Anglo-Batavian Society,<sup>241</sup> but also played into and was exacerbated locally by the contested reorganization of the University of London along regional lines, a process in which the phenomenon of ‘foreign’ or ‘ethnic’

<sup>240</sup> Clogg, *Politics and the Academy*, p. 110.

<sup>241</sup> Tiedau, ‘Dutch and Belgian artistic and intellectual rivalry in interwar London’.

chairs played a central role,<sup>242</sup> and against which there was strong concern over the delineation and apportionment of academic subjects in particular on the part of London's historians. Whereas both antagonists had started out with similarly broad interdisciplinary conceptions of their respective fields of studies, reflecting the nationalist messages behind them, Geyl had essentially been fortunate to have come early (1919) and, as an (initially unintended) consequence of his 1924 falling-out with Harting and Foster and the separating out of the disciplines between the two, managed to become accepted by and integrated into the disciplinary fold of historians, whereas Cammaerts, arriving several years later, had to bear the full brunt of academic resistance. In these circumstances, it was not difficult for Geyl, pugnacious as ever, to use his influence inside the university to undermine the Belgian initiative, which in origin had been no more or less propagandistic than his own. If anything, looking at the sources of the funds, the Anglo-Belgian Union's initiative had been much more of a 'grassroots' campaign, if this is the right term to use in an elitist higher education context, than the Dutch one, which received its funding from well-established Anglo-Dutch business interests.

Both initiatives had a semi-official character and enjoyed at least the moral support of their respective governments, with non-governmental binational friendship organizations (with significant overlaps with the political and diplomatic sectors in the membership) being the primary actors. Government, academic and public opinion in London as the then centre of the political world system carried weight for both countries, as the issues discussed here were, for once, not 'purely academic' but had the potential to matter on the ground, in the literal sense of the word at a time when borders in Europe were redrawn during the peace settlement following the First World War. Like Toynbee, or even more Seton-Watson, who had campaigned for the dissolution of the Habsburg empire and in 1922 became the first Masaryk chair of Central European history (funded by the Czechoslovak government, but with a remit covering more than one country, namely the entire Danubian and Balkans area), at the School of

<sup>242</sup> In his scholarly autobiography, which is highly illuminating to anybody interested in the academic study of academic politics, Richard Clogg writes: 'The Koræes chair is the mother and father of the nowadays not uncommon phenomenon in the English-speaking world of the "ethnic" chair, that is to say a chair intended, overtly or covertly, to legitimise and promote the national aspirations of the donors, whether governmental or individual, who have put up the money for it. Not without reason, its history has been described as bloodstained'; R. Clogg, *Greek and Me: a Memoir of Academic Life* (London/New York, 2018), p. 3. After Toynbee's 'involuntary resignation', agreement was reached at King's College London to continue the Koræes chair with conditions approximating 'those governing the Chair of Dutch Studies'; Clogg, *Politics and the Academy*, p. 111.

Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (SSEES, then part of King's College London, today of UCL),<sup>243</sup> Geyl was both an activist and a scholar, and like Toynbee and Seton-Watson, if on a smaller scale, he had direct influence on high politics and the redrawing (or in this case preventing the redrawing) of borders in Europe.

But beyond academic politics, this story has also revealed other ethical problems concerning the larger issue of the relationship between academia and political activism in general. At the same time that Geyl left London for Utrecht (1935), *Buitenlandse Zaken*, the Dutch Foreign Office, stopped employing silent press agents abroad. After 1932 the practice had internally come to be regarded as reputationally dangerous, as its clandestine nature had the potential to compromise the Dutch government, and coinciding with his star agent's departure, Drion's *Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie* was rolled into the new, overtly operating, government press service *Regeringspersdienst*.<sup>244</sup> When Geyl, in his autobiography, had the chutzpah to call Cammaerts 'a propagandist from Brussels', while he himself was working for an equivalent semi-official Dutch government organization, he demonstrated not only an unhealthy dose of self-confidence bordering on arrogance (something Geyl occasionally became aware of himself)<sup>245</sup> but also allows insights into the self-conception of this 'alpha-historian', if ever there was one. He had no qualms about being paid by a Dutch propaganda organization, as he saw himself not as a recipient of orders but rather as a senior adviser who quite frequently told the Dutch Foreign Office, whom he regularly accused of 'lameness' in the Flemish Question, what to do. His successes in the Dutch–Belgian altercation over the River Scheldt had gained him credit in The Hague, which gave him leeway to pursue his own political activism in favour of the Flemish movement in Belgium, for which there was considerably less enthusiasm in the Dutch capital. The necessity of informing his main employer, the University of London, about his secondary employment, something that Cammaerts skilfully circumvented with an accounting trick, as detailed above, Geyl apparently had no scruples about ignoring altogether.

<sup>243</sup> I. W. Roberts, *History of the School for Slavonic and East European Studies, 1915–1990* (London, 1991). H. and C. Seton-Watson, *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (London, 1981). Seton-Watson, incidentally, was also Toynbee's opponent in the Koraes affair.

<sup>244</sup> A. R. M. Mommers, *Inventaris van het Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie over Nederland, 1919–36* (The Hague, 1951), p. 7; Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 245.

<sup>245</sup> P. van Hees, A. W. Willemsen, *Geyl en Vlaanderen: Uit het archief van prof. dr. P. Geyl. Brieven en notities*, i (Antwerp, 1973), p. 10.

Some of his practices as silent press attaché were also highly questionable from an ethical point of view. Not only did he, as we have seen, pass on to The Hague internal, often confidential, university documents and letters of his correspondents, and report details of personal conversations with friends, colleagues and opponents alike, but to serve his activism neither did he shy away from writing letters to the editors of British national newspapers, either anonymously or under assumed names. On occasion he even resorted to made-up identities such as 'A Fleming' or 'A Flemish reader', practices that, certainly today, would be seen as incompatible with his position as a university chair.<sup>246</sup> And far from being embarrassed by this practice later on or explaining it as a juvenile folly, he seemingly stayed proud of this aspect of his London years throughout his life and repeatedly acknowledged it, though obviously without giving details. Then again, Geyl never made a secret of his opinion of the relationship between scholarship and politics. In fact, he opened his *Levensverhaal*, another autobiographical work, published posthumously in 1971, with a reflection on the interrelationship of the two:

I would like to tell you something about my life-long contacts with [the field of] politics. I hardly need to point out that my work as a historian has been strongly influenced by it. It is my deepest conviction that history is related to life in our own times, which means practically with the political, with societal life.<sup>247</sup>

Cammaerts' practice of concealing his association with the Belgian authorities was of course not different in principle. The two mirrored each other in amalgamating their respective political activisms with scholarship, if on opposite sides of the conflict, and the ends justified the means, apparently. To Cammaerts, although much more mild-mannered than Geyl, might also apply what James A. Brundage wrote in a review of Bryce Lyon's Pirenne biography:

Further, while Lyon is prepared to accuse Geyl of using history in the service of politics (which no doubt he sometimes did), Lyon seems oblivious to the possibility that Pirenne himself may on occasion have been guilty of much the

<sup>246</sup> Two letters to the editor of *The Nation* in Feb. 1921, in response to one by 'a Belgian Reader (without doubt Cammaerts)' may serve as an example. Apart from writing one in his own name, Geyl sent a second letter, using the name of a Flemish physician in the East End, with whom Geyl, in his own words, knew he could talk openly, when learning that his activist father had just been sentenced to death *in absentia* in Belgium. Also, in a counter-piece to an anti-Dutch report in *John Bull* in May 1921 that he submitted 'not in his own name'; NA, inv. no. 2.19.026, no. 18, *Overzicht der rapporten van onze vertegenwoordigers tot 5 maart 1921. Zeer vertrouwelijk*, p. 1; *Overzicht der rapporten van onze vertegenwoordigers tot 14 mei 1921. Zeer vertrouwelijk*, p. 1f.

<sup>247</sup> Geyl, 'Levensverhaal (tot 1945)', pp. 312.

same sort of thing. Despite his professional scrupulosity, Pirenne's view of the history of the Low Countries was strongly colored by his fervent nationalism and by his emotional commitment to the essential unity of Walloons and Flemings. One can respect the commitment without at the same time conceding to it the status of a central historical truth.<sup>248</sup>

While over time and sometimes also depending on context, Geyl oscillated between more moderate and more radical versions of his pro-Flemish and sometimes openly anti-Belgian activism (the former dominating in his publications and the latter in parts of his correspondence), the question of to what extent tactical considerations determined this restraint remains somewhat controversial – a debate Jo Tollebeek aptly summarizes as follows: 'While Geyl showed himself to be a reformist in concrete politics, in his heart he was a revolutionary.'<sup>249</sup> Growing concern about preserving his professional reputation as a historian, the more he became accepted within the profession, will have played a role, as has the turn towards antidemocratic and national-socialist ideas of large parts of the movement he felt part of, something there can be no doubt he thoroughly disapproved of. For all the contradictions in Geyl's peculiar form of national liberalism, the liberal side won out in the end.<sup>250</sup>

If one looks at the afterlife of the Dutch–Belgian 'academic proxy war' in London, the most striking fact is that the British perception of the Benelux countries and of Low Countries history, which was largely non-existent before the First World War, was shaped in this time, and remained dominant throughout a good part of the twentieth century. As Alastair Duke pointed out in a review of Geyl's autobiography:

When Pieter Geyl died on New Year's Eve 1966, he was one of only two Dutch historians – the other was Johan Huizinga – with a truly international reputation. As far as the then monoglot Anglo-Saxon historical world was concerned he was quite simply *the* historian of the Low Countries. He owed that position partly to the fortuitous circumstance that while his history of the Dutch-speaking Netherlands was available in English, Henri Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* had

<sup>248</sup> J. A. Brundage, '[Review of] *Henri Pirenne: a Biographical and Intellectual Study* by Bryce Lyon', *Speculum*, liv (Jan. 1979), 174–6, at p. 175f.

<sup>249</sup> J. Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 330: 'Kortom: Geyl toonde zich in de concrete politiek wel een reformist; in zijn striven was hij echter een revolutionair.'

<sup>250</sup> With Willem Schermerhorn, later to be the first Dutch prime minister after the Second World War, and others, Geyl in 1935 founded the *Nederlandsche Beweging voor Eenheid door Democratie* (Dutch Movement for Unity through Democracy), which sought to defend liberal democracy against both fascism and communism. Also see I. J. H. Worst, 'De laatste Loevesteiner: Liberalisme en nationalisme bij Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)', *BMGN*, ic (1984), 201–218, at p. 211.

not been translated. His down-to-earth critique of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* was applauded by professional historians queasy about the Englishman's meta-history. Geyl was then a real star in the historical firmament.<sup>251</sup>

There can be no doubt that Geyl left his stamp on the field of Low Countries history in anglophone academia. While he justifiably earned the respect of his British colleagues with his scholarly achievements, Geyl, who would later (as part of his altercation with Toynbee) publish on *Use and Abuse of History* (his 1954 Terry Lecture at Yale),<sup>252</sup> also did his utmost to spread in Britain his not entirely impartial views of Low Countries history as generally accepted historical truths. In this, he could count on the material support of the University of London's Dutch studies fund, beginning with his *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations* (1920), copies of which, with support from the fund, were distributed to every professional historian in the UK. The publication of the first volume of his magnum opus *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (which Geyl had translated himself) and the translation of the second and third parts into English by his student Stanley Thomas Bindoff, later Professor of History at Queen Mary, University of London, were also heavily subsidized by the committee (so indirectly, as Marees van Swinderen, the Dutch envoy, was then presiding, also with official Dutch backing), the third part even after Geyl had left London for Utrecht.<sup>253</sup> Not a small number of his students also made careers at the University of London.

Still, Geyl's influence on Low Countries history has not outlasted his lifetime for too long. Sad as it could be seen, on a personal level, that Geyl, whose life had been dominated by the Flemish question, did not live to see the transformation of Belgium from a unitary into a federal state, which started only a handful of years after his death and fulfilled at least the more moderate versions of his life's theme, historical scholarship of the Low Countries outgrew his legacy more quickly than could have expected. As Duke continues:

Yet, forty-odd years later, it has to be said that Geyl's reputation as a historian has proved less durable than might have been supposed, less enduring than

<sup>251</sup> A. Duke, '[Review of] P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef. Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar, L. Dorsman and P. van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009)', *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxxvi (March 2012), 88–90, at p. 88.

<sup>252</sup> P. Geyl, *Use and Abuse of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).

<sup>253</sup> UCL Special Collections, Committee for the Promotion of Dutch Studies, 22 Jan. 1932 (£45 [£~2.2k in today's money] for *Revolt of the Netherlands, 1555–1609*); 18 Feb. 1935 (£30 [£1.5k] for *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century*, i); 28 Feb. 1938 (£60 [£2.8k] for *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century*, ii).

Huizinga's or, for that matter, Pirenne's. As the passage of time has deflated the importance of Geyl's sparring partners, his polemics have grown stale, while the vision of some Greater Netherlands state encompassing all the Dutch speakers has lost its potency. Yet while Geyl's prestige as the historian of the Dutch-speaking peoples has faded, his involvement in politics has secured him a niche in the political history of his own time.<sup>254</sup>

The scholarly infrastructure that Geyl created and shaped in London from 1919 onwards, on the other hand, the department of Dutch (that in 1983, when Bedford College merged with Royal Holloway, was reunited with UCL); his own Chair of Dutch history that after its separation from that department in the wake of his falling-out with his literary colleague and the provost in 1924, would eventually be merged into Neale's history department (1936); the Dutch collections of UCL library and those of the Institute of Historical Research (IHR), as well as the Low Countries history seminars that Geyl instituted in the same place in 1924–5,<sup>255</sup> firmly established London as one of the best-known centres of Low Countries studies in the anglophone world, with illustrious and well-respected scholars such as Gustaaf Renier, Ernst Kossmann, Koenraad Swart, Jonathan Israel and, currently, Benjamin Kaplan succeeding him to the chair for Dutch history (and institutions), discontinuing the Greater Netherlands direction given to it by its inaugural incumbent and avoiding the pitfalls of Geyl's intertwined scholarship and activism.

Since 1967, so even preceding Belgium's far-reaching federal transformation from 1970 onwards, at the suggestion of the Dutch ambassador, Belgian diplomatic representatives have been invited to serve on the UCL committee for the promotion of Dutch studies, which used to oversee the academic activities of what now came to be called Low Countries studies, thus formally ending the unfortunate Dutch–Belgian propagandistic and intellectual rivalry of the interwar years at the University of London.<sup>256</sup> The fundamental communality of interests between the two countries, which by now was manifested not just in the Benelux Union and NATO

<sup>254</sup> A. Duke, '[Review of] P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie 1887–1940*'. But note the lasting importance of Geyl's greatest work, *Napoleon: For and Against* (1947; in English 1949) and its central Geylian idea of historiography as a never-ending debate.

<sup>255</sup> See Stijn van Rossem's chapter in this volume and U. Tiedau, 'History of the IHR Low Countries history seminar', in *Talking History: Seminars and Seminarists at the Institute of Historical Research, 1921–2021*, ed. D. Manning (London, 2023).

<sup>256</sup> Herman van Roijen, Royal Netherlands Ambassador, to A. Tattersall, Esq., UCL secretary, 1 Feb. 1967, Royal Holloway University of London Archives, 402/14/7; J. Deleu, 'Neerlandistiek in Engeland', *Ons Erfdeel*, ii (1967–8); 'België voortaan vertegenwoordigd in het "Committee for the promotion of Dutch studies"', *Neerlandica extra Muros*, April 1967, p. 22.



(1948) but also in joint membership of the European Economic Community of the Six (1957), the predecessor of the current European Union, is the background to this development. In parallel with the far-reaching internal Belgian federalization process which in a series of constitutional reforms since 1970 has largely defused the linguistic-communitarian conflict and turned the country from a unitary into a fully fledged federal state, in 1980 a Dutch–Belgian Treaty established the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (Dutch Language Union) as an intergovernmental organization, looking after the Dutch language and *Neerlandistiek* abroad. The following year the Flemish literary scholar Theo Hermans took over the reins of the UCL department of Dutch. And when, in 2004, Roland Willemyns, then incumbent of the annually rotating Belgian chair, was invited to deliver the first (and so far only) Pieter Geyl memorial lecture at UCL, he pointed out what an ironic turn of history that was, and one that shows how irrelevant the conflicts of the interwar period have become today.<sup>257</sup>

<sup>257</sup> R. Willemyns, ‘Dutch: One language divided by two countries’, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxix (2005), 153–74, at p. 153.

## 4. Pieter Geyl and the Institute of Historical Research

*Stijn van Rossem*

When Pieter Geyl was appointed professor of Dutch studies at University College and Bedford College for Women in 1919 he had already lived in London for five years.<sup>1</sup> His position as London correspondent for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (NRC), one of the biggest-circulation Dutch newspapers, had allowed him to become acquainted with the British capital's political and industrial circles. During his years in English academia Geyl continued to influence public opinion and the political agenda both in the United Kingdom and in the Low Countries. As the London representative of the *Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie over Nederland*, a Foreign Affairs agency with 'silent attachés' on its payroll, Geyl reported on the whispers in political corridors and wrote many anonymous opinion pieces in order to improve the image of the Netherlands abroad. At the same time, he supported the Greater Netherlands movement, advocating the unification of Flanders with the Netherlands, and travelled to Belgium regularly to meet with champions of the Flemish cause and to give public speeches, resulting in him being banned from travelling to Belgium between 1929 and 1931.

In contrast to his political connections, Geyl's network in British academia was limited. Initially, he was reluctant to develop meaningful connections in this field and was not really interested in the social advantages of the gentlemen's clubs in or outside the university. His difficult character and lack of humility nearly resulted in the termination of his contract at the end of his first five-year appointment. Saved more through the intervention of powerful friends than by his own persuasiveness, Geyl had learned his lesson and became more careful and sociable.

This chapter aims to emphasize the important role that the Institute of Historical Research (IHR) played in the development of the academic career of one of the most important historians of the twentieth century. Geyl had shown interest in the newly founded postgraduate school since

<sup>1</sup> 'University Appointments', *The Times*, 27 June 1919, p. 19.

its opening in 1921 but engaged with it only after avoiding the premature end of his academic career. The pivotal role of the IHR in Geyl's career has never been underscored or analysed, although Geyl is one of the few historians whose life is studied as much as his work. In his autobiography, written while held prisoner by the Nazis during the Second World War, the few positive passages on his career in London are dedicated to the institute.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this autobiography, this chapter relies heavily on records in the IHR archive, which contains many unknown letters from and to Geyl.

Geyl's connection to the IHR made his tenure in London a success and enabled him to secure an important professorship at Utrecht University (1935), but he also gave something back to the IHR. As one of the first international historians to be attached to the new institute, he helped to build its global character. He played an active role in the academic life of the IHR and created a legacy by building one of the most important reference libraries for the history of the Low Countries outside of the Netherlands and Belgium.

### *Chair of Dutch studies*

During the First World War London became a hub for many international government officials, captains of industry and cultural agents. By the end of the war it had emerged as the political and cultural centre of Europe, and many countries chose to institutionalize the spirit of cultural exchange by establishing university chairs in London to promote the study of their language, literature and history. In the case of the chair in Dutch studies, the initiative was taken by expats from the Netherlands. Key figures were René de Marees van Swinderen (1860–1955) and Frederik Cornelius Stoop (1863–1933). Marees van Swinderen had been Minister of Foreign Affairs until 1913 and had resided in London since 1914 as the Dutch envoy to Great Britain. Stoop, the brother of the oil magnate Adriaan Stoop, was a stockbroker and art collector who had moved to London in the 1880s.

In 1918 the University of London approved the formation of a committee for the promotion of Dutch studies with Marees van Swinderen as honorary president and Stoop as honorary treasurer, 'to advise the Senate through the University College Committee and the Bedford College Council as to the steps to be taken for the development for the endowment of a Chair of Dutch, the Professor to teach at University and Bedford Colleges'.<sup>3</sup> Originally, the capital sum needed to endow the chair was estimated at

<sup>2</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar, L. Dorsman and P. van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Archief van het gezantschap Groot-Brittannië [MvBZ], 925, letter of 28 June 1921.

£25,000. The committee was able to raise £21,000 quickly, and appointed Geyl as professor in September 1919, followed by Pieter Harting (1892–1970) in 1920 in the capacity of reader.

Because the salaries of Geyl and Harting ate more than the endowment was able to produce, the committee approached the Dutch government in 1920 for additional financial support. New calculations by the University of London pointed out that at least £30,000 was needed to meet the minimum salary requirements of a professor and a reader. Using Marees van Swinderen as a go-between, the committee asked the Dutch government to match the missing funds, either by adding to the endowment or through an annual donation. In its requests, the committee refers to similar contributions from the Italian, Portuguese and Greek governments to their respective chairs at London institutions. The committee pointed out that:

It [the new chair] can be regarded as helping in a very definite and real way to represent intellectual and cultural sides of Dutch life and thought to the people of Great Britain. It is not merely a case of teaching the Dutch language, though that is done most effectively: it is a case of spreading a knowledge of Dutch Literature, History and Art in the centre of the British Empire, and so, indirectly, throughout that Empire.<sup>4</sup>

From its conception, the budget for the chair included funds to create a Dutch studies library. The limited funds in the first years of the chair, however, left little to no money to develop this library. In 1921 the Dutch government approved the sum of 2,500 guilders (£212) earmarked for the library of the Dutch studies department. The subsidy grew to 5,000 guilders by 1931, with 1,000 guilders to be spent on acquiring books.<sup>5</sup>

With the funds and the staff now in place, the Dutch studies programme was fully developed in the academic year 1921–2.<sup>6</sup> The junior class ‘Grammar, translation and composition’ was taught by Harting as a biweekly introductory course in the Dutch language. Five senior classes were offered. Historical grammar was co-taught by Geyl and Harting. Harting also offered a class on medieval Dutch texts, and the other three courses were all taught by Geyl, covering modern Dutch literature, colonial history and Dutch–English political relations in the Dutch Golden Age. In addition, Harting and Geyl organized two public lectures. Harting’s classes were held exclusively in Bedford College, while Geyl alternated between teaching in Bedford College on Thursdays and at University College on Fridays. At the same time, only a few blocks away, the new Institute for Historical Research opened its doors.

<sup>4</sup> MvBZ, 925, letter of 28 June 1921.

<sup>5</sup> MvBZ, 925, 27 Oct. 1931.

<sup>6</sup> MvBZ, 925, UCL courses brochure 1921–2.

### *A history laboratory in the heart of London*

The creation of the Institute of Historical Research was the lifelong project of Albert Frederick Pollard (1869–1948), professor of constitutional history at University College London (UCL). In his inaugural address of 1903 he called for the creation of a postgraduate school of historical research. In his vision, the institute would not only want to ‘make historians but to discover and spread historical truth’.<sup>7</sup> The outbreak of the First World War delayed the plans, but as early as May 1919 Pollard repeated his request for the establishment of an Institute of Historical Research:

Hitherto no University in the British Empire has made adequate progress in the specialisation for the post-graduate study of historical, political and legal science [...] It has been a matter of public comment that it was not found possible in this country [...] to improvise a Board of National Historical Service for the purpose of bringing to bear upon present problems the light of historical knowledge and experience.<sup>8</sup>

In February 1920 the University of London approved the plan to secure ‘two, or possibly three houses in the neighbourhood of the British Museum’.<sup>9</sup> An appeal to find the necessary budget of £20,000 was only moderately successful, and the majority of the required funds were donated anonymously, although it is now known that the donor was Sir John Cecil Power (1870–1959).<sup>10</sup> In the summer of 1921 the institute officially opened its doors.

In his overview of the first decade of the IHR, historian Joel T. Rosenthal explains the five pillars on which Pollard’s IHR was built:

1) the seminar, that regular gathering of teachers and students wherein methods and sources were explicated, research findings and ideas and projects discussed with colleagues regardless of rank, status, or gender, 2) the library, 3) the Anglo-American Conference, 4) the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research (BIHR), a regular scholarly outlet and 5) the Thursday evening mini-conferences in the IHR to which both committed friends and would-be supporters, invited and coming from many walks of public and academic life, might be induced to join the ranks.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> D. J. Birch and J. M. Horn, *The History Laboratory: the Institute of Historical Research, 1921–96* (London, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Birch and Horn, *The History Laboratory*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Birch and Horn, *The History Laboratory*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> J. T. Rosenthal, ‘The first decade of the Institute of Historical Research, University of London: the archives of the 1920s’, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques*, xxxviii (2012), 19–42, at 22.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal, ‘The first decade of the Institute of Historical Research’, 24.

*The failed transfer of the Dutch studies library (1921)*

Right from the start, Geyl showed an interest in the Institute of Historical Research. In October 1921, only months after it opened, Geyl launched a request that the historical section of the library of the Dutch department (housed in Bedford College) be moved to 'the room provisionally allotted to Netherlands History' ('provisionally' is added in pen by the IHR librarian).<sup>12</sup>

The earliest plans for the temporary IHR building, dating from November 1920, do indeed mention a room dedicated to the Netherlands, next to and – interestingly – separated from the large European room located centrally in the building (see fig. 4.1). Apart from the rooms dedicated to British history, it was intended that only France, Russia and the Balkans were to have their own room. The reason for this is unclear, but it is plausible that these rooms were created to house other collections that were in the process of being donated to the new institute. This could mean that Geyl started negotiating the housing of the library attached to his chair well before the opening of the IHR; this would have been possible shortly after the plans for the foundation of the institute were approved on 12 February 1920. In any case, Geyl's proposal indicates the potential he saw in connecting his new chair and library to a new and ambitious institution, as he admitted in his initial letter: 'I am very anxious indeed to transfer these books to the Institute, as I am convinced that there can be no place where they could be of greater use to historians in general, and I venture to say that they would form a real asset to the Institute.'<sup>13</sup>

Both parties agreed the transfer would be mutually beneficial and were able to arrange the practicalities quickly – except one. Contrary to the general policy of the IHR library, Geyl wanted the books from the collection to be available to people wanting to borrow them: 'As this library is unique of its kind in London and will certainly prove of great use to all students of Dutch History, I should not feel justified in placing it under conditions which would preclude anyone from taking books home.'<sup>14</sup>

Knowing that this request went against the regulations, he offered his collaboration in order to implement the policy:

I should be willing to remain personally responsible for the books and to accept a rule that books could be taken out only with my consent. No difficulties are likely to arise from such an arrangement. As most of the books apart from publications of sources are written in Dutch, they will only appeal to a small number of serious workers, all of whom will be personally known to me.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Archive IHR, General Correspondence [IHR, GC], Geyl, 1921, proposal 7 Oct. 1921.

<sup>13</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1921, proposal 7 Oct. 1921.

<sup>14</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1921, letter from Geyl to Jeffries-Davis (28 Oct. 1921).

<sup>15</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1921, letter from Geyl to Jeffries-Davis (28 Oct. 1921).

## Pieter Geyl and Britain

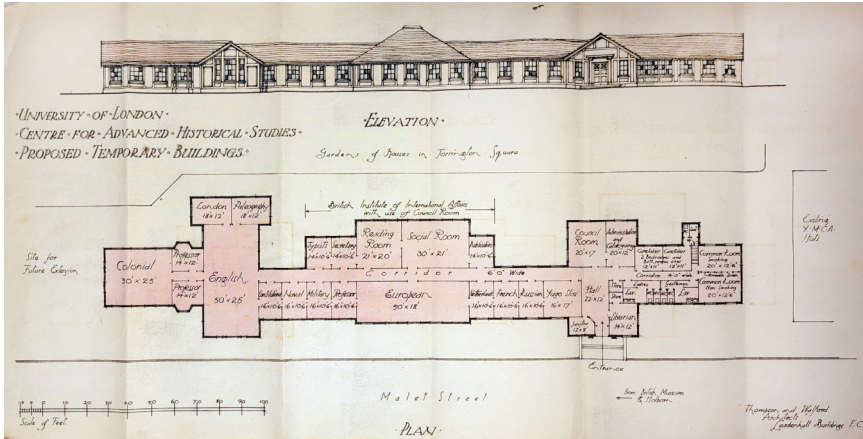


Fig. 4.1: Provisional plan of the IHR from November 1920 (IHR Archive, IHR/11/1/1)

The request was immediately rejected by Pollard himself: it would set an unwanted precedent for the other collections.

But there were also institutional obstructions, as Geyl had taken the initiative without the approval of the owner of the collection, the Dutch government in the form of the Dutch studies committee.<sup>16</sup> The committee agreed to the books being moved on 15 November, as long as they remained the property of the committee. They were to be placed in a separate room and the IHR had to provide the bookcases.<sup>17</sup> Geyl wrote to Pollard one week later to tell him the good news, and repeated his request that the books could be checked out to readers, asking Pollard to try the policy for a year to see if it would create any inconvenience. The IHR consequently agreed to the terms ‘on the understanding that no books may be borrowed from the library for any purpose’.<sup>18</sup> At this point it became clear that Geyl had not informed the committee of the position of the IHR, as its reaction was one of surprise and a desire to discuss the matter with Geyl and the members before taking further action. As no other correspondence on the matter was forthcoming, the books remained in Bedford College; apparently the IHR no-lending policy was a deal-breaker for both Geyl and the committee.

<sup>16</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1921, letter from Geyl to Jeffries-Davis (25 Oct. 1921).

<sup>17</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1921, letter from Geyl to Jeffries-Davis (15 Nov. 1921).

<sup>18</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1921, letter from Geyl to Jeffries-Davis (15 Nov. 1921).

### *Geyl's academic struggles (1922–4)*

As mentioned above, the first years of Geyl's professorship were far from successful. His autobiography speaks at great length about the reasons for his initial difficulties. Geyl points firstly to his inexperience as an academic, especially in the English context. Feeling insecure and unproven, he had wanted to show his worth through his work and publications before stepping into the foreground of the academic social circle. Looking back, this proved to be a great mistake: Geyl already felt cut off from the rest of the history department because of the exotic remit of his chair, and his feelings of social inadequacy only added to this:

I was pretty isolated in these first years. Neither did I attend the monthly college dinners, even later I rarely did. I did not like the eternal chatter; I hated drinking too much wine. Even after I was well acclimatized, I was never able to shake off the feeling that I was not fully accepted, that I could not contribute to most conversations on important and less important university issues, and that, ultimately, they saw me as a foreigner ... as a representative of a minor subject, as the third wheel.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Geyl's relationship with the committee for Dutch studies seems to have deteriorated quickly. Characterizing the committee as a charade, Geyl criticized the members for daring to intervene in academic matters. In 1922, both Stoop and Marees van Swinderen voiced concern about the fact that Geyl and Harting were teaching their students a simplified form of spelling. Geyl defended the decision vehemently by stating that this simplified spelling was gaining traction among scholars and that it had obvious benefits when teaching foreign students. The fervour of his defence, based on the conviction that it was his prerogative as head of the department, soured his relationship with the committee to the point that he described Stoop as a 'dim-witted but self-conscious moneybag' and Marees van Swinderen as a 'little man full of life, a fast mind with little solid knowledge'.<sup>20</sup>

The third and most problematic issue involved his relationship with the University College provost, Sir Gregory Foster (1866–1931, provost 1904–29, and vice-chancellor 1928–30). Foster was unhappy with the poor numbers attending the Dutch studies programme and suspected that Geyl was using the chair only to carry out his own research. Foster therefore proposed to replace Geyl at the end of his five-year term with Pieter Harting, who had more students and had integrated more seamlessly into the department.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef*, p. 87f.

<sup>20</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef*, p. 89f.

<sup>21</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef*, p. 117f.



When Geyl learned of the plans he called out the University College representatives, the Dutch studies committee members and Harting as conspirators, even though he felt powerless. Wanting to avoid being fired, he accepted an offer from the Netherlands to lead the international office of a new newspaper and handed in his resignation, only to have to revoke it soon afterwards when it turned out that the investor in the newspaper had disappeared. In the end, it was due to the support and pleas of Margaret Janson Tuke (principal of Bedford College), the eminent professor Petrus Johannes Blok (Geyl's ex-mentor, who met with both Mares van Swinderen and Foster) and Pieter Nicolaas van Eyck (Geyl's friend and successor as the NRC correspondent in London) that Geyl was able to retain his position.<sup>22</sup>

### ***The birth of the IHR Low Countries collection***

The events of 1924 resulted in the separation of the chair into a Dutch-language programme under Harting at Bedford and a history programme under Geyl at University College.<sup>23</sup> They also enforced Geyl's decision to create institutional connections inside and outside University College.

The conflict with Foster had given Geyl some popularity among his colleagues in the history department. Two young assistants, John Ernest Neale (1890–1975) and Hugh Hale Leigh Bellot (1890–1969), introduced him to Pollard's circle. Neale specialized in Elizabethan and parliamentary history and eventually succeeded Pollard at UCL; Bellot was an American history scholar who eventually became vice-chancellor at the University of London (1951–53). Geyl was particularly fond of Bellot, admiring his lively spirit and academic qualities and relating to him as a fellow outsider, since Bellot had not studied at Oxbridge and came from a middle-class family. As Geyl openly admitted in his autobiography, it was Bellot and Neale who helped kickstart his career by including him in the workings of the Institute of Historical Research.<sup>24</sup>

The revival of the plan to transfer the Dutch studies library from Bedford College to the IHR was the first step in this process, and an important one. Indirectly, it might have been the invitation from librarian Henry W. Meikle (1880–1958) in November 1924 to serve on the library committee for the purchase of expensive books that helped Geyl to establish a good relationship with the staff and workings of the library.<sup>25</sup> On 8 June 1925 Geyl asked the

<sup>22</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef*, pp. 118–23.

<sup>23</sup> 'University News', *The Times*, 20 Dec. 1923, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef*, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1924, letter from Meikle to Geyl (8 Nov. 1924). The institute had decided to expend part of the accumulated budget since 1921 on the purchase of expensive books and urgently required large collections. Three subcommittees were appointed:

Dutch studies committee to restart the process of transferring its collection to the IHR. The committee reminded Geyl why the move had not gone ahead in 1921 and concluded that he had reluctantly waived his request that the books be lent out.<sup>26</sup> A new request by Geyl was that the committee rent a room for him in the IHR. The request seems vague, and was not acted upon, but it would not have been a room intended to house books but a personal office for Geyl. This only proves the extent to which Geyl wanted to break away from University College: not only did he want to move the library out, he wanted to avoid spending any time on its campus.

Since all the practicalities had already been discussed, Bedford College, the Dutch studies committee and the IHR quickly came to an arrangement and planned to move the collection in the third week of September.<sup>27</sup> The move was completed on the twenty-ninth and went smoothly. The few books that were initially missing turned out to be in Geyl's personal library. Some of them eventually made it into the IHR, but others, including several bibliographical works, would remain in his possession.<sup>28</sup>

### *The IHR as a safe haven*

In Geyl's autobiography, as mentioned earlier, the paragraphs dedicated to the IHR stand out as the most enjoyable aspect of his academic career in London. The reading room in the IHR became a place where Geyl could focus on what he most liked doing – research, as far away as possible from university politics. How much of a regular he became at the institute's library is clear from the following example. When a student of the Amsterdam professor Hajo Brugmans approached librarian Meikle with a research question in 1926, he immediately forwarded the question to Geyl, who was helpful but also felt annoyed that Brugmans had not sent the student to him directly.<sup>29</sup>

Thanks to Bellot, Geyl also became part of another pillar of the IHR, the seminar, joining the ranks of prominent English historians such as Pollard, Neale, Eliza Jeffries Davis (1875–1943) and Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889–1975). With Robert William Seton-Watson (1879–1951, specialism Austro-Hungary) and Paul Vaucher (modern French history), Geyl formed a triumvirate of continental historians. As a regular lecturer, Geyl helped

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medieval history, modern European history, and English and imperial history. The librarian asked Geyl to be part of the second committee, along with Dr Gooch, Professor Seton-Watson and Professor Vaucher.

<sup>26</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1925, letter from Seton to Geyl (11 June 1925).

<sup>27</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1925, letters of 27, 30 and 31 June 1925.

<sup>28</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1925, letter of 21 October 1925.

<sup>29</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1926, letter of 19 April 1925.

to shape the educational outlook of the IHR in its first decade.<sup>30</sup> In 1924–5 he took over Bellot's English diplomatic history seminar, one of the most popular.<sup>31</sup> Under his direction, 'English' was dropped from the seminar's title and an international approach was embraced. The following year Geyl co-taught a preliminary course entitled 'Reading of Dutch historical texts' with Jacob Haantjes (1899–1956), who had replaced Harting at the Dutch studies department.<sup>32</sup> Even though the courses never attracted more than a handful of students, they did help Geyl to find students for his University College courses and PhD candidates.

Geyl's favourite student was Stanley Thomas Bindoff (1908–80), who translated Geyl's magnum opus *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* ('History of the Dutch-speaking Peoples') into English and later became professor at Queen Mary, University of London.<sup>33</sup> Geyl wrote a letter to Pollard to recommend him for the position of assistant librarian in 1930 and later negotiated free access for Bindoff to his seminar.<sup>34</sup> He was also convinced that he had been instrumental in launching Bindoff's career by persuading Neale to hire him as a reader at University College.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he helped to find financial aid for the publication of Bindoff's thesis and proudly mentioned in his autobiography that the book was dedicated to him. Another student Geyl supported strongly was R. R. Goodison, who he tutored while Goodison was working on his MA thesis on England and the Orangist party, although in this case his mentorship was less successful: Goodison was not given free access to the IHR and was unable to establish himself as an academic.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to his work for the library and the seminar, Geyl was also active in other areas of Pollard's IHR. He was regularly invited to write reviews of publications on the Low Countries for the *Bulletin* (BIHR) and played a central role in the Anglo-American Conference of Historians (Fig. 4.2).<sup>37</sup> The conference was Pollard's brainchild and grew into the most important history conference in the UK. Held on 8 July 1921, the first of these conferences virtually coincided with the opening of the

<sup>30</sup> Rosenthal, 'The first decade of the Institute of Historical Research', 27. Also see U. Tiedau, 'History of the IHR Low Countries history seminar', in *Talking History: Seminars and Seminarists at the Institute of Historical Research, 1921–2021*, ed. D. Manning (London, 2023).

<sup>31</sup> University of London, IHR, *Fourth Annual Report, 1 September 1924–31 August 1925*, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> University of London, IHR, *Fifth Annual Report, 1 September 1925–31 August 1926*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> It appeared under the title P. Geyl, *The Netherlands Divided, 1609–1648* (London, 1936).

<sup>34</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1930, letter of 25 June 1930; IHR, GC, Geyl, 1934, letter of 15 Feb. 1934.

<sup>35</sup> S. T. Bindoff, *The Scheldt Question to 1839* (London, 1945).

<sup>36</sup> R. R. Goodison, *England and the Orangist Party*, University of London MA thesis, 1934.

<sup>37</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, letter of 15 June 1929; letter of 25 June 1930; letter of 29 Nov. 1932.



Fig. 4.2: Geyl on the Anglo-American Conference of Historians, London, July 1926 (*middle of back row in front of the UCL Portico*), in *The History Laboratory: the Institute of Historical Research, 1921–96*, compiled by Debra J. Birch and Joyce M. Horn (London, 1996), after p. 144 (*detail*)

IHR. It brought the most important and best-known scholars from the United States and the UK to London.<sup>38</sup> The conference was covered by *The Times*, the paper framing it within the post-war spirit of international collaboration: ‘The Conference will be the means of bringing into personal touch historians known to one another only by their publications and repute, and of increasing that individual friendship which is one of the surest guarantees of international goodwill.’<sup>39</sup>

The conference was held every five years and grew on each occasion: there were close to 200 attendees in 1921; 300 participants in 1926; and 450 in 1931. Geyl was asked to serve as the secretary of the modern European section for the second and third conferences, working with Pollard to decide on the subjects for discussion and the invited speakers, and writing up a report on the work of the modern European section.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Rosenthal, ‘The first decade of the Institute of Historical Research’, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Rosenthal, ‘The first decade of the Institute of Historical Research’, 32.

<sup>40</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1930, letter of 25 June 1930; letter of 26 May 1930.

*Geyl as a librarian*

The annual report of the IHR for 1925–6 proudly announced the addition of the Dutch studies collection to its library, with a total of 1,050 volumes coming from Bedford directly, supplemented by a donation of 300 volumes from the Dutch studies committee a few months later. This constituted a 5 per cent increase in the library's total stock of books and made the Low Countries collection a substantial part of the IHR.<sup>41</sup>

From this time on, the IHR administered the annual grant from the Dutch government to expand the collection in consort with UCL.<sup>42</sup> However, the budget was not split equally between the historical section in the IHR and the linguistic section in Bedford: two thirds of the grant went towards history, one third towards language.<sup>43</sup>

Fig. 4.3: Growth of the Low Countries book collection at the IHR per decade

year	volumes	percentage
(1925)	(1,050)	
1926–35	937	20
1936–45	204	4
1946–55	139	3
1956–65	1,345	29
1966–75	471	10
1976–85	708	15
1996–95	547	12
1996–2002	283	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,634</b>	<b>100</b>

For the remaining ten years of his stay in London, Geyl continued to be very involved in the expansion of the collection. The acquisition register of the Low Countries collection in the IHR shows that many of the books were bought by Geyl personally; he then passed the receipts to the institute. He helped to negotiate good prices with the primary supplier, Martinus Nijhoff, a publisher and dealer of both contemporary and antiquarian books. Nijhoff had published both Geyl's monographs, *Christofforo Suriano* (1913) and *Willem IV en Engeland tot 1748* (1924), and for this reason Geyl felt the institute could bargain with them. Geyl suggested that the IHR

<sup>41</sup> University of London, IRH, *Fifth Annual Report, 1 September 1925–31 August 1926*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1925, letter of 5 Oct. 1925.

<sup>43</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1925, letter of 24 Nov. 1925.

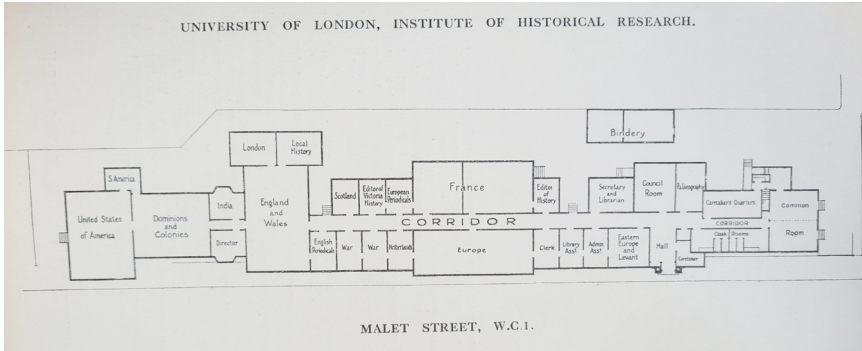


Fig. 4.4: Floor plan of the IHR. Back cover of the annual report (1927).

librarian Meikle ask for a discount of between 25 and 30 per cent. Nijhoff responded that these margins were impossible on books in a minority language and made it clear that 10 per cent was the most he could offer.<sup>44</sup> Nijhoff continued to supply books to the IHR after Geyl's departure, largely because the firm was able to deliver not only recent publications but also out-of-print reference works and rare books.<sup>45</sup>

By the time Geyl had left London (1936), the collection consisted of almost 2,000 titles (see fig. 4.3). This represented 43 per cent of the total collection in 2002 (when the last entry to the accession register was recorded); under Geyl, the collection grew faster than in any later decade. The high number of volumes recorded for the years 1956–65 is because, from 1958 on, the original foundation collection, until then still officially owned by the Dutch government, was entered in the accessions register. In reality, the collection grew by only 295 titles, or six per cent, in that decade.

During Geyl's stewardship of the collection, the IHR was able to acquire hundreds of rare books on the history of the Low Countries. Geyl made sure that the works of important early modern historians such as Ludovico Guicciardini (1521–89), Pieter Christiaansz Bor (1559–1635) and Lieuwe van Aitzema (1600–69) were made available in the original editions. Geyl also acquired more than 919 political pamphlets printed between 1602 and 1814. They are bound in fifty volumes (and therefore are counted as only fifty volumes in the statistical overviews) but represent one of the largest collections of Dutch pamphlets outside the Low Countries. The collection was acquired through Nijhoff, at two points in time: twenty volumes were

<sup>44</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1925, letter of 5 Nov. 1925.

<sup>45</sup> The ongoing correspondence between the IHR and Nijhoff is to be found in IHR, GC, Nijhoff.

part of the collection brought into the IHR in 1925; the remaining thirty were bought towards the end of Geyl's tenure in London (1934).<sup>46</sup>

### *The evolution of the Low Countries room*

The Low Countries room in the IHR was an important place for Geyl:

They gave me a room to put my history books, that I had built up with money from the Dutch Government, and that had until then been hidden in Bedford College [...] I really liked that little library. It was really useful for my own research and it was admired by the English: even they found there a lot of useful published sources.<sup>47</sup>

It featured in the preliminary plans dated November 1920 as a separate room next to the larger European room which was located at the centre of the building (see fig. 4.1). A plan from 1927, after the transfer of the collection, locates the Netherlands room on the other side of the European room (fig. 4.4).

The original IHR buildings in Malet Street were only temporary. They were constructed when building costs were at their peak along the principles of an army hut on a concrete base with a timber frame filled in with sheets of asbestos.<sup>48</sup> As early as 1926, the IHR was given notice to leave the premises when the government abandoned its plan for the new buildings of the University of London to be erected on the Bloomsbury site it had just acquired; the government wanted to sell the land back to the Bedford trustees. Only a vigorous international press campaign was able eventually to suppress the plans. The Council of the Historical Association, for example,

passed a resolution declaring that the destruction of the Institute of Historical Research by the demolition of its buildings and the dispersal of its library, which is threatened by the decision of the Government to return the Bloomsbury site to the Duke of Bedford, would be a national calamity.<sup>49</sup>

After the University of London had managed to secure the site, plans were drawn up for the complex that would eventually become Senate House. In 1931, the famous architect Charles Holden was assigned to the project, which was originally scheduled to take thirty years to complete. A fundraising

<sup>46</sup> 20 volumes: IHR Archive, GC, Geyl, List of books handed over to the Institute of Historical Research (22 Sept. 1925); 30 volumes: IHR, Low Countries Acquisition Register, entry for 20 June 1934, D892–921. Bought through Internationaal Antiquariaat Nijhoff for *hfl.* 169,83.

<sup>47</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in het verleden leef*, pp. 151–2.

<sup>48</sup> *Observer*, 24 April 1938, quoted from Birch and Horn, *The History Laboratory*, p. 63.

<sup>49</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 1926, quoted from Birch and Horn, *The History Laboratory*, pp. 27–36.



campaign was initiated in 1935 to find the £70,000 needed.<sup>50</sup> One of the people who did not contribute was Geyl, who apologized in a personal note to Pollard, explaining that his financial situation did not allow him to make a contribution.<sup>51</sup> By 1938, the IHR had left its original building and moved to Senate House. By this time, Geyl had left his post at UCL and returned to the Netherlands to become a professor at the University of Utrecht. The Low Countries room, however, outlasted Geyl's tenure and remained one of the larger rooms in the new library. Between 1938 and 1943 the IHR library was temporarily located on the third floor of Senate House. Apart from the Low Countries, only Germany, France and Eastern Europe were assigned individual rooms separate from the General European collection (fig. 4.5).

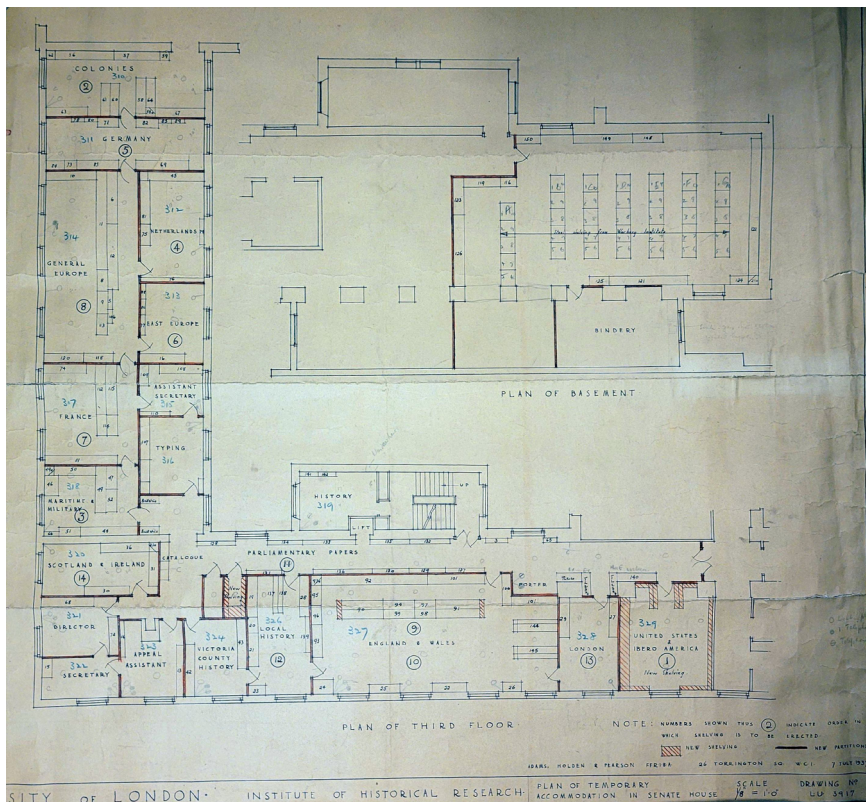


Fig. 4.5: Floor plan of the temporary housing of the IHR on the third floor of Senate House, 1937 (IHR archive, IHR/11/1/10)

<sup>50</sup> Birch and Horn, *The History Laboratory*, pp. 53–7.

<sup>51</sup> IHR, GC, Geyl, 1935, letter from Geyl to Pollard (21 March 1935).



During the Second World War the IHR collections were moved again, this time to Tavistock Square. In 1946 the collection was finally able to move to its permanent location. The library was divided over the first, second and third floors of the northern block of Senate House. The second floor was devoted largely to the European collections, which were split up by country. (France, Spain, Italy, Germany). The Low Countries room was moved to the third floor, where most of the American collections were housed, opposite the upper hall. It would remain there until 2013, when renovation to the IHR led to a complete overhaul of the layout of the library, removing many of the smaller European rooms and integrating the Low Countries collections for the first time in the general European collections. The Low Countries room was converted into a computer training room.

### **Conclusion**

By the end of his life Geyl had established himself as a scholar of international renown. The plethora of obituaries in international newspapers and journals testifies to the fame he had gained by this stage.<sup>52</sup> They mention his combative spirit and captivating writing style, his vehement public debate with Toynbee, his book on Napoleon that gave rise to his most well-known aphorism, and much more. The anonymous obituary in *The Times* adds an unexpected laudation to the list of Geyl's achievements, ranking the creation of the 'excellent library of sources for Dutch history at the Institute of Historical Research' at the top.<sup>53</sup> More than thirty years after Geyl had left London, the Low Countries collection was not only still seen as a remarkable achievement, it was also still firmly connected to Geyl. This chapter has demonstrated that Geyl's engagement with the collection was far-reaching. Geyl personally negotiated the transfer of the collection to the IHR, was heavily involved in the acquisition process and without a doubt used the collection to write the first volumes of his magnum opus *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, and he was involved in all aspects of the IHR, from teaching through organizing conferences to sitting on library committees.

Looking at Geyl in this way also demonstrates the impact the IHR has had on the history profession. The connections Geyl made through his activities at the institute put his academic career back on track after he was almost

<sup>52</sup> 'Pieter Geyl dies; Dutch historian', *The New York Times*, 3 Jan. 1967, p. 35; 'Pieter Geyl, historian, dies at 81', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Jan. 1967, p. B16; 'Dr Pieter Geyl – writer, teacher, and historian', *Guardian*, 3 Jan. 1967, p. 9; A. C. C., 'Prof. Pieter Geyl', *The Times*, 6 Jan. 1967, p. 12; A. J. P. Taylor, 'Pieter Geyl: a great historian', *Observer*, 8 Jan. 1967, p. 25; A. Toynbee, 'Professor Pieter Geyl', *The Times*, 7 Jan. 1967, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> 'Professor Pieter Geyl: an eminent Dutch historian', *The Times*, 3 Jan. 1967, p. 12.

let go from his tenure and contemplated returning to journalism in 1924. For Geyl, the IHR was a place to focus on work rather than on university politics, to enjoy the support of colleagues and to engage English scholars with the history of the Low Countries. Geyl never stopped seeing himself as much more than a historian: he did not abandon his literary ambitions, he continued to weigh in on public debates and sometimes found it hard to separate his political views from his historical work. However, thanks to his involvement with the IHR, first and foremost, he remained a historian.



## 5. ‘It’s a part of me’: the literary ambitions of Pieter Geyl

*Wim Berkelaar*

Pieter Geyl’s retirement from his post as professor of modern history at Utrecht University in 1958 would probably not be noteworthy in itself. He had reached the age of seventy, the then compulsory retirement age for academic staff in the Netherlands. Never in the course of his life had Geyl been more famous than at this point in time. His well-known vanity was flattered more than ever when, on 21 May 1958, he was awarded the P. C. Hooft Prize, the most prestigious literary prize in the Netherlands at the time, named after the seventeenth-century historian, poet and playwright, for whom Geyl had much respect, especially for his *Nederlandsche historiën* (‘Dutch Histories’, 1628–47). One could have asked Geyl at this point in his life: what more could he wish for?

However, this was not Pieter Geyl’s reaction. Two months before the prize ceremony in Muider Slot Castle near Amsterdam, his students had organized a farewell ceremony for their academic teacher in the same venue, during which Geyl reflected on his long and prolific career. Overall, he was satisfied with his life achievements, but there was one thing that still left him discontented: the lack of recognition as a poet and literary writer. In the address to his students,<sup>1</sup> Geyl spoke with some irritation about the rejection of his early novel, written (but not finished) around 1910, by the then influential writer and essayist Albert Verwey, a prominent member of the famous *Tachtigers*, a group of Dutch writers who, at the end of the nineteenth century, sought to replace the pastoral literature that had dominated Dutch writing since the mid-nineteenth century with a new, heroic and romantic genre. ‘Was Albert Verwey the right person to judge my novel?’ Geyl grumbled.

Geyl’s novel arouses one’s curiosity but unfortunately it has not been preserved in his rich archive, kept in the Special Collections department

<sup>1</sup> P. Geyl, ‘Terugblik’, in P. Geyl, *Studies en strijdschriften: Bundel aangeboden aan de schrijver bij zijn aftreden als hoogleraar aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht* (Groningen, 1958), pp. 492–508.

of Utrecht University Library.<sup>2</sup> Still, we know from Geyl's letters to his childhood friend, Pieter Nicolaas van Eyck (1887–1954), that Geyl had been working on the novel. Van Eyck and Geyl were schoolmates at the Gymnasium Haganum in The Hague, where the two boys had started a passionate correspondence about literature, which lasted almost fifty years, until Van Eyck's death in 1954. Their shared infatuation with literature could, however, not mask their different worldviews. Whereas Geyl was secular and pragmatic, Van Eyck could probably best be called a pantheist with an antenna for religion. Both admired the *Tachtigers*, although Geyl had more reservations than Van Eyck; he condemned Lodewijk van Deysssel's dubious way of living and had no appreciation for the poems of Herman Gorter, preferring instead authors in the group who now have largely been forgotten, such as Jacob van Looy, Jan Apol and Hélène Swarth.

Both friends began to write poetry, Geyl somewhat half-heartedly. He limited himself largely to imitating the *Tachtigers*, whereas Van Eyck managed to find his own voice and become one of the representatives of the 'generation of 1910', a group of poets born in the 1880s who entered the literary scene that decade. Van Eyck, although nowadays considered to be somewhat obscure, became a successful poet in the first half of the twentieth century, winning one of the most prestigious literary prizes for Dutch literature, the Constantijn Huygens Prize, in 1947.

The young Van Eyck tried to stimulate his friend to excel in the literary field. However, only some unpublished short stories by Geyl's hand remain, inspired not only by Van Eyck's influence, but also by an episode of unrequited love. In the summer of 1902, Geyl had fallen in love with his classmate Margriet Réthy, who left school a year later and moved to Germany with her parents. Geyl's strong feelings for her inspired him to write short stories, although these were no romantic tales. On the contrary, one of them was about Joan of Arc fighting the British invaders of France in the fifteenth century, driven by visions sent by God. Another, 'The Sultan', revolved around a Muslim tyrant who attempted to suppress his people. As with his earlier novel, all these short stories remained unfinished. Nevertheless, they clearly demonstrate Geyl's interest in historical fiction. He enjoyed historical novels such as *Majoor Frans* by Truitje Bosboom-Toussaint and adored the novel *Vorstengunst* by A. S. C. Wallis, the pseudonym of Adèle Opzoomer, daughter of the then famous philosopher Cornelis Willem Opzoomer.

<sup>2</sup> University Library Utrecht [UBU], Archive-Geyl, R 4.1: Script with poems (1903–4); 4.2: Script with poems and unfinished play. This play was about Johann Friedrich Struensee (1737–72), a Danish statesman of German origin who, as the king's physician, had enormous influence on King Christiaan VII, eventually overthrowing him. After some years he in turn was overthrown, and beheaded.

Although the young Geyl did not complete his short stories, at least he left us some finished poems, almost all of them about Christ. In his archive, a collection named *Golgotha* is preserved, with the subtitle *Tien gedichten over het lijdensverhaal* ('Ten poems about the way of the Cross').<sup>3</sup> As Geyl later frankly admitted, these poems were inspired by Albert Verwey, the same man who had been so critical about his unpublished novel. Verwey's poem *O man van smarten* ('Christ on the Cross'),<sup>4</sup> for example, inspired Geyl to write the poem below, *Wijding* ('Consecration'):

O, droeve moeder, die uw zoon zaagt lijden Aan 't wreede kruis, dat hoog en hard zich hief, Ik heb hem lief, uw zoon, ik heb hem lief! ... O 't bleeke hoofd, waarin de doornen spijlen,	O, sad mother, your son is suffering On the cruel cross, high and hard, I love him, your son, I love him! ... O, the pale head, with the spine
De naakte armen, die zich krampend breiden, De slanke handen, wreedelijk doorboord! ... Ik heb uw zoon gezien, door licht van smart ongehoord Nu wil 'k mijn vers in eerbied aan hem wijden.	The naked arms, which are spasmodic The small hands, cruelly stabbed I have seen your son, through light of sorrow Now I will dedicate my verse to him in honour
Mijn vers is alles, wat ik geven kan ... ik kan niet bidden en ik kan niet smeeken ik kan niet knielen voor den menschen	My verse is all I can give I can't pray and I can't beg I can't kneel for the people
Maar laat mij zeggen tot den smarteman, dat ik hem liefheb, laat van liefde spreken, mijn vers, als wierookwolk, die stijgt tot God. <sup>5</sup>	But let me say to the man of sorrows That I love him, let love peak My verse as a smell of incense that is sent to God.

This highly pathetic poem, a poor imitation of Verwey's, is but one of Geyl's early attempts of dubious quality. The Christ poems contain a certain level of irony, as in his posthumously published autobiography, written when held in Nazi-German hostage camps in the 1940s, Geyl frankly admits that as a young man he had no particular interest in Christ, but considered himself 'a tremendous rationalist'.<sup>6</sup>

His early poems can thus be regarded as little more than the work of a romantic young man who desired to be a poet and imitated his literary heroes, the *Tachtigers*. Van Eyck reprimanded Geyl for not taking poetry seriously enough; for example Geyl admitted to composing poetry while

<sup>3</sup> UBU, Archive-Geyl, 4.2: Script with poems and an unfinished piece of theatre.

<sup>4</sup> In A. Verwey, *Van de liefde die vriendschap heet* (Amsterdam, 1885).

<sup>5</sup> UBU, Archive-Geyl. Translation by the author of this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar, L. Dorsman and P. van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 22.

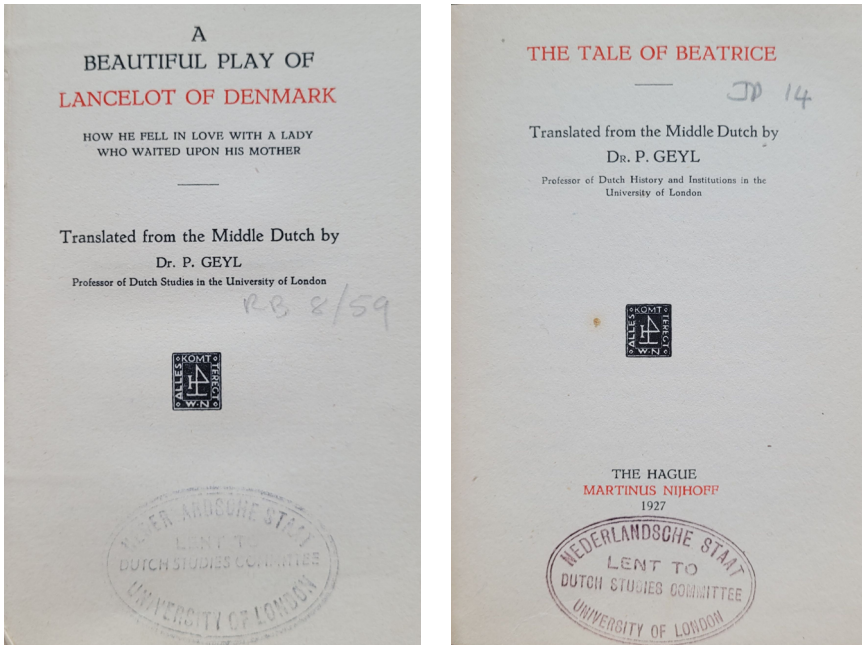


Fig. 5.1: Medieval Dutch plays *Lancelot of Denmark* (1924) and *The Tale of Beatrice* (1927), translated by Geyl. Both were staged in London's West End.

lying on the floor next to his stove, a practice that in van Eyck's eyes did not befit an aspiring serious poet.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Van Eyck, who not only became Albert Verwey's successor as professor of Dutch language and literature in Leiden, but also a prize-winning poet, the young Pieter Geyl discovered that he was much more of a historian and an essayist. Still, during his university years in Leiden he maintained his interest in literature. His first publication was an essay on the French medieval poet François Villon.<sup>8</sup> He also wrote about Joost van den Vondel, the great Dutch poet of the seventeenth century,<sup>9</sup> and revised his university paper on the quarrel between the nineteenth-century writers Jacob van Lennep and Eduard Douwes Dekker, the anti-colonial writer who published under the pseudonym Multatuli.<sup>10</sup> Instead of becoming a

<sup>7</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> P. Geyl, 'François Villon', *Onze Eeuw*, ix (1909), 243–90.

<sup>9</sup> P. Geyl, 'De datering van Vondel's Roskam', *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, xxx (1911), 308–21.

<sup>10</sup> P. Geyl, 'Multatuli en Van Lennep', *Onze Eeuw*, xii (1912), 96–115.

novelist or poet himself, Geyl, alongside his historical work, frequently ventured into the field of literary criticism.

However, being a critic was not enough to satisfy Geyl’s literary ambitions. During his years in London, he set himself the task of translating the medieval plays *Lancelot of Denmark* (1924)<sup>11</sup> and *The Tale of Beatrice* (1927) into English (fig. 5.1).<sup>12</sup> In his autobiography, Geyl dates his translation of *Lancelot* to 1919/20.<sup>13</sup> In the foreword to that play, published in the *Dutch Library* series by Martinus Nijhoff, Geyl emphasized the fact that the fourteenth-century play’s unknown author probably originated from Brabant: ‘It can be regarded as certain that the author, of whom nothing else is known, not even his name, was a South Netherlander, that is to say, that he was a native of the Dutch-speaking region of the present kingdom of Belgium.’ While historically correct, this was doubtless also a statement indicating his enthusiasm for the Greater Netherlands idea. Geyl was proud of his translation and, in particular, the compliment he received from the Scottish scholar and essayist W. P. Ker, then Quain Professor of English language and literature at UCL. Ker wrote to him, ‘Your translation reads and sounds like a medieval play, with just the right amount of quaintness and old fashion in the style of phrasing.’<sup>14</sup>

However, the verdict was harsher in the Netherlands. K. H. de Raaf, himself deeply familiar with medieval literature, was especially critical of Geyl’s *Lancelot of Denmark* and *Beatrice*. According to him, Geyl’s interpretation of the characters of *Lancelot* in his foreword was flat and inaccurate (‘The characters in the play are real human beings, none wholly good or wholly evil’). At the same time De Raaf judged that Geyl’s translation of *Beatrice* had ‘a somewhat drier or harsher quality’ than that of *Lancelot of Denmark*.<sup>15</sup> The English press was more positive: the *Manchester Guardian* of 24 June 1924 praised ‘the technical ability of Dr Geyl: He has rendered the verging of the mediaeval spirit on the modern and preserved the mediaeval flavour of the language.’<sup>16</sup> At the end of 1923, Geyl’s translation of *Lancelot of Denmark* was even staged in London’s West End (at Playroom Six, 6 New Compton Street, Cambridge Circus), with Hilda Maude among the cast.

<sup>11</sup> *Lancelot of Denmark*, trans. from the Middle Dutch by Dr P. Geyl (The Hague, 1924).

<sup>12</sup> *The Tale of Beatrice*, trans. from the Middle Dutch by Dr P. Geyl (The Hague, 1927).

<sup>13</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> Geyl, ‘Introduction’, *Lancelot of Denmark*, viii–ix.

<sup>15</sup> K. H. Raaf, *The Museum*, 10 July 1926, in UBU, Geyl papers, 18, Correspondence about publications.

<sup>16</sup> And *The Dial* in March 1926: ‘The play of Lancelot of Denmark has been admirably translated by Dr Geyl with the minimum of affection. His simple method gives a simple delicacy of each passage.’



Geyl was romantically attracted to the actress, but if we can believe the account in his autobiography, they only talked about and never engaged in intimacy.<sup>17</sup> In any case, this theatrical experience gave him a taste for more, and his second play, *The tale of Beatrice*, would also be staged (in 1927). For both stage projects he managed to enlist help from the poet Robert Trevelyan, the nephew of the historian George Trevelyan.<sup>18</sup>

During his years in London Geyl also wrote his own plays. One of them he read out loud to Elisabeth de Roos in Kensington Gardens in the hope of impressing her. It did not, at least not in the way Geyl had hoped: she would later marry the Dutch writer Edgar du Perron. Geyl later wondered why none of his English plays had survived,<sup>19</sup> and I wonder with him, because in Geyl's rich archive not one of them can be found. In the 1930s, when most of his attention was devoted to historical work on the relations between the House of Orange and the stadholders and to his magnum opus *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, his literary interests seemed to disappear into the background. His latent ambitions were, however, revived during the Second World War, when Geyl, between October 1940 and February 1944, was imprisoned by the Nazi regime. There were plenty of reasons for his arrest. In the 1930s, Geyl had published several essays critical of Nazi-Germany. He had also been a prominent member of the movement *Eenheid door Democratie* ('Unity through Democracy'), which was opposed to both Nazi-Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> Along with others, Geyl was taken first to Buchenwald (1940), and then moved on to hostage camps in Haaren (1941) and Sint-Michielsgestel in the Netherlands (1942–44).<sup>21</sup>

In Sint-Michielsgestel, in just three weeks, Geyl wrote the thriller *Moord op de plas* ('Murder on the Lake'), a book full of reminiscences of his childhood, when he used to sail in Krimpen, South Holland (fig. 5.2b). When it was published after the war (1946), Geyl, ostentatiously modest, called his crime novel a 'light' book,<sup>22</sup> but in reality he was anxious to know how literary critics would react. The reviews were mixed. 'A good detective story' was the verdict of the Catholic periodical *De Linie*.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Ben Stroman, then a well-known critic, wrote that the book lacked tension,

<sup>17</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> See F. Rovers, 'Eenheid door Democratie: Een analyse van een burgerlijk-democratische volksbeweging in de jaren dertig', *Utrechts Historische Cahiers* (Utrecht, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Here he wrote his posthumously published autobiography, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*.

<sup>22</sup> Geyl, 'Voorwoord, juni 1945', *Moord op de plas* (Utrecht, 1946).

<sup>23</sup> *De Linie*, 29 Nov. 1946.



Fig. 5.2: Written during Geyl’s captivity (1940–44): the sonnet collection *O vrijheid* (‘Oh, freedom’, 1945), and the detective novel *Moord op de plas* (‘Murder on the Lake’, 1946).

a devastating verdict for a crime novel.<sup>24</sup> Later, Geyl came to the opinion that it was not of the same quality as his poems. Still, he never disowned it and later said: ‘It’s a part of me.’<sup>25</sup> A persistent rumour in Utrecht has it that until his death at the end of 1966, Geyl used to regularly visit the bookshops in the city to enquire whether *Moord op de plas* was still in stock.

It was only fourteen days into his captivity that Geyl began to compose poetry again. What was the reason for this? Was it because he had no access to his library? Or did he feel that he had to record his experiences in captivity and regarded poetry as the best means to express himself? Whatever the reason, during the war he composed thirty-two poems. With the help of a fellow prisoner, the writer Nico Donkersloot, twelve of them were published in the literary periodical *Criterium* under the pseudonym P. van Haaren, which alluded to their place of internment in 1941. In 1944, a further twenty poems were published under the title *Het wachtwoord* (‘The

<sup>24</sup> *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 30 Nov. 1946.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Interview met Geyl’, in *Pieter Geyl: Verzamelde opstellen*, ed. P. van Hees (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1978), p. 23.

Password'), under the pseudonym A. van der Merwe, a reference to one of the places of his childhood.

Ed Hoornik, the editor of *Criterium* and himself a poet, who had initially judged Geyl's poems positively, turned more critical. In his verdict, they were more reflective than poetical,<sup>26</sup> and this assessment makes sense. Take the following poem, for example, still of interest today because it tells us something about Geyl's love of history.

'k Heb in geschiedenis mij thuis gevonden	In history I found my home.
Oorlog, verraad, moord, kerker en schavot.	War, treason, murder, jail and scaffold.
't Was mij volmaakt vertrouwd, en ik	I was familiar with it and I
schreef vlot	wrote easily
Van stumperds die hun tijd niet	Of bunglers who were out
meer verstonden.	of time
Van ballingen die enkel mokken konden	Of exiles who could only sulk,
Of hopen – tot hun vijand's	Or hope – in the face of their enemy's cool
koele spot.	mockery.
Mij boeide nooit zozeer' t persoonlijk lot,	I was never interested in personal fate,
als hoe tijdsdraden zich vervlochten en	And wanted to know how time was
ontwonden	interwoven and decomposed.

In some of the poems one can recognize Geyl's nostalgia for his time in England, as in the opening sentences below:

Londen, ik hield van 't roezen van uw straten,	London. I liked the buzz in your streets,
des avonds als het schouwburguur begon.	In the evenings when the theatre began. <sup>27</sup>

After the war, other critics arrived at verdicts similar to Hoornik's, for example the young modern poet Koos Schuur, as well as Simon Vestdijk, one of the most famous Dutch writers of the time. They published critical reviews of *O, vrijheid ...!* ('O, Freedom ...!'), the title under which Geyl's poems had been published after the liberation (fig. 5.2a), irritating Geyl considerably. Vestdijk wrote that Geyl's poems would be better read as a commentary on his imprisonment than as poetry.<sup>28</sup> Geyl responded: 'It worries me that you judge my work only as an expression of a strange experience in a strange age. I think that my poems express an experience that can move my readers. Will that not show that I have realized myself poetically?'<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> UBU, Geyl papers, 18: Correspondence about publications: 3. *O, vrijheid! en Het leven wint altoos*. Hoornik to Geyl, 24 March 1942 and 14 April 1942.

<sup>27</sup> Geyl, *O Vrijheid! ...*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> S. Vestdijk, "O Vrijheid!" van Prof. Geyl', *Het Parool*, 30 Jan. 1946.

<sup>29</sup> UBU, Geyl papers, 18: P. Geyl to S. Vestdijk, 5 Feb. 1946.

That two lifelong friends, the historian J. S. Bartstra and the liberal politician F. W. J. Drion, thought positively of his poetry was cold comfort to Geyl; the verdict of his long-standing ally (and occasional foe) Carel Gerretson mattered much more to him, for Gerretson had acquired great fame as a poet with his highly acclaimed collection of poems *Experimenten* (1911), published under the pseudonym Geerten Gossaert around the time the two of them first met. It was a friendship based on their shared support for the Greater Netherlands idea.

Geyl was curious as to what Gerretson thought of his poems. After initial reluctance, his friend agreed to evaluate them in December 1942. He praised Geyl for his translations of *Lancelot* and *Beatrice*, saying they had a perfect balance between 'outer appearance' and 'inner emotions'. But in Gerretson's opinion Geyl's feelings were not expressed profoundly enough: 'In the end you are a rationalist. There's too little of your heart (which is something different than sentiment) in your poems.'<sup>30</sup>

Geyl considered Gerretson's opinion just because in it he recognized his shortcomings. His old friend van Eyck, however, remained silent, and a frustrated Geyl complained about the silence of their common friend in a letter to Gerretson.<sup>31</sup> The praise he received from the literary critic P. Minderaa compensated to some extent; Minderaa wrote:

The poems have their own character. These are not poems of a bookworm, but of a man who looks to nature with a power of perception, who is moved by love and friendship and also by questions of the mind. But these are also poems of a thinker who observes the world and who has a sense for writing concisely. Spontaneous expressions of emotion are followed by reasonable considerations. But the poems are never cerebral. The heart remains the source.<sup>32</sup>

However, it was the criticism of the young writer and essayist Pierre H. Dubois that most lifted Geyl's spirits. According to Dubois, *O, vrijheid ...!*, while 'not a masterpiece', still contained verses that had poetical qualities. Dubois also remarked that the historian Geyl had always had something of a poet about him. Touched by that remark, Geyl responded to Dubois: 'In my youth I wrote a lot of poems and thought that I would be a poet. But I felt myself inferior in comparison with Van Eyck and studying [history] silenced me.'<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (Baarn, 1980), iv, p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, iv, Geyl to Gerretson, 22 Dec. 1942.

<sup>32</sup> P. Minderaa, 'Een geleerde, die dichter werd', *De Nieuwe Nederlander*, 27 March 1946.

<sup>33</sup> UBU, Geyl papers, 18: Correspondence about publications: Geyl to Dubois, 20 April 1946.

The poet Geyl also remained silent after the war. It is doubtful that he was muted by the criticism he encountered. Probably he was just too absorbed by his historical work and had little time left to continue composing poetry. Two years before his retirement, a reprint of *Moord op de plas* was received relatively well by the critics, most of whom emphasized the versatility of the author rather than the qualities of the novel itself. This did not bother Geyl. Buoyed by the novel's recent positive reception, he began to hope that his poetry volumes might be reissued. In 1958, after consulting Pierre Dubois, who had reviewed *O, vrijheid ...!* favourably, Geyl re-published his poems under the title *Het leven wint altoos* ('Life Always Wins'), omitting poems that directly referred to events in the war, such as the execution of five hostages in August 1942.

The publication of *Het leven wint altoos* drew only one serious review, and it was devastating. In the Catholic newspaper *De Tijd*, Jan Elemans wrote that he was 'never captured' by the poems, which demonstrated the author's incapacity as a poet.<sup>34</sup> Only after Geyl received the P. C. Hooft Prize did the collection attract some attention in the press. But again, the reviews were rather on the critical side. As was the case in 1946, the younger and older generations of critics differed in opinion. While older critics tended to judge them relatively positively, among them C. J. E. Dinaux, who praised Geyl's poetical reflections on history,<sup>35</sup> younger writers such as Adriaan Morriën were dismissive. While Morriën enjoyed Geyl's poetry as a form of history writing, he still did not want to call him a poet, feeling that Geyl's historical consciousness blocked his emotions, whereas the individual expression of emotion was what distinguished a true poet.<sup>36</sup>

Characteristically, the P. C. Hooft Prize presented to Geyl on 21 May 1958 was awarded not for his literary but for his historical work and, in particular, for his essays (fig. 5.3). The jury consisted of the writer Adriaan van der Veen, the librarian Leendert Brummel, the art historian Hans Ludwig Cohn Jaffé, the literary critic Pierre H. Dubois and the Catholic historian Lodewijk J. Rogier, who was also the 'strong man' of the jury. Rogier had long admired Geyl, not just as a writer but as a historian who, in his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, had paid attention to the important, but until then often overlooked, role of Catholics in the early modern Netherlands.<sup>37</sup> In the jury's report, Geyl's style was described as 'sober' and 'efficient'.<sup>38</sup> Sober

<sup>34</sup> *De Tijd*, 12 April 1958.

<sup>35</sup> C. J. E. Dinaux, 'Dichter en historicus', *Het Boek van Nu*, May 1958, 1965–6.

<sup>36</sup> *Het Parool*, 31 May 1958.

<sup>37</sup> L. J. Rogier, 'Pieter Geyl, moed zonder bravoure', *De Tijd*, 14 Dec. 1957.

<sup>38</sup> UBU, Archive-Geyl, Correspondence, map P. C. Hooftprijs.



Fig. 5.3: Geyl receiving the P. C. Hooft Prize, 21 May 1958. Nationaal Archief Den Haag, Fotocollectie Anefo (photo: Joop van Bilsen), inv. no. 909-5807.

and efficient referred to his polemics and portraits as well as to his historical studies, but there was no word on his literary writings.

This was never to change. Anyone who wrote about Pieter Geyl wrote about his historical work. Geyl's poems and detective stories were (and continue to be) neglected. And this continued to be the case after his passing on 31 December 1966.<sup>39</sup> None of Geyl's poems made its way into the great anthologies of Dutch poetry such as Gerrit Komrij's *Dutch Poetry in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. However, there is one poem that future anthologies, in my opinion, cannot afford to miss. It was written on 18 December 1943, in the middle of the war, and reflects Geyl's vision of human life and death in the endless universe:

The stars are fright'ning: the cold universe,  
Boundless and silent, goes revolving on,  
Worlds without end. The grace of God is gone.  
A vast indifference, deadlier than a curse,  
Chills our poor globe, which Heaven seemed to nurse

<sup>39</sup> A. L. Constandse, 'Prof. Dr. Pieter Geyl, historicus van internationale faam', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 2 Jan. 1967; A. W. Willemsen, 'Prof. Dr. P. Geyl, historicus en medespeler in het actueel gebeuren', *Het Parool*, 3 Jan. 1967.

So fondly: Twas God's rainbow when it shone,  
Until we searched. Now as we count and con  
Gusts of infinity, our hopes disperse.  
Well, it's so, then turn your eyes away  
From Heav'n. Look at the earth, in its array  
Of life and beauty – Transitory? Maybe,  
But so you are. Let stark eternity  
Heed its own self, and you, enjoy your day,  
And when death calls, then quietly obey.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> UBU, Archive-Geyl; quoted in V. Mehta, *Fly and the Fly Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (London, 1962), pp. 156–7. Geyl wrote the poem in English; there is no Dutch 'original'.

## 6. Pieter Geyl and the idea of federalism

*Leen Dorsman*

When on 1 January 1914, only a few months before the outbreak of the First World War, Pieter Geyl was hired as London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (NRC), one of the leading liberal newspapers in the Netherlands, he entered a profession that suited his literary, political and career aspirations well. Although his later appointment as university professor gave him the societal status he longed for, journalism remained second nature to him. His newspaper writing informed his work as a historian and, conversely, his work as a journalist always had a historical dimension to it. While it would go too far to call the war a godsend for Geyl, it did catapult his career. London in those years was the place to be for journalists, and Geyl was situated right in the eye of the storm. For someone as inquiring and ambitious as he was, this was the perfect position.

That journalism and history-writing can go hand in hand may sound like a banal statement nowadays, but this was not a combination that was accepted easily by academic historians in the early twentieth-century Netherlands. Journalists hardly ever crossed the boundaries into historical research in the academic sense, and however much some historians commented on current developments, for example Johan Huizinga, this was rarely connected with their academic work (the same would become true for the later Geyl, after he accepted the chair in modern history at Utrecht University in 1936).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Geyl always insisted that ‘history plays a role in current politics’ and that this was what gave the historical profession its importance.<sup>2</sup>

The First World War had a significant influence on the development of contemporary historiography and Geyl was in good company. Many of the professional historians in the Netherlands were writing about the war, for example Petrus Johannes Blok (Geyl’s mentor at Leiden University), Herman Colenbrander (also at Leiden), Hajo Brugmans (University of

<sup>1</sup> P. Luykx, ‘De beoefening van de nieuwste geschiedenis’, in *De laatste tijd: Geschiedschrijving over Nederland in de 20ste eeuw*, ed. P. Luykx and N. Bootsma (Utrecht, 1987), pp. 9–65, on Geyl, pp. 22–3.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Het land aan de ketting van De Gaulle – de fout van “57”’, *Het Vrije Volk*, 26 April 1963.



Amsterdam) and Willem Kernkamp, who held the Utrecht chair in modern history until Geyl succeeded him in 1936.<sup>3</sup> All of these scholars published extensively in newspapers and current affairs periodicals and some of them also re-published these articles later in edited volumes or anthologies.

### *Federalism*

In many respects, Geyl's ideas from his early years in London continued to shape his later historical and political thinking, as he confirms in his autobiography, written from memory one world war later, during his captivity at the hands of the Nazis. His being taken prisoner in October 1940, although on the face of it to 'safeguard' the lives of Germans interned in the Dutch East Indies, was not incidental, as in the late 1930s he had campaigned against fascism with the political movement *Eenheid Door Democratie* ('Unity through Democracy') and he had also been one of the first Dutch academics to openly protest against German anti-Jewish measures. At first, he was detained in the political section of Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar in Germany; later he was transferred to the south of the Netherlands, first to Haaren and then to the former Catholic seminary Beekvliet in Sint-Michielsgestel, where, along with other prisoners, mostly members of the Dutch political and intellectual elite, he had time to deliberate about the future of the Netherlands after the German defeat.<sup>4</sup>

A clue to the significance of federalism in Geyl's political thinking can be found in an intriguing paragraph in his memoirs, according to which he considered writing a biography of the liberal politician Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) and so developed a keen interest in British imperial problems. On the occasion of Chamberlain's death in July 1914, Geyl published an extensive obituary for this statesman of 'gigantic vitality and dynamism' in the NRC.<sup>5</sup> He became so familiar with the problems of the British empire that his understanding of this topic guided him throughout the interwar period and into the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> Especially during the discussions he

<sup>3</sup> P. Blaas, 'Nederlandse historici en de Eerste Wereldoorlog', in *Wankel evenwicht: Neutraal Nederland en de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, ed. M. Kraaijestein and P. Schulten (Soesterberg, 2007), pp. 14–31. On Kernkamp as a journalist see L. Dorsman, *G. W. Kernkamp: Historicus en democraat (1864–1943)* (Groningen, 1990), pp. 125–205.

<sup>4</sup> Officially Geyl was taken hostage as retaliation for the arrest of Germans in the Dutch East Indies after the outbreak of the war on 10 May 1940. On his participation in discussions on the post-war political system of the Netherlands see M. de Keizer, *De gijzelaars van Sint Michielsgestel: Een elite-beraad in oorlogstijd* (Alphen aan den Rijn, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> 'Joseph Chamberlain', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 6 July 1914. It is not accidental that Geyl wanted to write Chamberlain's biography. He had always had a preoccupation with charismatic personalities. The term he used for such a person was 'een figuur' ('a character').

<sup>6</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar,

had at Beekvliet about the future constitutional relationship between the Netherlands and its own empire in the Dutch East Indies, Geyl realized that he could resort to the idea of federalism as a solution to a wide range of political problems that he had developed during those war years in London.

The unity of the British empire, or *de Rijksgedachte*, as he called it in Dutch, and the idea of empire not only intrigued him as a war-time journalist, but it also served as a framework for much of his historical and political thinking in the years to come. Of course, the paragraph on Chamberlain was only a brief passage in a typescript of several hundred pages and there may be doubt about the accuracy of Geyl's recollections three decades after the events, but still a point can be made for the central importance of federalist thought for Geyl.<sup>7</sup>

The first time Geyl wrote extensively about British imperialism and federalism was in a 1915 NRC article entitled 'Problemen van het Britse Rijk' ('Problems of the British empire').<sup>8</sup> As is generally known, the Irish question, which Geyl followed closely, had federalist aspects to it, but the immediate reason for publishing his article was the Canadian prime minister Robert Borden's attending a meeting of the British cabinet. As Geyl observed, the relationship between Britain and its dominions was notoriously 'delicate and bad' and a Canadian prime minister attending a cabinet meeting not spectacular in itself. Because of the war situation, however, this turned into a very important issue, according to Geyl. The challenge for the British empire was the relationship between Britain and its self-governing colonies; in other words, how to deal with the dilemma of having a democracy rule over other democracies. He drew a comparison with ancient Rome, which had to fundamentally reconsider its relationship with its subjects and allies after the transition from republic to empire. Geyl was convinced that the political situation after the First World War would entail similar consequences for Britain as the transition two millennia earlier, despite the apparent difference in the role of the monarch, an absolutist emperor in Rome but a constitutional king with curtailed powers in Britain. Set against this background, one of the burning questions was whether the British constitution could and would over time evolve into a federal system.<sup>9</sup> This federalist concept provides a common thread through

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L. Dorsman and P. van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 59. A typescript of the autobiography is kept in the Special Collections of Utrecht University Library. It contains handwritten comments by Geyl himself from a later date.

<sup>7</sup> The autobiography spans 55 years, is very detailed and was written without access to notes or source material.

<sup>8</sup> *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 31 July 1915.

<sup>9</sup> J. Kendle, *Federal Britain: A History* (London, 1997). The book covers British history

Geyl's work; it reappears in his writings and political activism for the Flemish movement in the 1920s and 1930s and re-emerges in his post-Second World War writings on Europe.

In his newspaper article on the 'problems of the British empire', Geyl saw the origins of the problem in the second half of the nineteenth century, when conservatives and liberals debated the question of the extent to which the colonies were to become free and independent. Partly as a result of the decision not to sever the bonds with the motherland by the dominions themselves, the modern imperialism of politicians such as Joseph Chamberlain was made possible. One of the ways of tightening the bonds between colonies and motherland was the introduction, in 1887, of a so-called colonial (later imperial) conference that convened every four years. However, over the course of time, the idea of national self-determination had evolved in the constituent parts of the British empire and the Great War had played a decisive role in this development. Geyl quite rightly realized that the dominions' war effort against Germany offered them potential leverage in discussions about the empire's post-war structure. The system of self-governance worked only as long as it was more or less restricted to internal affairs of the colonies, but now, because of the massive scale of the war, the system had reached its limits and started creaking. The crucial question was whether to let the colonies assume responsibility for their own military defence or whether to leave this to the mother country Britain. The problem was exacerbated because the political parties in the dominions were themselves divided in their opinions. Also, considerations of military strategy played a role in the debate.

Soon after arriving in London Geyl had become a member of the National Liberal Club at Whitehall Place, where he especially enjoyed the library. Among the journals he found there must have been *The Round Table: Quarterly Review of the Politics of the British Empire*, the mouthpiece of a movement operating under the same name. It had a federalist outlook and when in 1917 the idea of an annually meeting imperial cabinet, including representatives of the dominion governments, was widely discussed and accepted, Geyl, on 17 June 1917, dedicated an NRC article to the Round Table's plans.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the notion that the remit of the imperial cabinet

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from around 1600, because Kende sees federalism as one of the central ideas in its political development.

<sup>10</sup> *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 17 June 1917, 'De Round Table over de constitutioneele hervorming' ('The Round Table on constitutional reform'). This contribution was published on 17 June but is dated 1 June 1917. In a contribution to the NRC of 2 Sept. 1915 Geyl remarked that *The Round Table* was not well known in the Netherlands but that it was 'a very important journal'.

should include foreign policy and its proceedings, therefore, had to be kept confidential led to the suggestion that the quadrennial imperial conferences could act as a kind of commonwealth parliament. In this way, the Round Table movement was trying to reintroduce the previously rejected idea of a federal British empire through the back door. Two days before, on 15 June, Geyl had written about the demise of federalism.<sup>11</sup> In this article, Geyl pointed to Jan Smuts, the South African military leader, member of the Imperial War Cabinet and future prime minister of South Africa, who rejected all federalist suggestions for the empire and was instead in favour of a solution along the lines of the League of Nations, namely a free association of peoples.

Geyl's interest in British discussions about federalism initially led him, as noted above, to write a biography of Chamberlain as a means of investigating the constitutional problems of the British empire in more detail. To lay the groundwork, he offered a couple of articles on the British statesman to the Dutch monthly *De Gids*. The editors declined but eventually published three lengthy and more widely framed articles under the title 'De constitutioneele ontwikkeling van het Britsche Rijk' ('The constitutional development of the British empire') in 1917. The three articles comprised a detailed history of nineteenth-century British imperialism and the attempt to establish a means of cooperation with the colonies in the Imperial Federation League of 1884, which had supported a federalist kind of organization for the British empire.<sup>12</sup> However, these articles are written in a highly descriptive way, and it is difficult to discern Geyl's personal opinion in them.

### ***India and Indonesia***

Nevertheless, Geyl could not let the subject go. Even after giving up his post as NRC correspondent in 1919, he continued to write about the subject in the 1920s, according to his memoirs in the periodical *Economisch-Statistische Berichten* (ESB) and in the daily *De Locomotief* in the Dutch East Indies. While his contributions to the colonial newspaper could not be identified, Geyl indeed published a series of articles about the imperial conferences in the ESB. In the first of these, he wrote that it was very likely that at a certain moment the dominions would become self-governing entities, but he also believed that, in the end, all the parties involved would want to prevent the empire from falling apart.<sup>13</sup> The real question was what shape the empire would take in the future. One of the possibilities Geyl discussed

<sup>11</sup> The article was titled 'Het Rijkskabinet' ('The imperial cabinet').

<sup>12</sup> *De Gids*, lxxxi (1917), 2, 515–33; *De Gids*, lxxxi (1917), 132–55 and 313–55.

<sup>13</sup> 'De Rijksconferentie', *Economisch-Statistische Berichten*, vi (1921), 286, 291, 296.

was a federalist solution, although most dominions were not very keen on this kind of outcome. And federal systems, according to Geyl, tended to work only for geographically contiguous territories and not at a distance, as would be the case of the British empire. Furthermore, the history of the position of the province of Holland in the Dutch Republic alone demonstrated how difficult it was to achieve equality among the constituent parts of a federation.

Another federalist case was the subject of an ESB article by Geyl in 1930, this time internal federalism in British India. Here was a situation in which the federal territories were geographically contiguous, and in the preceding years India had indeed been moving towards self-rule and self-determination. However, Geyl did not have much confidence in the process, partly because he considered India to be an underdeveloped backwater, but also because, in his view, federations could work only when the forms of government of their constituent parts were more or less the same, which was not the case in India. The Hindu–Muslim divide also stood in the way of a real federalist solution there. In 1931 Geyl wrote: ‘Almost always federations come into existence when already independent unions decide to come together.’<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, in these publications Geyl rarely mentions the Dutch colonial empire in the East Indies, and there are several reasons for this.<sup>15</sup> In the first place, he was not interested in Dutch East Indian politics. In a letter from 1927 to the historian F. C. Gerretson, with whom he entertained a lifelong, if not unproblematic, friendship, Geyl wrote, ‘this is rather far-off to me’,<sup>16</sup> which is probably the reason why he never drew a detailed comparison between India and the Dutch East Indies. It might also have to do with his attitude to non-white populations. When he visited South Africa in 1937, for example, Geyl was not specifically interested in the racial segregation of early apartheid;<sup>17</sup> it was only after the system hardened in the 1950s and 1960s that he became critical of the system. In the same letter Geyl responded to Gerretson, who previously had expressed anxiety about the future relationship of the Netherlands and its colony (‘a catastrophe is inevitable’), writing ‘I take some comfort in the thought that some years ago

<sup>14</sup> ‘De Britse Rijksconferentie’, *Economisch-Statistische Berichten*, xv (1930), 773, 777.

<sup>15</sup> Only in a review of E. Thompson and G. T. Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* (London, 1934) does Geyl write that a comparison between India and the Dutch East Indies seems natural enough, but that one also should be very careful because of the many differences in the land and the people. The review is in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 9 June 1934, reprinted in *Soerabaiaasch Handelsblad*, 14 July 1934.

<sup>16</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger, i (Baarn, 1979), p. 230 (letter to F. C. Gerretson of 2 Nov. 1927).

<sup>17</sup> *Pieter Geyl in Zuid-Afrika: Verslag van de lezingentournee langs universiteiten in Zuid-Afrika, juli–december 1937*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (Amsterdam, 2000).

the English also had a rather gloomy view on their position in their Indies, which was followed by a considerable *détente*. In those Indian peoples, there is such a miserable low level of perseverance and aptitude of construction.<sup>18</sup> This is another reason why Geyl was able to imagine, however difficult it might prove to achieve in practice, a federalist solution for the British empire, but not for the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies. Federalism might be a solution for complicated political situations but, as we saw earlier, in Geyl's opinion only worked as federalism between equals and when the involved entities were geographically contiguous. For the British empire, both inequality and distance were great obstacles, but the same would apply for a federation of the Netherlands and future Indonesia.

### *The Flemish question*

None of Geyl's publications on the constitutional problems of the British empire make a connection to his pet subject, the Flemish question in Belgium. This seems strange, as Geyl had been deeply involved in the Flemish movement since his student years in the 1910s and, particularly after the end of the First World War, there is exponential growth in publications about the position of Flanders within the Belgian state. In the 1920s the debate became rather heated and Geyl was more and more involved in Flemish political activism, to the point that he was refused entry to Belgium twice (in 1929 and 1933).

Geyl, however, rarely made a connection between the two cases, although federalism was discussed in both contexts. He only referred to the British situation a few times to give additional weight to his opinions about federalism as a possible way forward for Belgium; one example can be found in his correspondence with Herman Vos, his most important ally in the campaign for a federative system there. In 1926, Geyl invited Vos over to London during the imperial conference that took place from 19 October to 22 November that year. They planned to consult the South African prime minister J. B. M. Hertzog, who advocated the end of empire and its replacement by a British commonwealth,<sup>19</sup> in which all dominions

<sup>18</sup> It was not Geyl but Gerretson who frequently used the term '*Rijksgedachte*' when discussing the Dutch–Indonesian question. Geyl used the term only in respect to British imperial policy. See Gerretson's 1954 valedictory speech at Utrecht University: *De Rijksgedachte* (Utrecht, 1954). In the 1930s and 1940s the term had been rather contaminated with Nazi connotations.

<sup>19</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (3 vols, Utrecht/Antwerp/Amsterdam, 1973–5), i, p. 359, letter of 12 Oct. 1926. Hertzog was also seen as an advocate of the Dutch or 'Diets' element in Afrikaner culture, against the anglicizing tendencies of his political rival Jan Smuts. When both groups merged in the late 1930s, Geyl was disappointed in Hertzog and his followers.

would be equal in status and constitute 'autonomous communities within the British Empire' (Balfour Declaration of 1926). It must have been an attractive idea to both Geyl and Vos. In 1930 Geyl again quoted the South African example in a letter to Vos, mentioning, alongside Irish Home Rule and the Nordic union between Sweden and Norway, the voluntary granting of self-government to the South African provinces of Transvaal and Orange River in 1907. This, he felt, was the way to establish a reasonable political answer to a complicated problem, and a similar federalist solution, in Geyl's view, would not only bring peace to Belgium but also diminish the risk of another war in Europe.<sup>20</sup> In a letter of 1930 to Jeroom Leuridan, a Flemish nationalist and member of the Belgian parliament, he once again used the model of South Africa (in this case Hertzog's acceptance of the commonwealth in 1926) to explain that the acceptance of self-government, a step in the direction of a federalist solution, was not necessarily negative and did not mean giving up further ambitions.<sup>21</sup>

Among Dutch and Belgian historians there is a long-standing and heated debate about 'the true Geyl', whether he was part of a movement that aimed to dismantle Belgium or whether he was only campaigning, if in a particularly zealous way, for Flemish autonomy within a Belgian framework.<sup>22</sup> In the context of this chapter, the question may be reframed as: did Geyl advocate a federalist solution to the Flemish question? The answer seems obvious because Geyl was one of the architects of the *federaal statuut* (federal statute) that was brought before the Belgian parliament in 1931. But even then, different forms of federalism were conceivable. Was the statute about a federation of two or three Belgian communities based on language, or was it about a federal union between the Netherlands and

<sup>20</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, p. 300, letter of 11 Feb. 1930.

<sup>21</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, p. 327, letter of 13 Oct. 1930. The British example is also used in support of federative tendencies in the inaugural address at the acceptance of his extraordinary professorship at the University of Rotterdam in 1938, 'Het nationalisme als factor in de moderne Europese geschiedenis' ('Nationalism as an element in recent European history'). The address primarily targeted the federal cooperation of different nationalisms within one state. Although he saw all kinds of problems, the tradition of self-governance within the British empire that was codified in the statute of Westminster of 1931 proved that such a coexistence of different nationalisms within one political system was possible. He added that this did not *prove* anything, nevertheless it was at least a *creed*. Reprinted in *Verzamelde opstellen*, iii (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1978), pp. 3–21, his remarks on the statute of Westminster on p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Mainly a controversy between historians in Leuven and Utrecht, in which the Leuven historians accused Geyl of aiming for the dissolution of the Belgian state. For an overview of the debate see L. Simons, 'Pieter Geyl en de Groot-Nederlandse gedachte', in L. Simons, *Antwerpen–Den Haag Retour: Over twee volken gescheiden door dezelfde taal* (Tielt, 1990), pp. 41–73, and Fons Meijer's chapter in this volume.

Flanders, which to all practical intents and purposes would have meant the dissolution of the Belgian state? Behind this ambiguity lies another question, namely whether the proposed federal statute was an end in itself or whether it was tactical, one step in the direction of a more radical solution.

Geyl is not easy to interpret because on the Flemish question his earlier thoughts about federalism fit in with his *Groot-Nederlandse Gedachte*, the Greater Netherlands idea. Was it federalism within Belgium that he was aiming for, or was a political Greater Netherlands the ultimate goal? In the three-volume edition of his correspondence on the matter, *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, one can find supporting evidence for both positions. He regularly put in writing that a partition of Belgium was not what he sought,<sup>23</sup> but on more than one occasion he also told correspondents that the proposition of a federal charter was purely tactical, that for him federalism was 'een noodwendig tussenstadium' ('a necessary interim stage').<sup>24</sup> One might say that he espoused a Fabian tactical approach of progressing gently in order not to estrange the less radical elements among his pro-Flemish allies.

Then again, Geyl also wrote to several of his correspondents that to him Belgium was 'not worth a straw' and that there was no inherent contradiction between federalism and the Greater Netherlands idea. Neither did he hesitate to call 'the reunion of Flanders and the Netherlands' the ideal solution to the problem.<sup>25</sup> For many of those involved in the debate about Geyl's real intentions, foremost among them Louis Vos and Lode Wils from Leuven, this was enough to conclude that Geyl was not sincere in his collaboration with the federalists.<sup>26</sup>

In my view, Geyl did employ tactics, but not so much the tactics of slow Fabian-like progress, in which a federal solution was only a stage on the way to a Greater Netherlands. Instead, his calculation may have been that he expected the francophone part of Belgium to reject the proposal of a Belgian federation of communities based on language, and then only one, radical, solution would be left. It must be said, however, that the proposed federation was entirely in line with Geyl's view of the preconditions for a federal solution for the British empire: equal communities, with a balance of interests, partly based on self-defence against a hostile outside world. Geyl, as a historian, would also have been concerned about the possible

<sup>23</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, i, eg. p. 238; ii, pp. 210, 303.

<sup>24</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, eg. pp. 230, 234, 252.

<sup>25</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, eg. pp. 326, 327, 331.

<sup>26</sup> When reading Geyl's texts on this question, one is often confronted with a certain ambiguity. It is not always clear from his formulations where exactly he stands. An example is his contribution 'Het Federal Statuut voor België' for his own journal *Leiding* (1931), ii, 301–3. Even close reading does not reveal what he believes the solution should be.



consequences of a partition of Belgium for the European equilibrium;<sup>27</sup> as a resident of London and as a journalist he had been at the centre of the European disaster of the First World War and must have seen the importance of balancing the fragile European political situation.

### *European federalism*

The federalist concept resurfaced in Geyl's work after the Second World War. This time it emerged in the context of the beginning of European integration. By this point, Geyl had not only become a well-known historian with his contrarian interpretation of the history of the Dutch republic and the house of Orange-Nassau, but also a public intellectual engaged in a broad range of topics. One of the characteristic features of the post-war Geyl was his leaning towards the philosophy of history, espoused especially in his discussions with Arnold Toynbee, which brought him world fame, and in the preface to his book on Napoleon with the famous quote of history being 'a discussion without end'.

In a speech given in 1953 on the occasion of the 317th anniversary of the founding of Utrecht University with the title 'Een historicus tegenover de wereld van nu' ('A historian vis-à-vis today's world') and the subtitle 'The European federation', Geyl tried to bring his philosophy of history and his ideas about federalism together.<sup>28</sup> This speech, delivered more than sixty years ago, has lost nothing of its urgency and still holds a message for us today. To begin with, Geyl queried the purpose of history: does it help us to understand the complex world of today? Beginning his search for an answer with Friedrich Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* ('On the Use and Abuse of History for Life') and its rejection of an excessive focus on history, which on the one hand can lead to paralysis and saturation and on the other to a strong call to action, which can turn into fanaticism because people think they are acting 'in opdracht van de tijd' ('by order of the times'),<sup>29</sup> Geyl spoke of a 'false fatality': in his view, there was no predestined course of history; instead, history was an open process. This echoes his famous discussions with Toynbee and those with communist and determinist historians such as Jan Romein. In this respect, the world of 1953 was a direct result of a series of catastrophes that had to be seen in conjunction with 'far-reaching and deep-rooted causes'. To

<sup>27</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> 'Een historicus tegenover de wereld van nu', *Socialisme en Democratie*, April 1953, 193–206.

<sup>29</sup> By using the terminology 'in opdracht van de tijd' Geyl was referring to Jan Romein, his communist colleague at the University of Amsterdam, who had in 1946 published a book with this title.

demonstrate what he meant by this, he quoted a report containing plans for a European federation commissioned by the foreign ministers of the six countries that together constituted the European Council and the European Coal and Steel Community.<sup>30</sup> The plan proposed a European parliament with two chambers and partly direct elections and contained ideas about the establishment of a European Court of Justice. Geyl called this a somewhat unitarian, centralized plan. But not to worry, he wrote; it was just a plan, no more. The danger he foresaw in it was that some interest groups in Europe would interpret these developments as the predetermined course of history. For these interest groups, a large part of the European population did not share the ideal of a united Europe only because they were not yet ready for it; they would understand it in time. Looking at the events of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it can be seen how prophetic Geyl was in this respect.<sup>31</sup> 'Brexit' and similar movements in other European countries to leave the European Union are based precisely on this idea that the 'elites' for years and years had not been listening to opinions on the ground.

However, this is not the point here. Geyl was not opposed to a federative solution to Europe's problems; on the contrary, he considered it a fundamental condition of European stability. But he did not want to proceed too fast and believed that those who wanted to pursue this process had first to converge and have some form of rapprochement. The Italian parliamentary tradition was distinct from the Dutch tradition. And the Germans had different interests to the French. And, he added, Europe would not be complete without the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries.

We find the same idea in a contribution to the broadsheet *Het Parool* in 1954 entitled 'Onorthodoxe bedenkingen tegen de Klein-Europa-politiek' ('Unorthodox considerations against the politics of a small Europe'), again still relevant today.<sup>32</sup> Geyl observed that there was a lot of vagueness in ideas about Europe, that there was no real public discussion of the subject and that many national politicians were suggesting that Europe had embarked on a road that had passed 'the point of no return'. Geyl wondered if this was really the case and had a few points to make. First, when politicians spoke about Europe they were talking about a very limited concept of Europe, namely the small subset of Europe that was the 'Europe of the Six', which to his mind could never be the idea of Europe as a whole. Second, he asked if a united Europe could serve as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union. In order for this to be possible, according to Geyl, it would be advisable to

<sup>30</sup> France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

<sup>31</sup> Repeated one year later by Gerretson in his *De Rijksgedachte*, pp. 22–3.

<sup>32</sup> *Het Parool*, 8 and 19 Jan. 1954.

have Germany as a member of NATO. This limited idea of Europe was not European idealism but rather French *realpolitik*. Finally, Geyl had doubts about the idea of European elections, as no common European political party system was in existence. He rejected a European federalism that would lead to a European hotchpotch, in which there would no longer be a place for national traditions and peculiarities. What he really wanted, he wrote in an afterword to this newspaper article, was a European federation that took into account national characteristics.<sup>33</sup> He had no doubts, he wrote explicitly, that such a federation was necessary and that it should encompass both an economical and a military federation.

However, Geyl also had some misgivings about certain federative ideas. As mentioned above, he envisaged a more inclusive Europe, not the Europe of the Six. He emphasized this view in an interview in the social-democratic newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* in 1963, in which he denounced de Gaulle's veto on Britain's accession to the European project, writing, 'now we are "locked in" in a small Europe'.<sup>34</sup> But even then, he doubted that the transition of power to a European parliament was advisable. Small countries such as the Netherlands would lose their uniqueness, which was at least partly based on language. Here again, we see Geyl's idea of federalism in its optimal form: yes, federalism provides a solution to political divisions, but it will only work between equal partners. This held for relations between the UK and its dominions; federalism would have worked in Belgium, if Wallonia had been prepared to see Flanders as an equal partner; and it could lead to a united Europe, if small nations could maintain their uniqueness within the greater European idea.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter has shown that the idea of federalism, an idea he encountered initially when observing the consequences of the First World War for the relationship between the UK and its colonies, played a central role in Pieter Geyl's political thinking. To him, federalism was a solution for a divided world, but only when all partners in a federation agreed to work on an equal footing.

As Hermann von der Dunk put it in his biographical entry on Geyl for the *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Pieter Geyl was not a philosopher but more of a common-sense thinker.<sup>35</sup> Federalism was a

<sup>33</sup> In a postscript published in *Het Parool*, 19 Jan. 1954, in reaction to comments by Pieter 't Hoen in *Het Parool*, viii, 15 and 16 Jan. 1954.

<sup>34</sup> 'Het land aan de ketting van De Gaulle – de fout van "57"', *Het Vrije Volk*, 26 April 1963.

<sup>35</sup> *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ii (Tielt, 1998), pp. 1302–5: '... een

recurring idea in his works, but he never indulged in theorizing federalism as a concept. Neither did he delve into the history of the concept, which, as is commonly acknowledged, to a large extent derives from the ideas of Johannes Althusius (1557–1638), Calvinist law professor at the University of Herborn in Germany.<sup>36</sup> Remarkable also is the fact that Geyl very rarely mentions the United States as an example of a successful federalist system, somewhat surprising given that as a Low Countries historian he was well aware of the manifold connections and parallels between American independence and Dutch early modern history. The impact of his experiences with imperial politics in London during the First World War was apparently so strong that it became the sole source of his ideas of federalism as a political solution.

Following in the footsteps of the German-American political theorist Carl Joachim Friedrich (1901–84), nowadays federalism is frequently seen as a dynamic concept, not so much as a condition but as a process.<sup>37</sup> This is interesting in respect to Geyl's federalism, especially with regard to the question of what he was really seeking when promoting a federal statute for Belgium in 1930–31. One might say that it was his step-by-step approach that showed his awareness of the idea of federalism as a process; his writings on the development of European unity in the 1950s and 1960s also demonstrate this awareness. In *The Idea of Greater Britain* Duncan Bell suggests, following Michael Burgess, that it is necessary to distinguish between the two separate concepts of 'federalism' and 'federation', although they are frequently used interchangeably. 'Federalism', for the most part, denotes 'a positive valuation of diversity', while 'federation' is used when referring to a specific form of government.<sup>38</sup> Looking at Geyl's writings, we find exactly this intermingling of concepts. He is very much interested in diversity, be it within the small Belgian state or in Europe at large. His biggest fear is that in a greater Europe the diversity of small countries might be lost. More problematic is the idea of federation, because it involves political decision making and political action.

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krachtige, maar geen diepe geest'.

<sup>36</sup> K. Scott, *Federalism: a Normative Theory and Its Practical Relevance* (New York/London, 2011), pp. 1–45.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, *Federalism*, p. 136; M. Burgess, 'Opening Pandora's box: Process and paradox in the federalism of political identity', in *The Ways of Federalism in Western Countries and the Horizons of Territorial Autonomy in Spain*, ed. Alberto Lopez-Basaguren and Leire Escajedo San Epifanio, i (Berlin, 2013), pp. 3–15.

<sup>38</sup> D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2017), pp. 94–5. Bell refers to M. Burgess, 'Federalism and federation', in *Comparative Federalism and Federation*, ed. M. Burgess and A.-G. Gagnon (London, 1993), pp. 3–14 and to P. King, *Federalism and Federation* (London, 1982), ch. 1.

Here lies Geyl's weak point when talking about federalist ideas. It sometimes looks as if the risks involved in a federalization process never crossed his mind. By becoming federal or proposing a federation, the noble idea of federalist diversity could also open Pandora's box; one never knew what powers might be released.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> M. Burgess, 'Opening Pandora's box', pp. 13–14.

## 7. Debating Toynbee after the Holocaust: Pieter Geyl as a post-war public historian

*Remco Ensel*

*The worst that our generation has had to witness,  
the persecution of the Jews ...*

Pieter Geyl, 14 October 1944<sup>1</sup>

In January 1948 Pieter Geyl and Arnold J. Toynbee discussed their profession and the ‘catastrophe’ that had befallen the world on BBC radio. Born at the end of the nineteenth century, the two men were among the first generation of professional historians to use broadcasting to get their message across and present themselves as authoritative public intellectuals in mid-twentieth-century Europe. The aim of this chapter is to locate Geyl specifically as a public historian in the intellectual atmosphere of the post-war years. It is this author’s contention that Geyl’s famous dictum about writing history as ‘an argument without end’ should not so much be seen as a timeless aphorism but as an intervention in the new post-war climate of the Cold War.

In recent literature on the history of historiography at least two approaches can be identified. The first recognizes the importance of biographical aspects of historiography as an academic endeavour.<sup>2</sup> The second investigates the implications of the professionalization of history for the formation of a ‘scholarly self’.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that both approaches are complementary, for example when concealing personal experiences under

<sup>1</sup> P. Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against*, trans. O. Renier (New Haven, 1949), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> As Ellen Crabtree wrote, ‘In his essay *What is history?* E. H. Carr famously cautioned students to “study the historian before you begin to study the facts”. But why not study the historian full stop?’, in E. Crabtree, ‘Can post-war French historians be subjects of history?’, *French History Network Blog*, 12 Nov. 2015 <<http://frenchhistorysociety.co.uk/blog/?p=688>> [accessed 18 Oct. 2021]; see on the incorporation of personal war experiences in German history writing *Das 20. Jahrhundert erzählen: Zeiterfahrung und Zeiterforschung im geteilten Deutschland*, ed. F. Maubach and C. Morina (Göttingen, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> H. Paul, ‘Introduction: scholarly personae: repertoires and performances of academic identity’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, cxxxix (2016), 3–7.

the guise of scholarship becomes a virtue. It is thus better to speak of separate realms, that of biography and that of the ideal scholarly self. Here we will devote attention to both, by focusing on the appearance of the historian in public debate. Along with Geyl's publishing strategy, the historical debate shows how historians perceive their ideal relationship with colleagues and their target audience. It is a little-recognized fact that much of the proverbial 'discussion without end' in fact takes place beyond academic forums and journals. The radio debate, which developed into an intense dispute after 1948, illustrates how differently Geyl and Toynbee perceived their role in the post-war world. Toynbee was not afraid to supply the general public with political and moral advice, even beyond the boundaries of his specialist knowledge. His contemporary had a more restricted role in mind for historiography. In this chapter, the two approaches are compared through an analysis of the debate, which yielded fundamental questions on collective and individual responsibility and guilt.

### *Geyl as a public historian*

Pieter Geyl (1887–1966) was a committed historian. He considered the practice of history a serious occupation based on skills, and thought its influence should not be contained within the walls and media of university. Geyl, who also worked as a journalist, published in journals such as *De Gids*, the leading Dutch literary journal then, and in many other public periodicals. Geyl was a polemicist, a debater who knew how to keep his fellow historians on their toes. The Dutch historian Niek van Sas called him 'a troublemaker and a firebrand, always contrarian but in an infectious manner'.<sup>4</sup> Geyl's biographer van der Hoeven likened him to 'an English intellectual, to whom the scholarly practice involves an element of play, including fierce polemics, which however were not meant to affect personal relations'.<sup>5</sup> The pleasure of this gentleman's disagreement was dominant but it would be wrong to think that this was an insignificant 'game'. Geyl was extremely indignant when a critic reproached him with having shown himself overly respectful towards, even exhibiting 'humble kowtowing' in his debate with, Arnold Toynbee (this will be looked at more extensively below). Geyl did not like it at all that mildness was attributed to him. His opponent 'argues that I spare my

<sup>4</sup> N. van Sas, 'Geyl als geschiedschrijver', in *Pieter Geyl: Autobiograaf, Geschiedschrijver, Polemist: Voordrachten gehouden bij de presentatie van de autobiografie van Pieter Geyl op 25 september 2009 in de Universiteitsbibliotheek van de Universiteit Utrecht*, ed. L. J. Dorsman, N. van Sas and W. Berkelaar (Utrecht, 2009), pp. 11–16.

<sup>5</sup> H. van der Hoeven, 'Geijl, Pieter Catharinus Arie (1887–1966)', *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland* <<http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/b/bwn1/geijl>> [accessed 12 Nov. 2013].

adversaries and only put up a sham fight'. On the contrary: 'In my polemics, I have always endeavoured to give my opponent the full measure.'<sup>6</sup> This was especially true when he told Toynbee that his approach made a mockery of the most elementary notions of their profession.<sup>7</sup> 'Even among his best friends, Geyl hardly ever engaged in small talk. But surveying historiography and debating were Geyl's great passions.'<sup>8</sup> In doing so, Geyl employed the complete register that historians have at their disposal, including the deployment of authority as an established historian and the rhetorical strategy of denying a colleague the status of historian.<sup>9</sup>

Geyl's battleground as a historian was the early modern era and especially the political history and historiography of the Dutch republic. Nonetheless, like no other he knew how historians are affected by current events. After his doctorate, Geyl lived through the First World War in England, as a journalist for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*.

At the beginning of the Second World War Geyl was interned in Buchenwald and subsequently for two years in the Brabant town of Sint-Michielsgestel.<sup>10</sup> There, he wrote poems and had them published illegally, an autobiography that would only be published posthumously decades later and *Patriotten en NSB'ers* (1946). In this latter book, Geyl negated the argument that the rather unpopular eighteenth-century Patriot party and the members of the Dutch National Socialist Party (NSB) could be seen as 'traitors to their country'.<sup>11</sup> His historiographic study on Napoleon is also a product of his years of imprisonment.<sup>12</sup> The irresistible parallel between the French emperor and Hitler forced itself on Geyl even before the war, before Jacques Presser took Hitler and Stalin as models for his biography of Napoleon.<sup>13</sup> After the war, the parallel with Hitler was universally recognized in Geyl's internationally

<sup>6</sup> P. Geyl, 'Antwoord aan Gomperts', *Hollands Weekblad*, x (1959); 'Antwoord aan Galen Last', *Hollands Weekblad*, i (1959–60), 11; P. Geyl, 'Antwoord aan Galen Last', *Hollands Weekblad*, xi (1959–60), 10; these are reactions to H. Galen Last, 'Prof. Geyl: Een Nederlands nationalist', *Hollands Weekblad*, i (1959–60), 3, and H. Galen Last, 'Geyl tegen Gomperts', *Hollands Weekblad*, v (1959–60), 2.

<sup>7</sup> P. Geyl, 'Toynbee the prophet', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xvi (1955), 260–74.

<sup>8</sup> L. J. Rogier, *Herdenking van P. Geyl* (Amsterdam, 1967), pp. 405 and 410.

<sup>9</sup> Geyl used this method in his polemic with the Amsterdam historian Jan Romein. P. Geyl, 'Romein en de geschiedenis', in P. Geyl, *Verzamelde opstellen*, p. 1. Collected and with an introduction by P. van Hees (4 vols, Utrecht/Antwerp, 1978), vol. 3, pp. 181–204.

<sup>10</sup> A. van Duinkerken, 'De gijzelaar Pieter Geyl', *De Gids*, cxxi (1958), 35–7.

<sup>11</sup> P. Geyl, *Patriotten en NSB'ers: Een historische parabel* (Amsterdam, 1946). No reference to the politically charged issues surrounding Geyl's 'Greater Netherlands' *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* is made here (Amsterdam, 1948–59). See also Wim Berkelaar's chapter in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this see the chapters by Reinier Salverda and Mark Edward Hay in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> J. Presser, *Napoleon: Historie en Legende* (Amsterdam, 1946).



praised book, with respect for his years of imprisonment adding to its status. Conversely, Geyl's book led to historiographic studies on Hitler, Auschwitz and Hiroshima.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary history of the Nazi dictatorship supplied Geyl with a subject, and his study induced, with some delay, historical reflections on Europe's recent history of repression and mass violence.

During these years, Geyl positioned himself as a public intellectual. In his comparative study on the public presentation ('öffentliche Praxis der Historiker') of post-war historians in Germany and Italy, Marcel vom Lehn also speaks of 'public intellectuals'.<sup>15</sup> He follows Stefan Collini in his description of the intellectual as someone who, based on their cultural authority, seeks publicity to consider general issues before a large public.<sup>16</sup> However, vom Lehn avoids the concept of the 'public historian', since people referred to in this way tend to present themselves as 'experts'. There is also Michel Foucault's distinction between the universal and the post-war-specific intellectual, with the latter more explicitly rooted in an academic field. Geyl, although from an earlier generation, moves more in the direction of the specific intellectual.<sup>17</sup> That said, this author prefers the more precise term 'public historian' because of the opportunity it offers to investigate the specific (and historically developed) professional role of the historian for whom knowledge of the past remains the point of reference and source of intellectual *and* moral authority. For Geyl, public debate was part of what it means to be a historian.<sup>18</sup>

Pierre Nora's position supports the position taken by this chapter. *Historien public* is the title of a collection of essays by this French historian, archivist and publisher.<sup>19</sup> Although he is primarily known for the multivolume *Les Lieux de mémoire* ('The Sites of Memory'), Nora's career testifies to his much broader engagement with numerous social and intellectual issues. The *historien public* as envisioned by Nora is not a representative of public

<sup>14</sup> W. Berkelaar, 'Pieter Geyl en de wording van Napoleon: Voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving', P. Geyl, *Napoleon: Voor en tegen in de geschiedschrijving* (Amsterdam, 2006); R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War* (London, 1993); J. Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> M. vom Lehn, *Westdeutsche und Italienische Historiker als Intellektuelle? Ihr Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Faschismus in den Medien (1943/45–1960)* (Göttingen, 2012), p. 134.

<sup>16</sup> S. Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006). The historian A. J. P. Taylor is one of the 'intellectuals' portrayed by Collini.

<sup>17</sup> M. Foucault, 'Truth and power', in M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton, 1980), pp. 109–33.

<sup>18</sup> The notions of public history – in relation to the concept of applied history – have taken off enormously more recently. See Jacqueline Niefser and Juliane Tomann, 'Public and applied history in Germany: Just another brick in the wall of the academic ivory tower?', *Public Historian*, xl (2018), 11–27.

<sup>19</sup> P. Nora, *Historien Public* (Paris, 2011).

history as commonly defined, that is to say a representative of illustrative or applied history. With the knowledge and skills of his profession, Nora's public historian takes part and intervenes in public debate. His prime objective is not entertainment – although that is part of his performance. The public historian informs, nuances, contextualizes, comments and puts issues present in society on the agenda.

There is an interesting connection here with the well-known German public debate. The public character of historiography played an important role in the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas started the debate by reacting to a publication by the historian Ernst Nolte that questioned the uniqueness of the Holocaust, writing: 'It is not an issue of Popper versus Adorno, it is not a question of disputes about scientific theory, it is not about questions of value-free analysis – it is about the public use of history.'<sup>20</sup> The quote is from an opinion piece in *Die Zeit*, which Habermas wrote in response to Nolte's article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. In his article, Habermas explained that if Nolte had published his controversial opinion in a historical journal, the philosopher would not have reacted. Indeed, 'I would never have even laid eyes on it' ('Ich hätte die Debatte gar nicht zu Gesicht bekommen'). But as it concerned a contribution 'in the full public gaze', Habermas felt obliged to react, for the *Historikerstreit*, as the polemic about the position of the Holocaust within German history came to be known, was now no longer restricted to the ivory tower of historiography. The debate had become part of the 'public sphere' and the historian was now a public historian who was broaching a social issue – the laborious processing of a charged past – based on their authority. It is noteworthy that Ernst Nolte would later declare that his approach and vision had been influenced by the so-called 'International Toynbee Debate of 1955/6' and particularly by Toynbee's vision on the Jews and their persecution.<sup>21</sup> Geyl played a crucial role in opening this debate, possibly not only because of his opinion on the issue but also because of his interpretation of the role a committed historian should play in society.

<sup>20</sup> J. Habermas and J. Leaman, 'Concerning the public use of history', *New German Critique*, xlv, special issue on the *Historikerstreit* (1988), 40–50. In German, J. Habermas, 'Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie', *Die Zeit*, xlvi, 7 Nov. 1986.

<sup>21</sup> N. Kampe, 'Normalizing the Holocaust: the recent historian's debate in the Federal Republic of Germany', in *Perspectives on the Holocaust*, ed. M. R. Marrus (Westport, 1989), pp. 412–32. Historian Peter Gay, who in 1941 fled from Berlin as Peter Fröhlich and had already written on the genocide in 1945 in an American student magazine, in 1978 pointed out Nolte's trivializing approach of antisemitic terror to him. The author is grateful to Merel Leeman for this note.

*The debate as play*

Pieter Geyl was not only the historiographer of the debate, he also served as a debater himself. Geyl saw historiography as a social activity in which the historian always has to balance his engagement as a citizen against the detachment of the academic.<sup>22</sup> This presupposes a necessary reflection on the profession of the historian, on the authority which historians, in their role of 'knowledge specialists', can employ and on the obligations this entails.<sup>23</sup> How does the individual historian operate and how does the 'historical community' function in this social force field of interested parties?

As a variation on Geyl's famous dictum that history is 'a discussion without end', this chapter asks the question of how 'the historical discussion' is started and along what lines it is carried out. Geyl's famous, somewhat apodictic quote comes from the introduction to his historiographic study of Napoleon. Just as in the case of Ranke's 'bloß sagen wie es eigentlich gewesen' ('just say how it actually was'), this phrase was lifted from its context and turned into an aphorism.<sup>24</sup> Geyl was pleased with his coinage and had the phrase included in the heading of his introduction. The article in the heading 'The discussion without end' seems to suggest that Geyl thought the phrase applied only to the French publications about Napoleon. Nothing could be further from the truth. For Geyl, its meaning was much broader. Difference of opinion, discussion and debate are inherent to historiography: 'Truth, though for God it may be One, assumes many shapes to men.'<sup>25</sup> The international success of his Napoleon study stimulated Geyl to proceed with his investigation in the collection of essays *Debates with Historians*. How fitting that the German edition of this collection appeared under the title *Die Diskussion ohne Ende* ('Debates without End').<sup>26</sup> In the original text, the quote was put at the end of the introduction. Now, it had been promoted to book title, and the author of the introduction, the German historian Franz Petri,<sup>27</sup> had opted for the italicization of the phrase: 'Im Original nicht kursiv' ('unitalicized in the original').

<sup>22</sup> J. Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin: Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* (Amsterdam, 1990, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> See on the rights and obligations of the concerned historian A. de Baets, *Responsible History* (New York, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> From the preface to Ranke's *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, i (Leipzig/Berlin, 1824), p. vi.

<sup>25</sup> P. Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (London, 1949), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> P. Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (Groningen/Jakarta, 1955); P. Geyl, *Die Diskussion ohne Ende: Auseinandersetzungen mit Historikern* (Darmstadt, 1958).

<sup>27</sup> There is much to be said about Franz Petri and the interpretation of his collaboration during the war and his career. See eg D. Barnouw, 'The Nazi New Order and Europe', in *Imagining Europe: Europe and European Civilisation as Seen from Its Margins and by the*

The historian Jo Tollebeek has pointed out that the titles of Geyl's essay collections suggest that he thought in terms of 'reactions' and 'tournaments'.<sup>28</sup> Historiography is a battleground, possibly also a joust. But, it should be added, this is a serious game, a rule-bound social practice in which people, as *homines ludentes*, broach social issues. Historiography is simultaneously a fight, a tournament and a game in which some play within the rules, others dodge the rules and still others make their own rules to which they then subject the other participants.

All this recalls Johan Huizinga's considerations on the family resemblances between play and war. In *Homo Ludens* (1933), Huizinga devoted a chapter to each of the three related forms: play and law, play and war, playing and knowing. The element of play, in the shape of competition and controversy, is also present in scholarship. The debate as play and as competition directs us to the arena, the (unwritten) rules – the tacit knowledge, the conventions of self-control and discipline, the transgressions and the moral outrage caused by them.<sup>29</sup> Geyl was full of praise for French polemics and added that 'we' also had known times 'when our history was our political battle ground ... There are certain dangers involved in such a use of history, I would be the last to deny it. But it brings it closer to the public, it enables it to permeate and enrich public life.' Geyl's words here seem tinted by nostalgia or jealousy of the French polemic public sphere. For, as has been remarked about the present-day Dutch historical community, '[i]n the Netherlands, historical truth is not a boxing ring, but a negotiation table'.<sup>30</sup>

### *The radio debate*

The 'model debate' between the fifty-nine-year-old Toynbee and the sixty-year-old Geyl was not held in one of the academic journals or at a scholarly conference. The debate took place at the invitation of the BBC in a British radio studio for the Third Programme, the 'wavelength of intellectuals' in Geyl's words. Toynbee had been giving radio talks for some time<sup>31</sup> and

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*Rest of the World: the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. M. Wintle (Brussels, 2008), pp. 73–90; U. Tiedau, 'Franz Petri', *Handbuch der völkischen Wissenschaften* (Munich, 2008), pp. 467–74, as well as Alisa van Kleef's chapter in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*.

<sup>29</sup> Huizinga is careful in weighing up the playful character of scholarship: J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens, Proeve ener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, 6th edn (Groningen, 1974), pp. 198–9; '[G]ames form a *family* the members of which have family likeness: L. Wittgenstein, "The Blue Book", in L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (Oxford, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> P. Lagrou, 'Loe de Jong, of de professionele strategieën van een publieke intellectueel in Koude Oorlogstijd', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, cxxx (2015), 79–90.

<sup>31</sup> P. van Hees, 'Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)', in *Historici van de twintigste eeuw*,

Geyl was also an experienced radio speaker. The debate was broadcast on 4 January and 7 March 1948. In the same year, an English transcript was released by Dutch and American publishers under the title *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past?*<sup>32</sup> In the radio guide, the debate was scheduled to last forty minutes. The published version could never have run to double this amount of time, so there must have been an editorial selection from the transcript.<sup>33</sup> The fact that it was broadcast on radio illustrates the importance of non-academic media in these post-war years in reaching the general public. And to professional historians: in her memoirs the Groningen historian Bunna Ebels-Hoving described how she was introduced to the discipline of historiography through courses on ‘Toynbee and his radio debates with Geyl’, even though her lecturer dismissed historiography as ‘a kind of Spielerei’ [‘just fooling around’].<sup>34</sup>

Both historians were familiar with the transfer of historical knowledge to the general public and with their role as public historians. But Geyl cast himself as Toynbee’s adversary, in the role of the searching historian averse to overarching structures and theories.

The origins of the radio debate lay in the Dutch academic world. No earlier than August 1946, Geyl acquired the first six volumes of *A Study in History* through his old friend the historian David Mitrany. Geyl believed that the Amsterdam historian Jan Romein was an avid admirer of Toynbee and it therefore seemed a good idea to challenge his competitor with a biting critique in a lecture for the Dutch Historical Society. Or, as he wrote to his correspondent of many years Carel Gerretson, ‘This is the book that is so admired by Romein, but that he has not understood at all.’<sup>35</sup>

Geyl was irritated by Romein’s praise and by his tendency to ridicule ordinary historians as navigators lost at sea, in contrast to the great historical

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ed. A. H. Huussen, E. H. Kossmann and H. Renner (Utrecht, 1981), pp. 144–61, p. 160, ‘modeldebat’; *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees (Baarn, 1979–81), v: Geyl to Gerretson, Utrecht, 31 Oct. 1947 (letter 983): ‘golfleengh’.

<sup>32</sup> P. Geyl and A. J. Toynbee, *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past?* (Bussum, 1948); amended, and with an essay by P. A. Sorokin in the following year as P. Geyl, A. J. Toynbee and P. A. Sorokin, *The Pattern of the Past: Can We Determine It?* (Boston, 1949).

<sup>33</sup> See D. Derrick, *The Toynbee Convector* [blog] <<http://www.davidderrick.wordpress.com/criticism/>> [accessed 18 Oct. 2021]; *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, v: Geyl to Gerretson, Utrecht, 31 Oct. 1947 (letter 983): ‘wavelength’.

<sup>34</sup> Bunna Ebels-Hoving, *Geschiedenis als metgezel: Confrontaties met een vak, 1950–2010* (Hilversum, 2011), p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, v: Geyl to Gerretson, 23 Sept. 1946 (letter 943); ‘Interview met Ved Mehta: ‘I decided to bait him a little. The result was the lecture.’ Pieter Geyl, ‘Toynbee’s systeem der beschavingen’, *Verslag van de Algemene Vergadering der leden van het Historisch Genootschap gehouden te Utrecht op 9 November 1946* (Utrecht, 1947), pp. 26–63, and P. Geyl, ‘Toynbee’s system of civilizations’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, ix (1948), 93–124.

philosophers who, compass in hand, survey the general course of history. He took aim at Toynbee to get at Romein: 'For me, Romein was obviously the background to this,' he explained to Gerretson after earlier writing to him that he had found Toynbee's book fascinating, 'enlightening, and moreover beautifully written'. In his second review, years later, in 1955, Geyl would again mark out the 'neo-Marxist' Romein as an advocate of Toynbee's. But already in 1947 Romein had grasped that he himself was the real target. In his letter to Geyl he wrote that Geyl had rashly and paternalistically judged a book which Romein had been working on for two years. Geyl thought the letter petty: 'Weak – and small-minded'. Personal animosity certainly seems to have been a factor in the origins of the debate.

In 1946 Geyl gave a lecture on Toynbee and published a translated version of it in the American *Journal of the History of Ideas*.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently he received the invitation to do the radio broadcast from the BBC. On 1 January 1948 – exactly a year after his correspondence with Romein – Geyl left for London 'for a week or so'.

It is interesting that Toynbee opened the debate in Geyl's style with a game metaphor: 'Well, the BBC has put on for you a kind of "historians' cricket match" and the bowler has just delivered his ball.' On other occasions, Toynbee preferred boxing metaphors. The booklet that transcribes the radio debate in fact consists of two successive monologues. When we read in Toynbee's contribution 'as I said a minute or two ago', we are made aware of the passing of time that is part of conversational debate. At another point Toynbee says he would like to correct 'an impression that I think our listeners may have got ...'. Interruptions or signs of actual dialogue are lacking in the transcript, but the speakers clearly reacted to each other's arguments and objections. Geyl at one point encouraged Toynbee to elaborate upon a subject because 'our listeners would be very much interested to hear what you say about that'. And finally, there is the inevitable: 'Toynbee, our time is up. There are just a few seconds left.' Formatted in this way, the transcript attempts to give the impression of a real conversation.

Geyl had 'greatly enjoyed' the radio discussion and, furthermore, he heard afterwards that 'the laurels went to G'. The debate confirmed Geyl's global fame, but he was generous enough to admit that this was completely due to Toynbee's fame, in which he, as the critic, had been able to bask. Geyl had chosen his opponent well.

The published transcript is comparatively sterile, intended for the attentive reader, 'the British intellectual'. The conversation was about nothing less than the state of humanity in the post-war world. Central was the role which

<sup>36</sup> Geyl, 'Toynbee's system of civilizations'.

the historian, still endowed with significant authority, could fulfil in offering orientation in confusing and disturbing times. The radio debate was not just a reflection of a substantial conversation between two academically trained historians; here, two people were talking in a world that had just experienced the Second World War and a mass murder without comparison. We now read Geyl's 'discussion without end' as a timeless aphorism, but it can also be interpreted as a phrase bound by time and place. It is important to put this phrase into context. It is not coincidental that Geyl introduces the phrase by referring to Jan Romein's concern for the 'pulverization' of our view of the past caused by ever increasing specialization.<sup>37</sup> Against Romein's desire for a univocal perspective on the past, Geyl underlined the inevitability, even necessity, of disagreement. In a similar manner, Geyl wrote about his meeting with 'Soviet historians' who were weighed down by 'mental regimentation' in 'the discussion without end', 'which to me and most of my western colleagues is the practice of our profession'. Their work, in Geyl's opinion, 'was an impressive show of arms' (but was filled with 'parroted stories').<sup>38</sup> 'Unhindered discussion' was a pillar of civilization which in Geyl's time, the mid twentieth century, was still shamelessly identified with the west. The debate at the BBC radio studio was proof of the rationality of western civilization. In this sense, the 'discussion without end' was also a statement made in the context of Cold War politics.

### *Analogy and a sense of the new*

Toynbee wrote books about the Sumerians, the Greeks and the Romans, but they also contained a message relevant to world citizens of the twentieth century. The destiny of mankind depended upon whether humanity (read: the historian) could distil lessons from the past. Western civilization had been in decline since the Renaissance. In 1948, Toynbee stated that the recent war had confirmed his thesis of decline: 'There is no doubt, when we look around us, a great deal to induce gloom ...': 'We have learned to split an atom and are in danger of splitting it to our own destruction.' Toynbee saw only one ray of hope: Christianity offered guidance to avert the apparently inevitable doom. Toynbee's system of civilizations was popular with people who were trying to find their bearings after the war and were apprehensive about the future. Especially through the rhetoric of the historical parallel, Toynbee could lend authority to his doom scenario. Analogy is the cherished tool of public history and one of the forms that

<sup>37</sup> J. Romein, *Het vergruisde beeld: Over het onderzoek naar de oorzaken van onze Opstand* (Haarlem, 1939).

<sup>38</sup> P. Geyl, 'Sovjet-historici stellen zich voor', *De Gids*, cxviii (1955), 380–90, at pp. 382, 384.

comparative thinking can take, according to Alix Green in her introduction to applied history.<sup>39</sup> Analogy as a heuristic device evokes continuity, but in combination with a blasé mindset it tends to become a blunt instrument. Or, as John Tosh pointed out in his overview of public history, 'It is equally important for historians to be able to recognize the new.'<sup>40</sup>

The core of the Geyl–Toynbee debate was the evaluation of the disaster(s) that were in store for humanity. For Geyl, the future was uncertain, which suited the habitus of the historian. Toynbee, on the basis of his perception of the profession, thought he should prescribe a remedy for humanity. In Geyl's opinion, that was the very reason why Toynbee could hardly assume the title of 'historian'. It is, Geyl wrote, 'no amazement that the great system builders mostly do not come from the ranks of professional historians, who are daily wrestling with the unruly material'. Toynbee was the exception. He truly was a professional historian and moreover, as an Englishman, familiar with the national empirical tradition. Yet Toynbee's twelve-volume *A Study of History* could not, notwithstanding its dizzying erudition, be deemed worthy of the title of a historical study. It was a prophecy, Geyl judged later in his perspicacious review in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.<sup>41</sup> His correspondent Gerretson confirmed this: 'such immense erudition wasted on a hopeless endeavour'.<sup>42</sup> Toynbee reacted briefly and rather weakly by saying that 'in choosing a name for the book under review, I deliberately called it not a history, but a study of history'. For a study of Shakespeare is not a sixteenth-century play.

It can be gleaned from the debate that the greatest concern of both parties lay in man's capacity for self-destruction on a global scale. In the British post-war climate, with which Toynbee was familiar and Geyl to a certain extent, there was a dominant fear of omnicide, one or more Holocausts that would impact the whole world. Fear of a world-wide nuclear disaster seemed greater than the fear of mass murder affecting specific groups, analogous to the Shoah. Omnicide was more a concern about self-destruction than a concern about violence against others. Seventy years later, we must now acknowledge that the mass murders that took place after the Second World War – in Rwanda, in Indonesia, in Cambodia, in Bosnia ... – were perpetrated without the deployment of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Alix R. Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose: Historians and Historical Thinking in Government* (London, 2016), pp. 75–9.

<sup>40</sup> John Tosh, 'In defense of applied history: the History and Policy website', 10 Feb. 2006, [historyandpolicy.org](http://historyandpolicy.org).

<sup>41</sup> Geyl, 'Toynbee's System of Civilizations'.

<sup>42</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, v: Gerretson to Geyl, undated (letter 982).

<sup>43</sup> A. Gallagher, *Genocide and Its Threat to Contemporary International Order* (New York, 2013), p. 105.



If the two men's main concern was humanity's self-destructive capabilities, the genocide did not surface in their debate. They showed no awareness that the 'gloom' of the war was not only the general destruction it caused, a 'fate of the world' and a 'destiny of mankind', but could also refer to the specific extinction of other people because of descent or religion. At the same time, it cannot be absolutely ruled out that hints were made in reference to this. The terms with which we now refer to 'the genocide' or the Holocaust were not then available; the vocabulary was different. When Geyl, in his historiographic essays in *De Gids*, discusses German history, it is evident that the true question is how this catastrophe could possibly have taken place. In retrospect, even the great German historian Leopold von Ranke fell victim to this, with his so-called 'objective' attitude, his abandonment of individual responsibility, his veneration of the state and his conviction that each epoch should be regarded as 'unmittelbar zu Gott' ('immediate to God'). 'Ranke as trailblazer of National Socialism?' Is this what is wrong with Germany? 'Political quietism: finding God in history, in the hope of finding Him willing to take the blame for what goes wrong.' Therefore, the title of Geyl's essay read 'Ranke in the light of the catastrophe'. History does not absolve humanity from individual responsibility; on the contrary, it emphasizes taking that responsibility. Possibly we can substitute Toynbee for Ranke here.<sup>44</sup>

We can only guess whether in the radio debate of 1948 the persecution of the Jews played a part. In the consequences of the debate, however, it would assume an ever more prominent place, corresponding with the more general tendency in the historiography of the Holocaust.

### ***The persecution of the Jews***

Both historians were aware of and familiar with the First World War. Toynbee was involved as a public historian in collecting data on the war in Turkey. At the time, people talked about 'atrocities' and Toynbee came to be seen as an 'atrocities expert' after his data-collecting missions. 'Atrocities', often linked to 'barbarism', had taken on a new importance after the renewed attention to the international rules of war just before and after the turn of the century.<sup>45</sup> 'Atrocities' was also the juridical and moral term in which, in the first instance, the mass murder of the Jews came to be framed. With

<sup>44</sup> P. Geyl, 'Ranke in het licht van de katastrofe', *De Gids*, cxvi (1953), 87–103, p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> Rebecca Gill, 'Now I have seen evil, and I cannot be silent about it': Arnold J. Toynbee and his encounters with atrocity, 1915–1923', in *Evil, Barbarism and Empire*, ed. T. Crook et al. (London, 2011), pp. 172–200.

the realization that a new phenomenon was occurring, a new term quickly emerged: 'genocide'.

Geyl saw the persecution of the Jews in a different light to Toynbee, even if the subject was not explicitly mentioned in the debate. After the November pogrom in 1938, he had already called the persecution a monstrosity of barbarity (echoing the ancient language of atrocity) and made a moral appeal to the authorities to welcome Jewish-German refugees.<sup>46</sup>

In 1949 the historian Harry Elmer Barnes reviewed Geyl's study of Napoleon. He was struck by the 'extremely bitter and jaundiced' view of the Nazis exhibited by Geyl in the preface. The circumstances under which he had lived in the political section of Buchenwald had not been too bad, after all. Geyl had even been able to write his book while there! And look at the 'barbarities' of the Russians, the French and the Americans in Germany. 'It is better that the pot refrains from denouncing the kettle.'<sup>47</sup> Remember, this was in 1949, four years after the end of the war, yet the genocide does not register on Barnes's moral compass. It never would. Against the unwritten rule not to react to reviews, Geyl responded with a letter. He pointed out that his opinions of the Nazi movement (which had its roots in the 1930s) were based not on his own experiences but on the gruesome treatment 'of many thousands of prisoners'.<sup>48</sup> The correspondence with Barnes and the tenor of the debate with Toynbee appear to correspond with the usual perception of the post-war memory of the Holocaust. In the first post-war decade, amid a mounting Cold War atmosphere, the larger story of the war was thought to be one of national grief and heroic resistance. People were still reluctant to make a distinction between 'categories' of victims, so runs the argument, but the fallen heroes were honoured by name.<sup>49</sup> Jewish victimhood remained virtually unmentioned. With regard to the post-war Netherlands, France and Great Britain, it has also been pointed

<sup>46</sup> P. Geyl, 'Herinneringen aan "appeasement"', Prof. dr. P. Geyl, *Figuren & Problemen*, ii (Amsterdam/Antwerp, 1964), pp. 5–11, at p. 11; cf. *De Telegraaf* and *Handelsblad*, 18 Nov. 1938.

<sup>47</sup> H. E. Barnes, 'Review Pieter Geyl: *Napoleon: For and Against*', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, cclxv (Sept. 1949), 196–7: '... even though he admits that he was freely permitted to work on this very book while held as a hostage in the Buchenwald concentration camp, which was far more than would have been permitted to any prominent Nazi historian captured by the Russians, the English, the French, or the Americans ...'

<sup>48</sup> P. Geyl, 'Letter from Pieter Geyl', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, cclxvi (1949), 246–7. Barnes reacts once more: 'Letter from Harry Elmer Barnes', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, cclxvii (1950), 253–4.

<sup>49</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, 2009). See A. Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain* (London, 2014) and R. Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust: the Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy* (Oxford, 2013).

out that (rising) antisemitism was an obstacle to the recognition of Jewish victimhood. The Cold War created an enemy image in which West Germany was on the side of the good and too much stress on the horrors of Nazi Germany was unwelcome. The turning point would come in the late 1950s and early '60s. The deportations, the imprisonment and the mass murder came to be seen ever more emphatically as steps in a genocide, which still later was fashioned into concepts such as Holocaust and Shoah. In 1948, not everyone was yet ready for this.

But this argument invites further scrutiny. The first-hand reports and film images were already available. In *De Gids*, Geyl's favourite magazine, an essay on the then best-known camp, Bergen-Belsen, was published.<sup>50</sup> In recent times, historiography has devoted much attention to these earliest reflections on what would later be summarized as a single 'Holocaust'. The monograph *Multidirectional Memory* by Michael Rothberg is an inspiring example of this direction in Holocaust memory studies. Rothberg shows how the persecution of the Jews was discussed via other means, in political debate, in art and in literature. In his study on British Holocaust memory, Andy Pearce calls for a 'mining at micro level' in order to make these references and memories visible.<sup>51</sup> This does not mean that the historical image suddenly turns from silence to a cacophony of Holocaust references but that a landscape develops of hints, phrases and gestures, wisps of recognition, here and there traces of the awareness that a few years ago, an all-encompassing genocide occurred in the heart of Europe. As a professional historian, Geyl was more perceptive in this respect than Toynbee, with his overarching vision.<sup>52</sup>

It was with a heavy heart that Geyl undertook to read the 2,500 pages of the last four volumes of *A Study of History* in 1955. But it was also something he had to do, particularly in the light of the radio debate. 'Everybody seemed to expect it of me.' This time, he gave the persecution of the Jews centre stage in his reassessment of Toynbee's work.

Geyl's review became a nearly unprecedented condemnation of a work containing so much impressive erudition but so precious little historiography. Possibly, he had already formed his opinion on the basis of the previous volumes. The title 'Toynbee the prophet' seemed to indicate as much. The

<sup>50</sup> K. Strijd, 'De les van Bergen-Belsen', *De Gids*, cx (1947). Even before that, there had been publications on Bergen-Belsen (near Celle) in *Vrij Nederland* in Nov. 1945 (Jacques Tas) and in Jan. 1946 (Jaap Meijer). The author is grateful to Evelien Gans for this information.

<sup>51</sup> Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*.

<sup>52</sup> In his voluminous *Antisemitism: the Longest Hatred* (New York, 1991), pp. 377–9, Robert Wistrich is extremely critical about Toynbee and 'the Toynbee Generation' on the basis of specific passages in *A Study of History*.

books were more of the same: plenty of erudition, scant historiography. However, this time, Geyl was also concerned with an aspect that had gone unmentioned in 1948: 'Extraordinary ... is Toynbee's appreciation of the extermination of the Jews by the National-Socialist regime.' Toynbee had done something that became a trend in the post-war world. He had connected his assessment of the persecution of the Jews to Israel and its armed conflicts with Arab countries. Of course, Geyl stated, first, there is the customary condemnation of the extermination, but what followed? Toynbee equated Israel's expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes and country with the genocide, indeed, 'he describes this as a more heinous sin than that committed against the Jews' in several instances in history. Geyl deemed Toynbee's equalization of the Nazis and Israel as an inadmissible trivialization of the genocide. Toynbee's assessment was connected to his condemnation of Israel. Or was it the other way around? Anyway, it appeared that the evil of the Germans lay not in the genocide but in allowing the survival of a small number of Jews who had now become sinners themselves. In the review, Geyl quoted Toynbee: 'As for the National-Socialist Germans, on the Day of Judgment the gravest crime standing to their account might be, not that they had exterminated a majority of the Western Jews, but that they had caused the surviving remnant of Jews to stumble.'<sup>53</sup> Is it possible, Geyl asked rhetorically, to write with less balance than Toynbee had here? What had inspired the historian to write this 'amazing outburst against the Jews'? It seemed that Toynbee's concerns about the atom bomb and his anti-communism put all other violence in the shadows. Toynbee had a deep aversion against secular nationalism. The Jews were twice wrong: before the war, the Jewish faith had been a self-centred relic of the past ('fossilised', in the original) and after the war, the Jews were too modern with their successful nationalism. Only the old Christendom as the universal religion could save western civilization. Not unimportantly, the historian stood 'profoundly unsympathetic' against Judaism and the Jews, as his biographer William McNeill put it.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, thinking in terms of atrocities did not provide a suitable framework for interpreting the various forms of mass violence.

<sup>53</sup> P. Geyl, 'Toynbee the prophet', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, ii (1955), 260–74. Paraphrasing Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, viii (London, 1955), 290–1.

<sup>54</sup> This must have been the reason that Toynbee dismissed the medieval Christian violence against the Jews, as Geyl remarked in his review. William McNeill, *Arnold Toynbee: a Life* (New York, 1989), p. 48: 'In all these respects he was completely representative of his time and social milieu. The 1961 debate and the following article in *Time* transformed Toynbee in the USA from an unassailable scholar and respected public intellectual into damaged property.'

Next in line to incur the wrath of Geyl was A. J. P. Taylor; the historian, known for his TV appearances, exculpated Hitler by laying all the blame on 'Versailles' and accidentally forgetting the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Elmer Barnes was thrilled.

The Eichmann trial took place in 1961, forcing public recognition of the persecution of the Jews. This was also the year that Toynbee was criticized for his views on the Holocaust and the foundation of the state of Israel. In that year the final volume of his magnum opus appeared in the form of a retrospective entitled *Reconsiderations*. In it, it was stated more clearly than ever before: 'In the Jewish Zionists I see disciples of the Nazis.' What was left unmentioned in the radio debate of 1948, and what Geyl had pointed out in the 1950s, now became a major issue. In March 1961 Toynbee was held accountable when, according to the Dutch *Nieuw Israëlietisch Weekblad*, the Israeli treatment of the Arabs was morally equated to the 'racial murder of the European Jews by the Nazis'. A battle of words ensued, and the promise to continue the discussion via correspondence.<sup>55</sup> A debate on the same issue was held with Yaacov Herzog, the Israeli ambassador and brother of the later president Chaim Herzog, at McGill University in Canada. The debate was broadcast on radio and led to articles in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Debate in the shadow of the Holocaust***

Geyl felt compelled to complain that Toynbee, in his endeavour to become a prophet of his time, had neglected conventional debating rules. Toynbee, being a prophet, found it hard to react to the criticism of his opponents. He did not seek the truth, for he already knew it. In Toynbee's vision, the image of history was clear and simple – if only those historians would stop making it so unnecessarily complicated. But it was Toynbee's own work that was filled with '[t]he non-sequiturs and the contradictions, the far-fetched comparisons, the dizzying assumptions'. Toynbee refused to respond to concrete criticism: 'He dwells in a world of his own imagining, where the challenges of rationally thinking mortals cannot reach him.'<sup>57</sup> The debate, which Geyl, according to his adage that history is 'a discussion without

<sup>55</sup> *Nieuw Israëlietisch Weekblad* [*NIW*], xcii (24 March 1961). In December (*NIW*, xcii, 15 Dec. 1961), after his visit to Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, he was called 'the fiercely anti-Zionist professor'.

<sup>56</sup> The Canada debate can be listened to on YouTube: *The Herzog/Toynbee Debate* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2M5Ntu3CoIA>> [accessed: 18 Oct. 2021]; see also Yaacov Herzog, *A People That Dwells Alone* (London, 1975). A. J. Toynbee, 'Jewish rights in Palestine', *The Jewish Historical Quarterly*, lii (1961), 1–11, and S. Zeitlin, 'Jewish rights in Eretz Israel (Palestine)', *The Jewish Historical Quarterly*, lii (1961), 12–34.

<sup>57</sup> P. Geyl, 'Toynbee the Prophet', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, ii (1955), 260–74, p. 274.

end' had made into the core of his profession, was from Toynbee's position hardly rewarding. In his obituary, Toynbee even mischievously referred to it, as he had consciously avoided further debates with Geyl, knowing that 'a sure way of teasing him was to decline battle'.<sup>58</sup>

Did any of this matter to 'the public' whom the public historians thought they were addressing? Certainly. See for instance the way Pieter Geyl, in an essay disparaging Soviet historians (yet again with a wink towards Romein), ironically remarked that, since Marxist epistemology dictates that everyone is determined, it is impossible to make reproaches against individual members of the 'bourgeoisie'. Similarly, Hitler was no more than an exponent of capitalism and not much different to other westerners. Impassioned, Geyl cried: 'Indeed, I also have a faith. Not a faith in Marx or any other system. But faith in life, faith in the mind.'<sup>59</sup>

Here, also, the difference between Geyl and Toynbee was apparent. In Toynbee's historical model, people wandered as defenceless and helpless monads in a world ruled by great historical processes. But Geyl's historical model still saw people as individuals in mutual connection, each with their own agenda and agency. This had direct consequences. In Toynbee's world, people bore no individual guilt; they were victims of circumstance. This may help explain Toynbee's popularity in post-war Germany: 'the appeal to inevitability, of the doomed fate of a certain generation ...'.<sup>60</sup> It would return in the German *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s. For Geyl, there was hope, not in Christendom or in any other system mapping out the future, but in his premise of an open future with people who, as moral creatures, are able to make choices. This point of view of Geyl's also directly affects our judgment of the connectedness in time and place of historians as committed public intellectuals.

<sup>58</sup> A. J. Toynbee, 'Pieter Geyl', *Journal of Contemporary History*, ii (1967), 3–4.

<sup>59</sup> P. Geyl, 'Sovjet-historici stellen zich voor', *De Gids*, cxviii (1955), 380–90.

<sup>60</sup> L. J. Rogier, *Herdenking van P. Geyl* (Amsterdam, 1967), p. 30; see also on this subject Geyl, 'Ranke in het licht van de katastrofe', pp. 95 ff. on Bismarck's 'fert unda nec regitur'.



## 8. Pieter Geyl and the eighteenth century

*Reinier Salverda*

When Pieter Geyl passed away on New Year's Eve 1966, praise was not long in coming. The *Times* obituary of 3 January 1967 charted how Geyl, with a doctorate from Leiden University and having served as the London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (NRC) during the First World War, held the chair of Dutch history at University College London (UCL) from 1919 to 1935, after which he became professor of Dutch history in Utrecht. Geyl, a combative and unorthodox historian, was well known for his active involvement with the Flemish movement and for his outspoken anti-monarchist and anti-Orangist views concerning the history of the Netherlands. After the Second World War he achieved great fame internationally with his brilliant *Napoleon: For and Against* (1946) and his essays on and debates with leading historians. His *magnum opus*, however, the six-volume Dutch-language *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* ('History of the Dutch People', 1930–62), remained unfinished, its sixth volume ending in 1798, well before our modern age.

Praise and admiration for Geyl came from many different quarters. Arnold Toynbee, in a letter to *The Times* of 7 January 1967, valued Geyl as 'a critic from whom one might learn much', and praised his *Dutch Revolt* (2 vols, 1932–4; reissued in a single volume in 2001 by Phoenix Press under the title of *History of the Dutch-speaking Peoples*, in obvious analogy to Churchill's *A History of the English-speaking Peoples* (1956–8), as a work which 'produced a lasting modification of traditional views by throwing fresh light, from a new angle, on an important passage of history'. On the other end of the spectrum, Geyl was praised by A. L. Rowse for his critique of Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1946).<sup>1</sup> In between, there is John Bromley's and Ernst Kossmann's dedication to Geyl of their volume *Britain and the Netherlands in Europe and Asia* (1968): 'Piae memoriae Petri Geyl praeceptoris prudentis scriptoris praeclari amici egregii grato animo dedicatum' ('Dedicated, with a grateful heart, to the revered memory of Pieter Geyl, prudent teacher, excellent writer, extraordinary friend'). Another tribute came from Alice Carter in her monograph *The Dutch Republic in Europe in the Seven Years*

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Rowse, *The Use of History* (London, 1963), p. 68.



*War* (1971), a thorough analysis of the deep divisions underlying the Dutch Republic's outward neutrality. As she put it in her preface:

I was one of the many English students Professor Geyl taught to love his mother country, and to want to learn about relations between the Netherlands and England, which Geyl had come to regard as his second fatherland. Professor Boogman, also a student of Geyl's, has written recently of the freedom with which we were allowed to choose our own area of research, and make our own discoveries therein in our own way and at our own time. We could draw our own conclusions, to which Geyl would listen courteously before kindly revealing to us the fallacies apt to beset the young student who starts working on his own. We were not submitted to unsought direction, though it was always to be had on request. Nor were we intimidated by *obiter dicta*, though we would not, I think, have been permitted to harbour doubts about the Greater Netherlands theory. With that one exception his seminars were meetings of free minds.<sup>2</sup>

Herbert Rowen, the American historian of the seventeenth-century Dutch statesman John de Witt, ranked Geyl alongside Johan Huizinga.<sup>3</sup> Following on, three Dutch historians discussed Geyl's achievements in commemorative articles: first, in 1967, J. C. Boogman;<sup>4</sup> then Lodewijk Rogier, who stated that in Dutch historiography there is a 'before Geyl' and an 'after Geyl';<sup>5</sup> and lastly, in 1972, Hermann von der Dunk, who mentioned 'the important stimuli to innovation emanating from his work' but also noted that his work now belongs to 'a completed period in historiography'.<sup>6</sup>

Some two decades later, a rather more critical view of Geyl's work emerged, first from Von der Dunk in *Clio's Mirror*,<sup>7</sup> then in 1987 from Ernst Kossmann, Geyl's successor to the chair of Dutch history at UCL. The latter expressed his great respect for Geyl but also voiced clear reservations vis-à-vis his Greater Netherlands idea and his view of the Dutch language as the

<sup>2</sup> A. C. Carter, *The Dutch Republic in Europe in the Seven Years War* (London, 1971), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> H. H. Rowen, 'The historical work of Pieter Geyl', *Journal of Modern History*, xxxvii (1965), 35–49, at p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Boogman, 'Pieter Geyl (1887–1966)', *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xxi (1967), 269–77.

<sup>5</sup> L. J. Rogier, 'Herdenking van P. Geyl (15 december 1887–31 december 1966)', *Mededelingen KNAW, Afd. Lett. N. R.*, xxx, reprinted in L. J. Rogier, *Herdenken en herzien: Verzamelde opstellen* (Bilthoven, 1974), pp. 350–89.

<sup>6</sup> H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl, Dordrecht 15 december 1887–Utrecht 31 december 1966', *Jaarboek Maatschappij Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 1972, 123–35, at p. 135. Cf. DBNL (Digitale Bibliotheek Nederlandse Letteren), and Collectie Geyl, in *Digitaal Repertorium Utrecht* <<https://repertorium.library.uu/collectie/geyl>>.

<sup>7</sup> H. W. von der Dunk (1985). 'Pieter Geyl: History as a form of self-expression', in *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands: Papers Delivered to the Eighth Anglo-Dutch Historical Conference*, ed. A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse (Zutphen, 1985), pp. 185–214.

binding factor in the political history of the Low Countries. As Kossmann put it, these views were something out of the past, and shared neither by his colleagues nor by the subsequent generation of historians: '[Geyl's work] no longer excites us, it no longer challenges us, though it does strike us by its force, liveliness and spontaneity. It goes without saying that he will continue to be valued as a great historian, as he wanted and expected.'<sup>8</sup>

Kossmann's point was that Geyl was not a theoretician, and the renewal of historical studies after him came about in large part thanks to input and impulses from outside the Netherlands: with Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*, Mona Ozouf's culture of the revolution and Michel Foucault's mentalities and psychodynamics for example; along with innovative studies by American scholars of the radical Enlightenment (Margaret Jacob) and book history (Robert Darnton) and in-depth British studies of Dutch history by Simon Schama and Jonathan Israel.<sup>9</sup> In all these respects, said Kossmann, history and historiography had simply moved on and left Geyl behind.

Given these different judgements, it is worth going back to re-examine Geyl's work in light of the historical scholarship of today, fifty years on. Two questions in particular will occupy us here: 'Why Geyl?' and 'Why the eighteenth century in the Netherlands?' The first of these questions explores issues such as whether today Geyl is more respected than read and his work seen primarily as useful, sound and solid rather than challenging and stimulating. He was a generalist who covered all periods of Dutch history, but maybe his works are too Dutch in character and out of sync with today's era of globalization and progress through specialization? So, why would (or should) one still read and re-read his historical work? These and similar questions will occupy us when we consider the basic principles which Geyl as a historian adhered to when he practised his profession, his craft of studying, interpreting and criticizing his sources.

The second question takes us into issues such as: what was the eighteenth century to Geyl and what did he make of it? Why did he engage with this period of decline in Dutch history? And what led him to his re-evaluation of the Patriots in Dutch history and their democratic ideas and actions at the end of the eighteenth century? As we shall see, in contrast to Marx, for whom reading Diderot and the French Enlightenment was intellectual

<sup>8</sup> E. H. Kossmann, 'Huizinga and Geyl: a portrait of two Dutch historians', in *The Low Countries*, i (Rekkem, 1995), p. 257; see also J. Tollebeek, 'Een ongemakkelijk heerschapp: Geyl contra Ter Braak', *Ons Erfdeel*, xxxii (1989), 21–9, reprinted in J. Tollebeek, *De ijkmeesters: Opstellen over de geschiedschrijving in Nederland en België* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 203–14.

<sup>9</sup> S. Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780–1813* (London, 1992 [1977]); J. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford, 1995).

refreshment in old age, for Geyl, studying the eighteenth century was a lifelong intellectual pursuit, resulting in a large body of published work from early on in his London years until the end of his career. This state of affairs makes it doubly interesting to explore what Geyl's work can still teach us and why his studies of the Dutch eighteenth century still matter today.

Our underlying central question, meanwhile, is a critical one and concerns the merits and demerits of Geyl's scholarly contribution. Our overall aim is to contribute to a critical reassessment of the unique achievements and the enduring value of Geyl's contribution, both to history as a discipline in general and to the history of the Dutch eighteenth century in particular.

### ***Geyl and the craft of the historian***

#### *Sources, discovery and scrutiny*

In Geyl's practice as a historian, and in his reflections on his craft, three basic principles are paramount. Throughout his career, Geyl put great emphasis on the handiwork of the historian, the professional craft, the expertise and skills to be applied when working with sources and in archival research. If he taught us anything, it is that the historian must investigate, analyse, interpret, scrutinize, compare, discuss and do the historical detective work that is necessary if we want to know and understand what happened in history. Geyl's emphasis on the importance of sources and a thorough study of them harks back directly to the critical-empirical tradition within the Dutch Enlightenment, and especially to the scholarly work of Jan Wagenaar, the eighteenth-century Amsterdam Patriot historian.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting example from Geyl's work is the following. In his annotations to the English translation of the *Journal* of the famous seventeenth-century United Dutch East India Company skipper Bontekoe,<sup>11</sup> Geyl informs us that Bontekoe, on his return voyage from the East Indies in 1625, encountered an English man-of-war in Kinsale harbour (Ireland), and this vital piece of external information led the author of this chapter to the hypothesis that there might well be other things that Bontekoe does not tell his readers. Pursuing this further led to the discovery in the letters of Jan Pieterszoon Coen that Bontekoe was not the emblematic Dutch merchant skipper-next-to-god of his *Journal*, but in fact the captain of a

<sup>10</sup> See L. H. M. Wessels, *Bron, waarheid en de verandering der tijden: Jan Wagenaar (1709–1773): Een historiografische studie* (The Hague, 1997); and R. Salverda, 'Newtonian linguistics: the contribution of Lambert ten Kate (1674–1731) to the study of language', in *Proper Words in Proper Places: Studies in Lexicology and Lexicography in Honour of William Jervis Jones*, ed. C. Davies et al. (Stuttgart, 2001), pp. 115–32.

<sup>11</sup> See W. Y. Bontekoe, *Memorable Description of the East Indian Voyage, 1618–1625*, ed. M. Bodde and P. Geyl (London, 1929).

Dutch warship carrying weapons and ammunition to Java, where these were urgently needed to fight the British and the Indonesians.<sup>12</sup> On a more practical level, Geyl built up the Dutch history library in the Institute of Historical Research (IHR) as a solid collection of primary sources to be used in research and seminars.<sup>13</sup>

### *Relevance and commitment*

A second fundamental principle of Geyl's was that the position of the investigating historian is not outside the history under investigation. On the contrary, the historian is actively involved in that investigation, from their particular vantage point. This was certainly true of Geyl himself, whose dominant, headstrong personality, Multatulian polemical style and enlightened, liberal-national and republican political leanings are acutely present throughout his writings.

A good example is Geyl's post-war brochure rejecting the vilification of the Dutch Patriots of the Napoleonic era as collaborators, similar to the Dutch Nazi party Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (NSB) during the German occupation. As a democrat through and through and having been interned during the war, Geyl spoke up for the democratic and national character of the Dutch Patriot movement, aiming to rescue them from this slur. This happened at a time when, for example, Jo van Ammers-Küller's pre-war Patriot *Tavelinck* trilogy (1934–8) had the stigma of the NSB attached to it, because its popular author had collaborated with the Germans during the war.<sup>14</sup>

In this respect, Geyl himself was not too different from the eighteenth-century pamphleteers who took part in the great 1757 debate about the proper place of the Dutch statesman John de Witt in political history and theory, the subject of Geyl's impressive *Wittenoorlog* (1953). In Geyl's work we find the same political involvement and polemical talents that Jan Wagenaar brought to bear in his pamphlets of 1757. In fact, Geyl's

<sup>12</sup> R. Salverda, 'Young man, go east: Investigating colonial *topoi* in Dutch literature', *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxxi (2007), 1–22, at pp. 7–8.

<sup>13</sup> It was in this invaluable library that this author first discovered the monograph by Van Eck on *Het Proces Rauter* (1952), a fundamental study of the post-war prosecution for war crimes of Hanns Albin Rauter, the leading SS and police authority in the Netherlands during the occupation, a work just sitting there on the shelves of the IHR but not mentioned in De Jong's *Geschiedenis van het Koninkrijk in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*. See R. Salverda, 'Beyond a bridge too far': the aftermath of the Battle of Arnhem (1944), and its impact on civilian life', in *Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1800–2000*, ed. J. Fenoulhet, G. Quist and U. Tiedau (London, 2016), pp. 147–62.

<sup>14</sup> J. van Ammers-Küller, *Heeren, knechten en vrouwen* (Amsterdam, 1934–8), i: *De Patriotten*; ii: *De sans-culotten*; iii: *De getrouwen*.

commitments descend directly from the eighteenth-century ideal of the *philosophe* as intellectual and social tribune: his active and polemical involvement with public debate and opinion, his recognition that when doing political history the historian cannot avoid (and therefore must acknowledge) their own bias and his focus on the contemporary social and political relevance of his historical work.<sup>15</sup>

*Geyl's critical historiography*

Third, behind these first two principles lies Geyl's critical philosophy of history, which he developed in *Napoleon: For and Against* (published in Dutch, 1946; in English, 1949). This book opens, almost as an invocation, if not a clarion call, with Madame de Staël as the voice of liberalism in Europe, the enlightened author of the *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la révolution française* ('Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution', 1816) and the indomitable female protagonist opposing the tyranny of Napoleon and the Restoration of Chateaubriand. Geyl clearly adhered to a dramatic view of history as a struggle between protagonists and, in their wake, between historians, who, for all their differences of knowledge, viewpoint and bias, are not outside that history and must, one way or another, take a position vis-à-vis the issue at hand, in this case, the battle of liberalism against tyranny and despotism. And when they do, inevitably this will involve them in discussion. Here we see how Geyl arrived at his well-known dictum that history is 'a discussion without end': a truism perhaps, like the French saying 'Du choc des opinions jaillit la vérité' ('Two opinions are better than one'), or the classical 'Audi et alteram partem' ('Listen to the other side'), but still, a very influential view in modern historiography until today.<sup>16</sup>

This view of history as a discussion without end also informs Geyl's longstanding correspondence with his friend and colleague Frederik Carel Gerretson, which was not just about sources and their interpretation, about historical knowledge and 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' ('how things actually were'), but also about current political matters, values and visions, right up to their eventual parting of ways.<sup>17</sup> The real point here is a philosophical

<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Geyl's writings have inspired the author of this chapter to write an essay on Dutch culture in Europe: R. Salverda, 'Nochte heel vroom nochte onvroom: Naar een strategie voor de Nederlandse cultuur in Europa', *Ons Erfdeel*, xxxv (1992), 483–503.

<sup>16</sup> See the subtitle of *Geschiedschrijving in de twintigste eeuw: Discussie zonder eind*, ed. H. Beliën and G. J. van Setten (Amsterdam, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> For example Gerretson's letter of 12 Sept. 1947 in reaction to Geyl's *De Patriottenbeweging*. See *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (5 vols, Baarn, 1979–85), v, pp. 101–6.

one. With his critical-empirical approach to historical scholarship, Geyl was linking up with the British tradition from Bacon and Newton to Russell and Popper, where sources and archives provide the investigative material for historians, who then, next, apply their skills of analysis, interpretation, criticism, argument and evidence – not finalistic but open-ended – to prevent the Whig histories we would otherwise end up with.

This is vintage Geyl: his critical-dialectic method of doing history, in his view a basic commitment for the discipline. Geyl's interest was not so much in creating, developing and projecting historical images but rather in critical examination, playing off one image against another, in a historical discussion without end.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Geyl's contribution to the study of the Dutch eighteenth century***

Geyl's eighteenth-century writings consist of several monographs on the political history of the period and a range of critical scholarly articles, all based on authentic sources, the harvest of forty years of hard work, and quite a significant part of his overall output as a historian. Below, their main themes and interests will be discussed.

#### *Geyl versus Colenbrander*

First, there is Geyl's criticism, sustained over many years, of Colenbrander's influential view of the late eighteenth century as a particularly low point in Dutch national history, and against his presentation of the Dutch Patriots as a bunch of rather ridiculous puppets of the French. That Geyl's national pride was hurt by Colenbrander's disdain may have been one of the motives for this critique. Another may have been his desire to free himself of the fetters of the nineteenth-century trinity of 'God, the Netherlands and Orange', the national ideology (with its concomitant historiography) of the kingdom. But whatever his motive, Geyl did tackle Colenbrander's overwhelming dominance of the field with his massive output: his publication of sources in the *Gedenkstukken der algemeene geschiedenis van Nederland van 1795–1840* ('Memorials of the General History of the Netherlands from 1795 to 1840', 10 vols, 1905–22), as well as a series of monographs covering the same period,

<sup>18</sup> In his own work, this author has found this to be a useful and productive approach, especially in studies of the Dutch colonial past in the former East Indies, first in R. Salverda, 'Beeld en tegenbeeld van het koloniaal verleden', in *Rekenschap, 1650–2000*, ed. D. Fokkema and F. Grijzenhout (The Hague, SDU, 2001), pp. 71–94; also in R. Salverda, 'Doing justice in a plural society: a postcolonial perspective on Dutch law and other legal traditions in the Indonesian archipelago, 1600–1950', *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxxiii (2009), 152–70.

from *De Patriottentijd* ('The Patriot Period', 3 vols, 1897–98), *De Bataafsche republiek* ('The Batavian Republic', 1908) and *Schimmelpenninck en Koning Lodewijk* ('Schimmelpenninck and King Louis Napoleon', 1911) through to his *Inlijving en opstand* ('Incorporation and Revolt', 1913).<sup>19</sup>

This chapter looks at how Geyl developed his critique and, in particular, his critical method. He went into it hard and polemical, attacking Colenbrander wherever he could, on his plagiarism and his carelessness, on errors due to sloppy reading leading to patently unfounded and incorrect historical interpretations of the relevant archival documents. On this basis of historical-interpretive handwork and thorough critical readings of the relevant sources in their context, Geyl dismissed Colenbrander in his *De Patriottenbeweging* ('The Patriot Movement') as 'no reliable guide'.<sup>20</sup>

To Geyl, this clearing of the field was a basic prerequisite before he could proceed beyond Colenbrander's errors and misconceptions to develop a new and different understanding of the Patriots and their time. In this domain, we find some of Geyl's most impressive scholarly achievements, along two main thematic lines: first, his investigation of the Dutch republic's *ancien régime* under the Orange stadholders, and second, the breakthrough of the new era in pamphlets, Patriot ideas and public debate in eighteenth-century Dutch politics and society.

#### *The ancien régime in the Dutch Republic: Orange and Bentinck*

In 1924 Geyl's first monograph, *Willem IV en Engeland* ('Stadholder William IV and England'), written in London, discussed the Orange stadholders, with their hereditary powers and feudal patronage system reaching into all parts of the Republic. The book was much praised: 'one of the best contributions ... of recent years' (*Historisch Tijdschrift*), the 'narrative, both vivid and sincere, is established on solid foundations' (*History*), 'a thorough and finely balanced account of Dutch national history' (*Historische Zeitschrift*).<sup>21</sup>

Then, in 1934, there is Geyl's edition, jointly with Gerretson, of the first volume of the *Brieven* (*Letters*) of Willem Bentinck van Rhoon, the loyal anglophile Orangist courtier, statesman and political operator who had a great reach and was in a pivotal position within the politics of the Republic, and in whose activities we can see the inner workings of the Dutch *ancien*

<sup>19</sup> See E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier, 'De geschiedschrijving over de Patriottentijd en de Bataafse Tijd', in *Kantelend Geschiedbeeld: Nederlandse historiografie sinds 1945*, ed. W. W. Mijnhardt (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1983), pp. 206–27, at p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> P. Geyl, *De Patriottenbeweging, 1780–1787* (Amsterdam, 1947), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> 'eine sorgfältige, fein abgewogene Darstellung der niederländischen Landesgeschichte'; R. Häpke in *Historische Zeitschrift*, cxli (1930), 395–7. Quotes from *Historisch Tijdschrift* and *History* quoted from the back cover of P. Geyl, *Revolutiedagen te Amsterdam* (The Hague, 1936).

*régime* and how this managed to stay in power for many decades through patronage, pressure and, if necessary, by fomenting riots – even a *coup d'état*.

This 1934 Bentinck edition remains unfinished. The British Library alone held so much source material, previously untouched, that the completion of this first volume was in itself a major achievement. But pressures of work prevented further progress. In 1976, volumes 2.1 and 2.2 were published posthumously, but even then, the edition remained unfinished. Moreover, many other letters and documents from Bentinck lie scattered across archives in several countries.<sup>22</sup> A. C. Carter highlights not only this dispersion but also the extremely valuable information contained in the voluminous papers Bentinck left,<sup>23</sup> but Carter's work is not mentioned in the bibliography to this later edition of Bentinck's *Brieven*.<sup>24</sup>

Bentinck's wife, Countess Charlotte Sophie von Aldenburg, has since been the subject of a fascinating two-volume novel, *Mevrouw Bentinck* (1978–81) by the Dutch novelist Hella Haasse, based on original letters. An adventurous free spirit with wide-ranging international connections in the Europe of the Enlightenment, Charlotte Sophie appears in Marc Fumaroli's *Quand l'Europe parlait français* ('When Europe Spoke French', 2001), in a chapter in which she comes alive for the reader, almost jumping off the page with the immediacy of the letters she wrote to her many friends all over Europe. Her letters too are scattered across archives all over Europe, but many thousands have now been made digitally accessible by the Bentinck Archive at Middachten Castle. Her husband, Willem, fought her all the way for a divorce, and in the end won out, but not nearly enough is known about this man and his role in eighteenth-century Dutch politics. To understand him as a statesman in his time, a great deal of work needs to be done: a full edition of the available archive material and a major political biography of the scope and size of Herbert Rowen's *John de Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672*, or David Onnekink's recent political biography of Bentinck's father, *The Anglo-Dutch Favourite: The Career of Hans Willem Bentinck, 1st Earl of Portland (1649–1709)*.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See *Briefwisseling en aantekeningen van Willem Bentinck, Heer van Rhoon (tot aan de dood van Willem IV op 22 October 1751): Hoofdzakelijk naar de bescheiden in het Britsch Museum*, ed. C. Gerretson and P. Geyl, i: *Tot aan de Praeliminairen van Aken (30 April 1748)* (Utrecht, 1934), pp. v–x.

<sup>23</sup> Carter, *The Dutch Republic in Europe in the Seven Years War*, pp. xiv, 27, 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Briefwisseling Bentinck*, ii (Utrecht, 1976), p. 654.

<sup>25</sup> H. H. Rowen, *John de Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672* (Princeton, 1978); D. Onnekink, *The Anglo-Dutch Favourite: the Career of Hans Willem Bentinck, 1st Earl of Portland (1649–1709)* (London, 2013).



*Riots, revolts, revolution*

In 1936 Geyl published his monograph, *Revolutiedagen in Amsterdam (Augustus–September 1748): Prins Willem IV en de Doelistenbeweging* ('Revolutionary Days in Amsterdam (August–September 1748): Prince William IV and the Doelist Movement'), in which he analysed the mid-century Orangist riots in Amsterdam. Throughout, Geyl is on top of the action, which can be followed almost hour to hour in a narrative carefully reconstructed (with due attention to the confusion and clutter of the whole episode) from numerous pamphlets, letters and eyewitness reports with incisive source study.<sup>26</sup> Geyl argues that already in 1748 the beginnings can be seen of the alienation between the Orangists and incipient democracy, and between the stadholder and the citizenry, an alienation which would eventually result in the Patriot Revolution of 1787. Geyl was quite critical here of the Orangists and their *ancien régime* operations, blaming their long and slow demise on their political ineptness and inadequacy.<sup>27</sup>

Words matter, and here we note the use of the term 'revolution'.<sup>28</sup> Geyl indicated that the riots and revolt of 1748 were a precursor to what was to become a democratic revolution towards the end of the century. The fact is, though, that when Bentinck and his friends in the English government, the Duke of Newcastle and the Earl of Sandwich, spoke of 'the Dutch Revolution', what they meant was actually the pro-Orange, court-inspired, anti-republican, anti-French regime change then going on in Holland.<sup>29</sup>

It was only in the 1970s and 1980s, with the advent of social history, that interest among Dutch historians in riots and revolts was renewed.<sup>30</sup> The riots which occurred in Gelderland and Overijssel from the end of the seventeenth

<sup>26</sup> P. Geyl, *Revolutiedagen in Amsterdam (Augustus–September 1748)* (The Hague, 1936), pp. 164–75.

<sup>27</sup> Geyl, *Revolutiedagen in Amsterdam*, p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> For the evolution of the term 'revolution' see R. Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven, Conn./London, 1983), pp. 49–52 and S. van Rossem, *Revolutie op de koperplaat: Politieke prenten tijdens de Brabantse Omwenteling* (Leuven, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Against the view of Carter, *The Dutch Republic in Europe in the Seven Years War*, p. 157: 'revolution (a word to which we attach here only the milder Dutch sense of a change in personnel of government)': Bentinck, Newcastle and Sandwich actually described in their letters what they were then fomenting as 'the Dutch Revolution'. See R. Lodge, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Diplomacy, 1740–1748* (London, 1930), pp. 247–51, 311, and *Briefwisseling Bentinck*, i, p. 269 (letter no. 218 d. 19 May 1747).

<sup>30</sup> A. H. Wertheim-Gijse Weenink, '1672–1795', in *Geschiedenis van Gelderland, 1492–1795*, ed. P. J. Meij et al. (Zutphen, 1975), pp. 211–333 and 507–17; W. F. Wertheim and A. H. Wertheim-Gijse Weenink, *Burgers in verzet tegen regenten-beerschappij: Onrust in Sticht en Oversticht, 1703–1706* (Amsterdam, 1976); D. P. Keizer, *Reboelje yn de Dongeradielen 1749* (Bûtenpost, 1980); R. Dekker, *Holland in beroering: Oproeren in de 17de en 18de eeuw* (Baarn, 1982).

century, the *plooierijen* ('faction riots') against the monarchical ambitions of Willem III and Willem IV, were viewed by the Wertheims as leading to the anonymous publication in 1781 of the radical democratic pamphlet *Aan het Volk van Nederland* ('To the people of the Netherlands') by the IJssel patriot Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol, an important harbinger of the Batavian Revolution of 1795.

Rudolf Dekker complained in 1982 that the dominant image of the eighteenth century in existing historiography represented the Dutch Republic as a calm and quiet society, whereas in fact there had been a multitude of revolts throughout the entire history of the republic. He blames Geyl for sharing this blind spot on riots with many other Dutch historians. Based on his own investigation of the Netherlands, in combination with a European-wide comparative perspective posits that 'every country has its own pattern of social unrest'.<sup>31</sup> The particular pattern which Dekker saw in the Netherlands was that there had been a multitude of riots in the Republic in between the two near-civil wars (the first religious, in 1617; the second political, in 1787): in the first half of the seventeenth century riots were mostly religious in character; there were frequent tax riots throughout the seventeenth though not in the eighteenth century; food riots dominated in the first half of the eighteenth century; riots occurred in years of crisis (1653, 1672, 1747 and 1787); and Orangist upheavals, which, due to pressure from the rioting populace, in 1672 and 1747 led to regime change.

Regarding Dekker's complaint, this chapter takes the position that his conclusion would have been very much to Geyl's liking. To put it in Toynbee's terms: here too, Geyl, with his pioneering monograph of 1936 on the Amsterdam Doelisten riot of 1748, had set in motion a lasting modification of traditional historiography.<sup>32</sup>

### ***The coming of the new: the pamphlet war of 1757 and the political history of the Patriots***

Geyl's next monograph was his *Wittenoorlog* (1953), an analysis of the exchange of pamphlets in 1757 concerning the place of the statesman John de Witt in Dutch history. Based on an extensive collection of original documents, this study of Dutch political thought in mid-eighteenth-century public debate is one of the highpoints in Geyl's *œuvre*.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Dekker, *Holland in beroering*, p. 142.

<sup>32</sup> See eg A. Porta, *Joan en Gerrit Corver: De politieke macht van Amsterdam, 1702–1748* (Assen/Amsterdam, 1975).

<sup>33</sup> See G. J. Schutte, "A Subject of Admiration and Encomium": the History of the Dutch Republic as Interpreted by non-Dutch Authors in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century' in A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse, eds, *Clio's Mirror*, pp. 109–31, at pp. 115, 119.

From a political and ideological point of view, Geyl in this monograph rediscovers the *Staatse* tradition in Dutch political history since De Witt while at the same time linking up with the eighteenth-century historiography of Jan Wagenaar, a leading participant in this debate.<sup>34</sup> The book about the afterlife of De Witt and his place in Dutch political history and thought over the last three centuries has not yet been written but, as Rowen signalled, Geyl was a pioneer here, with the indications he gave of De Witt's importance in his writings.<sup>35</sup> Gerretson may have joked about what he saw as 'the *staatse* historiography from Grotius up to Your Honour',<sup>36</sup> but as Geyl himself wrote, 'It [the *Wittenoorlog*] is a work that has enormously fascinated me, but that will not attract many readers – so complicated, so deep into the mindset of those strange eighteenth-century characters.'<sup>37</sup>

In other works, such as *De Patriottenbeweging* ('The Patriot Movement', 1947), *Studies en Strijdschriften* ('Studies and Polemics', 1958) and the final volume of his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* ('History of the Dutch People', 1959; translated into French as *La Révolution Batave*, 1971), Geyl continued to develop this idea and offered a re-evaluation of the anti-stadholder movement and its resistance to the monarchical-absolutist ambitions of the Orange stadholders, their patronage and despotism.<sup>38</sup>

Geyl had not hesitated to describe the *Doelisten* revolt of 1748 as a precursor to revolution. Now, in his *Patriottenbeweging*, he described this revolt as a democratic movement of national political significance, an important mainstay in Dutch history, descended from the *staatsgezinde* tradition, which he thus put centre stage. In this way, Geyl produced a new vision of the Patriots and their Batavian Revolution, emphasizing a continuity that had been obscured by Colenbrander but was now rediscovered by Geyl's critical historical research. As C. H. E. de Wit concludes, 'In this study, Colenbrander's view of the period after 1785 and his method have been investigated, and that resulted in a confirmation of Geyl's critique.'<sup>39</sup>

However, De Wit went on to criticize Geyl for his views on revolt and revolution, which were still far too much those of a 'popular riot'.<sup>40</sup> So now the critic had been criticized, and with his own weapons of careful investigation

<sup>34</sup> See Wessels, *Bron, waarheid en de verandering der tijden*, ch. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Rowen, *John de Witt*, p. 893.

<sup>36</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, v, p. 269.

<sup>37</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, v, p. 189.

<sup>38</sup> See also the criticism aimed at Anna van Hannover in the final chapter of Carter, *The Dutch Republic in Europe in the Seven Years War*.

<sup>39</sup> C. H. E. de Wit, *De strijd tussen aristocratie en democratie in Nederland, 1780–1848: Kritisch onderzoek van een historisch beeld en herwaardering van een periode* (Heerlen, 1965), p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> De Wit, *De strijd tussen aristocratie en democratie in Nederland*, pp. 386–93.

of sources, critical interpretation and polemical discussion. One of the key pieces of evidence for De Wit's case was his discovery concerning the origin, purpose and especially the political significance of *Grondwettige Herstelling* ('Constitutional Repair'), published in two volumes in 1784–6.<sup>41</sup> Here, De Wit gave a valuable clarification of terms and concepts, showing how the label of 'Patriot' covered on the one hand pro-oligarchic but anti-Orange regents and on the other revolutionary democrats such as Van der Capellen, the author of the fiery pamphlet *Aan Het Volk van Nederland* ('To the People of the Netherlands') of 1781.<sup>42</sup>

Going further, De Wit (1974) came to see the second half of the eighteenth century as a struggle between aristocrats and democrats.<sup>43</sup> In this, incidentally, he was reverting to Robert Fruin, who used the same conceptual distinction, though in practice the two scholars applied it rather differently: to Fruin, Schimmelpenninck was a democratic patriot,<sup>44</sup> whereas De Wit did not really see this patriot as a democrat. This unhelpful terminological confusion was increased later when De Wit (1978) lumped Geyl and Colenbrander together as 'the conventional view'.<sup>45</sup> Against this, however, the difference between the views of Colenbrander and Geyl has been set out clearly by Haitsma Mulier.<sup>46</sup> De Wit also criticized Geyl for his 'bourgeois-conventional' views, in contrast to the more radical views of Thorbecke. But here, De Wit fails to appreciate the *Staatse*, republican, anti-monarchical tradition to which Geyl belongs just as much as Thorbecke, and ignores the fact that Geyl, like Willem Verkade and Jan Drentje, saw

<sup>41</sup> C. H. E. de Wit, *Het ontstaan van het moderne Nederland 1780–1848 en zijn geschiedschrijving* (Oirsbeek, 1978).

<sup>42</sup> C. H. E. de Wit, 'De Nederlandse Revolutie van de achttiende eeuw en Frankrijk, 1780–1801', *Werkgroep 18e eeuw, Dokumentatieblad* 11/12 (1971), 29–51. Note in this context that Van der Capellen's dangerous pamphlet was reprinted and distributed in 1784, for the first time conspicuously with his name and his portrait, through safely hidden behind the names of Wagenaar and Raynal and the titles of their works. See R. Salverda, 'Raynal and Holland: Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* and Dutch colonialism in the age of Enlightenment', in *Raynal's Histoire des deux Indes: Colonialism, Networks and Global Exchange*, ed. C. Courtney and J. Mander (Oxford, 2015), pp. 217–34, at pp. 232–3.

<sup>43</sup> C. H. E. de Wit, *De Nederlandse Revolutie van de Achttiende Eeuw: Oligarchie en proletariaat* (Oirsbeek, 1974).

<sup>44</sup> R. Fruin, *Geschiedenis der Staatsinstellingen in Nederland tot den val der Republiek*, ed. H. T. Colenbrander, 2nd, rev. ed. 1922. Introduction by I. Schöffers (The Hague, 1980), p. 354.

<sup>45</sup> C. H. E. de Wit, *Het ontstaan van het moderne Nederland 1780–1848 en zijn geschiedschrijving* (Oirsbeek, 1978). See also T. de Vries, 'Voorwoord', *Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck: Republikein zonder republiek* (Nijmegen, 1979 [1965, 1941]), pp. 7–14, at p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Haitsma Mulier, 'De geschiedschrijving over de Patriottentijd en de Bataafse Tijd', pp. 206–27.

those radical patriots and their *Staatse* traditions as precursors to nineteenth-century Dutch democracy and liberalism.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Taking stock: Geyl and his legacy***

Looking back, the following lines of approach can help us to take the measure of Geyl as a historian of the Dutch eighteenth century.

#### *Openings*

It is characteristic of Geyl that he could be quite open about what he did *not* know. For example, towards the end of his *Revolutiedagen in Amsterdam* (*Revolutionary Days in Amsterdam*, 1936) he remarks of one of the people involved: 'Rousset de Missy – perhaps someone else will someday find out some more about him – to me, he remains an unfathomable entity; one guesses, rather more an adventurer than a statesman; and in any case, could a Frenchman really be leading an Amsterdam popular movement?'<sup>48</sup> His friend Gerretson, on reading the book, had this response: 'He is more important than you think and you do him a bit of an injustice. More about this some other time when we speak.'<sup>49</sup>

#### *The past as a foreign country*

As a historian, Geyl had a healthy distrust of generalizations and formulas proposed in theoretical systems and perspectives as developed by Toynbee and Romein. Furthermore, Dutch eighteenth-century history to Geyl was not just the local variant of a universal system or pattern. That is, the historical narrative, the *sui generis* of the Dutch eighteenth century, had to be elicited from the sources, via careful and precise reading, analysis and criticism. This, then, is Geyl's key question: what is the specific and unique character of the eighteenth century in Dutch history? What are its

<sup>47</sup> W. Verkade, *Thorbecke als Oostnederlands Patriot* (Zutphen, 1974), p. 288; J. Drentje, *Thorbecke: Een filosoof in de politiek* (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 277–8.

<sup>48</sup> P. Geyl, *Revolutiedagen te Amsterdam (Augustus–September 1748)* (The Hague, 1936), pp. 158–9.

<sup>49</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, iii, pp. 81–2. For further information on Rousset and his activities as journalist, freemason, anglophile political operator, and in assisting Bentinck with his pro-Orange pamphlets in fomenting the *Doelisten* riots, see A. Porta, *Joan en Gerrit Corver: De politieke macht van Amsterdam, 1702–1748* (Assen, 1975), esp. pp. 207, 242, 247, 259, 266. For his involvement in the Doelist revolt of 1748, Rousset was rewarded in 1749 with his appointment as court historian and counsellor to the Prince of Orange. In this capacity he became the writer of a pro-Orange version, 'purged of all its false claims', in French, and immediately translated into Dutch, of the critical *Histoire du Stadhouderat* (1747) by the Abbé Raynal. See R. Salverda, *Raynal and Holland* (Oxford, 2015) pp. 217–34, p. 230.

peculiar features? How and why is it special, different, unusual, interesting, remarkable or unique? It is this question that is and will remain of enduring importance to students of the period.

Finally, when Geyl went looking for answers he was operating from a deep sense of how strange those eighteenth-century characters were and precisely for that reason, one suspects, he found them intriguing. From Bentinck to Luzac, from William IV to Wagenaar, from Van der Capellen to Rousset de Missy, there was no end to the fascination their unique mentalities and mindsets exerted over Geyl.

### *Narrating revolutionary times*

What emerges from Geyl's writings is that, back then, the world was very different indeed. The Republic's distribution of sovereignty was strongly regional, at times even completely local, in character. There were lines of distinction and demarcation everywhere, often in unexpected places, and often there was a totally different situation on the other side of these lines: different laws and freedoms, different rules and exceptions, different social obligations and power relations, different sanctions and protections while, simultaneously, not very far away, there might be a safe haven or sanctuary where new and alternative enlightened, universalist ideas and a national sense of politics might exist and could be disseminated.<sup>50</sup>

Geyl was well aware of this particularist situation and did his best to do justice to its complications and dynamics. But it clearly constitutes a challenge to the historiographer. So how did he go about this?

To begin with, he demonstrated how the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century was anything but a calm and placid bywater. On the contrary, as we have seen, it was a time of riots, pamphlets, patronage, manipulation and repression; of revolutions, *coups d'état*, wars, invasions and shifting alliances; of the long and slow demise of the House of Orange; of intense factional strife behind an outward pretence of neutrality; a time when the Dutch East India Company was on its way to bankruptcy and the Netherlands was losing out in the world-wide colonial rivalry between the French and the English. Geyl's history ends with the destruction of the old republic, which coincided with the revolutionary birth of the new Batavian Republic, in 1798, a constitutional democracy that had been envisioned

<sup>50</sup> S. J. Fockema Andreae, *De Nederlandse staat onder de Republiek* (Amsterdam, 1972) [= *Verhandelingen KNAW, Afd. Letterkunde*, nieuwe reeks, lxxviii]; J. Melles, *Ministers aan de Maas: Geschiedenis van de Rotterdamse pensionarissen met een inleiding over het stedelijk pensionariaat, 1508–1795* (Rotterdam, 1962).

and fought over throughout the late eighteenth century, well before the Netherlands ever became a kingdom.<sup>51</sup>

Geyl's central interest was in political history, and his focus was national in character, yet in the period he was investigating both these notions, 'politics' and 'nation', were only just emerging and did not have the clearer sense and meaning they have today, two hundred years on. Thus, when Geyl came to the story of how the revolution came about, he captured the clashes and dynamics of this drama in two clearly conflicting storylines. The first is the story of how the *ancien régime*, the Orange stadholders, the States General, the Grand Pensionaries and all others with vested interests in the old republic managed to hold on to and maintain their positions almost to the end of the eighteenth century, with gentle pressure, patronage, compromise, appropriation and rewards wherever possible, but if necessary through repression, riots, revolts and violence. The second story was that of the enlightened, democratic, public-minded and national sense of politics that was developing among the rising bourgeoisie of the time, which appeared victorious in the end and of which Geyl, as was his bias, saw himself as an inheritor.

### *Geyl superseded?*

Geyl's significance can also be measured against the innovations in historiography that came after him. The generations after Geyl have, over the past half-century, produced an enormous range of original studies, catering to emerging interests, investigating contemporary questions and offering fresh perspectives in historiography. So too in the field of eighteenth-century studies. These have gone beyond the scope and limitations of Geyl's political history, exploring different cultural, social and economic dimensions and taking on various themes of interest, such as civil society and the processes of modernization.

A bird's-eye view of the field of eighteenth-century studies reveals innovation in many different areas, and as a result of this we know (and also can know) so much more today about cultural and intellectual history, the history of the book and reading, about book towns such as Zwolle, Groningen and Leiden and publishers such as Lugtmans and Luzac, about literature and texts, translation and the dissemination of ideas across Europe through correspondence networks, pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, reading clubs and other societies. Today, we also have so many more biographies of leading personalities, such as Belle de Zuylen, Gerrit Paape,

<sup>51</sup> P. Geyl, *La Révolution Batave (1783–1798)* (Paris, 1971). See also A. Jourdan, *La Révolution Batave entre la France et l'Amérique (1795–1806)* (Rennes, 2008).

Jacob Haafner, the Van Hogendorp brothers, Justus van Effen, Admiral van Kinsbergen and grand pensionary Van de Spiegel, among others. There are many new subdisciplines today, in historiography, in social and economic history, women's history, regional and local history, in the political history of the Patriots, their ideas and theories, their riots, revolts and revolutions, in colonial history and the history of slavery, and so on, right through to the grand new syntheses that have since been published: *Blauwdrukken 1800* by Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt and *Metamorfose* by Niek van Sas.<sup>52</sup>

The combined effect of these developments has been a sea change in our knowledge and understanding of the Dutch eighteenth century. It is not just that we now have new answers to the same old questions, we also have totally different and new kinds of questions, and fresh approaches to finding answers to them. In the process, the field has been completely transformed since Geyl. In that sense, Geyl has been superseded. No one today does, like he did, only political history, purely of Holland and that particular era, in his unique and characteristic way: committed *staatsgezind*, democratic; an old liberal, committed to Madame de Staël's political values; and to critical, Multatulian polemics. Today, Geyl would most likely be standing intrigued and puzzled before all those new multidisciplinary subfields with their specialist techniques, perspectives and vistas which came to the fore only after his time.

But the question is: has Geyl really had his time? Or, conversely, what can we say is of enduring value in his eighteenth-century studies, and why?

### *A turning point in historiography*

Geyl's three basic principles – the importance of an empirical base in sources; his emphasis on critical scrutiny and interpretation; and his view of historiography as a discussion without end – present us with a coherent and effective methodological perspective for critical-historical historical research that remains influential and of continuing relevance today.

By practising these principles, Geyl explicitly adopted the discipline of historical and empirical testing of interpretations and hypotheses against the available evidence – as did, before him, the eighteenth-century historian Jan Wagenaar.<sup>53</sup> Of prime importance here is the quality of the critical investigations Geyl undertook in this rather under-researched period and the paths he cut for himself through the jungle of eighteenth-century Dutch historiography.

<sup>52</sup> *1800: Blauwdrukken voor een samenleving*, ed. J. Kloek and W. Mijnhardt (The Hague, 2001); N. C. F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland: Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750–1900* (Amsterdam, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Wessels, *Bron, waarheid en de verandering der tijden*.



This makes Geyl's work a decisive turning point within Dutch historiography, between on the one hand the tradition of Fruin and Colenbrander before him, and that of his critic De Wit on the other. It is a turning point also in the sense that Geyl's critical approach was the necessary precondition for the development, after Geyl, towards the flourishing, multifaceted, innovative and often surprising field of eighteenth-century studies which we have today.

### *Geyl versus Huizinga*

In Geyl's view, it is through the critical study of existing conventional images that scholarly progress in our discipline is made possible. In contrast, Huizinga consciously invents, creates and explores historical images, coming up with often remarkable and original findings and insights.

Geyl's forte was his critical, forensic examination and testing of ideas, interpretations, conceptions, findings and images against the available evidence in the historical sources. He did so with unprejudiced polemical sharpness, as evidenced in his *Napoleon*, a book that Huizinga could never have written. Huizinga's talent, by contrast, was of the imaginative-interpretative kind, concerned more with Giambattista Vico (and Benedetto Croce) than with political facts. What Edmund Wilson said of Vico and Jules Michelet also applies to Huizinga: they made 'a whole new philosophical-artistic world: the world of recreated social history'.<sup>54</sup>

Huizinga may have been more of a genius than Geyl, certainly in his *Homo Ludens*, but he did not have time for uncomfortable findings – not in his *Dutch Civilization of the Seventeenth Century*, from which Coen and the Dutch East India Company are strikingly absent, nor in his *In de schaduwen van morgen* ('In the Shadows of Tomorrow'), which lacked a truly humanistic policy of reconciliation with the Indonesians, as their social-democrat leader Soetan Sjahrir wrote from his prison on Banda island.<sup>55</sup> As a method for historical research, this author much prefers Geyl's critical approach over Huizinga's embarrassed silence concerning the Dutch colonial past, which is not fit for purpose in serious scholarly investigation. That is my bias.

### *Geyl's legacy*

As we have seen, Geyl certainly had his limitations and his blind spots; also, his writings are dated, but not *passé* – one can still learn a lot from him. In conclusion, this chapter would like to highlight what its author has found

<sup>54</sup> From E. Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (San Diego, 1940), quoted after *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. and ed. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (New York, 1961), back cover.

<sup>55</sup> Salverda, 'Beeld en tegenbeeld van het koloniaal verleden', 71–94.

most stimulating and what remains of enduring value in Geyl's work. First, Geyl's eye for the specific character of Dutch history, with its particular patterns and dynamics, which historians have to uncover and reconstruct through the painstaking detective work that is their craft: that is, not simply a template or copy of French, German, British or other international models, tendencies and influences. Second, Geyl's thorough and critical studies of the Dutch eighteenth century have restored the thread running from John de Witt, via Joan Derk van der Capellen and Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp to Johan Rudolf Thorbecke. This is the *Staatse* historical lineage, the democratic-liberal-enlightened-national-political tradition in Dutch history. It is in this context that we must see Geyl's re-evaluation of the Patriots. Third, with this analysis, Geyl effectively rebutted and rejected Colenbrander's view that the Patriot era was one of French dominance and an all-time low in the history of the Dutch nation. Fourth, with his writings on this period, Geyl has not only stimulated interest and investigation but also pointed the way forward, as for example in the preface to his *De Patriottenbeweging, 1780–1787*, in which he emphasizes the need for critical study of the available sources and the testing of existing images and assumptions concerning Dutch history against these data from history.

To investigate the dynamics and patterns specific to eighteenth-century Dutch society should be Geyl's epitaph. For that is what he put on the agenda for historians, nationally and also internationally, as we can see in Robert Roswell Palmer's *The Age of Democratic Revolution* (1959–64). He inspired historians to take the eighteenth century seriously and to engage in further research into the many fascinating facets of the period, which the generations after him have taken on with such zest, scholarship and imagination.



## 9. The historiographical legacy of Pieter Geyl for revolutionary and Napoleonic studies

*Mark Edward Hay*

*I am indebted to you, too, now and in the past, for helping me to understand the real history of Holland, Belgium, and hence of European and all historical processes.<sup>1</sup>*

R. R. Palmer to Pieter Geyl, while researching his two-volume *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*

Pieter Geyl is one of the most internationally recognized Dutch historians. In his eulogy of Geyl, Arnold Toynbee, his friend and colleague of forty-five years, stated, ‘No one who has a serious interest in history can afford to ignore Geyl’s work, because so much of it has made a lasting difference to our knowledge and understanding of the subjects he treated. [...] I discovered this myself when *The Revolt of the Netherlands* was published,’ and ‘Geyl could not resist the temptation to seize any opportunity for having a fight in any kind of arena that offered itself [...]. As a critic, Geyl had a gift that is all too rarely displayed in academic warfare. He could, and did, hit his human target with all his might.’<sup>2</sup> The renowned A. J. P. Taylor recollected that ‘Geyl’s practical contribution to history was his fundamental revision in the story of the [Dutch] revolt against Spain,’ but that ‘Geyl was not content to demonstrate how history should be written. He turned also to creative criticism of other historians.’<sup>3</sup> These reminiscences are a good reflection of how Geyl is perceived internationally. Geyl is acknowledged as a consummate historian with the exceptional ability to penetrate the problems of the past, but his reputation is based on only a fraction of his research – mostly translations of his research on the Low Countries, and on his frequent polemics with peers, most notably, of course, with Toynbee

<sup>1</sup> Palmer to Geyl, Boulder, Colo., 29 July 1951, Netherlands Archives of the University of Utrecht [NL-AUU], Collectie Pieter Geyl, 2796, xii, American Correspondence, 1.

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Toynbee, ‘Pieter Geyl’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, ii (April 1967), 3.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, ‘Pieter Geyl, a great historian’, *Observer Review*, 8 Jan. 1967.

M. E. Hay, ‘The historiographical legacy of Pieter Geyl for revolutionary and Napoleonic studies’, in *Pieter Geyl and Britain: Encounters, Controversies, Impact*, ed. U. Tiedau and S. van Rossem (London, 2022), pp. 185–206. License: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

himself. While Geyl's contribution to Low Countries history was great, and his encounters with peers were insightful, thought-provoking and amusing, it would not do justice to Geyl to define him in these terms only, for his lifelong dedication to study and research covered a broad spectrum of topics. While the various chapters of this volume touch on different aspects of Geyl's legacy, this essay explores Geyl's contribution to revolutionary and Napoleonic history, defined as covering the years 1776–1815. While Geyl may not in the first instance be associated with this field of study, this chapter will show that he had a considerable and lasting impact.

Revolutionary and Napoleonic studies occupy a peculiar place in historical studies. While accepting that defining a historical period is a debate without an end, encompassing just forty years in narrow terms, revolutionary and Napoleonic studies is a small and clearly delimited field of study. In geographical terms, it is limited to the Atlantic world, with a heavy, and understandable, focus on Europe, although, due to the scope of European commercial and colonial empires in this era, this often requires a global perspective. To keep the field of study appealing and relevant within these narrow temporal and geographical confines, historians have pushed the disciplinary boundaries of their research, resulting in a dynamic field where new ideas are floated and recent historiographical developments are readily incorporated. The dynamism of revolutionary and Napoleonic studies is reinforced by the fact that, although the field is narrow and clearly delimited, the period marks the endpoint of the early modern age and the dawn of the modern era, thus providing a common forum for both early modernists and modernists. In fact, it would be fair to argue that, due to the self-imposed boundaries of revolutionary and Napoleonic studies, the field has become a fertile testing ground, or laboratory, for historical studies more broadly. For this reason, the field lends itself to evaluating the breadth and endurance of the legacy of a historian who is internationally recognized as first among his peers.

After Geyl passed away in 1966 a committee of peers was set up to compile an inventory of his writings. They were unable to uncover all his writings. Even so, they logged no fewer than 1,049 publications.<sup>4</sup> This includes academic studies, political essays, polemics, correspondence with peers, as well as book reviews, entries in encyclopaedias and newspaper editorials. Geyl's work is predominantly historical in nature, including historiography and the critical and speculative philosophy of history, but he also ventured into art history, literary criticism and current affairs. His geographical focus was predominantly the Low Countries and its colonies, but to a lesser extent

<sup>4</sup> P. van Hees, *Bibliografie van P. Geyl* (Groningen, 1972), pp. 5–87.

also Britain and its empire, France, Italy, Germany and the United States. As regards his temporal boundaries, he explored affairs from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Geyl's output contains numerous publications relevant to revolutionary and Napoleonic studies. Space does not permit an in-depth examination of all his publications, so a thematic approach will be taken, and Geyl's historiographical legacy will be explored through discussion of his most impactful contributions.

### ***Reform, revolution, and restoration in the Low Countries***

The first publication, which cannot remain unmentioned, is Geyl's magnum opus, the *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, which explores the history of the Dutch-speaking peoples from the collapse of the Roman empire to the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> In the *Stam* Geyl brushed aside conventional political definitions of the Dutch, that is, as inhabitants of the Dutch state, in favour of adopting a cultural definition based on the geographical spread of the Dutch language covering much of the Low Countries. This allowed Geyl to present the historical experience of the Dutch-speaking people not through the narrow prism of the Dutch state but through the broader prism of the Low Countries. This change of perspective had a considerable impact on the historiography of the Netherlands, Belgium and the Low Countries because it shed a different light on key historical events, most notably the late-sixteenth-century break-up of the Dutch-speaking community into a northern and a southern Netherlandic state. Conventionally, historians in both the Netherlands and Belgium had interpreted the separation of the Low Countries as a natural and logical historical outcome. In Geyl's perspective, however, the separation was unnatural and nothing but a historical accident resulting from the inability of potential unifying forces to overcome the natural obstacle of the great river barrier dividing the northern from the southern Low Countries.

The reception of the *Stam* was not without criticism. One point of criticism focused on Geyl's logical leap from presenting the historical experience of the Dutch-speaking peoples to writing a history of the Low Countries, which marginalized the historical agency of the French-speaking community of the region. More generally, the argument could be made

<sup>5</sup> Van Hees, *Bibliografie*, pp. 88–117.

<sup>6</sup> P. Geyl, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (3 vols, Amsterdam, 1930–37). A revised edition was published in six volumes and extends the period through 1798: P. Geyl, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (6 vols, Amsterdam, 1961–62). Partly published in English as P. Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands, 1555–1609* (London, 1932); P. Geyl, *The Netherlands Divided, 1609–1648* (London, 1936) and P. Geyl, *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century* (2 vols, London, 1961).

that, particularly towards the end of the work, Geyl shows a bias towards affairs in the Netherlands. A second point concerned Geyl's arguably simplistic conception of culture. Language is not, or need not be, the sole trait through which one identifies as belonging to a community. In the Low Countries, religion was an important cultural identifier, and the same could be said of class, occupation and regional or provincial identity.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Geyl could be accused of, if not making history the hand maiden of politics, then at least bringing the two uncomfortably close, by providing with his *Stam* the historical substantiation for his conception of the 'Greater Netherlands' – the political idea of the community of the Netherlands and Flanders.<sup>8</sup> While these criticisms are not without merit, Geyl must at least be credited for taking the understanding of Dutch, Belgian and Low Countries history one step further by challenging long-held conventions and providing a well-researched counterargument, paving the way for a possible synthesis of antagonistic perspectives.

Book X of the third volume of the *Stam* explores the history of the Low Countries in the revolutionary era from 1780 to 1798. Even though some of Geyl's research findings have had a considerable impact on revolutionary and Napoleonic history, these parts of the *Stam* will not be discussed in depth here. The reason for this is that Geyl tended to extract from his *Stam* and update his research by drawing on new studies before republishing his conclusions through new outlets, occasionally even multiple times. Geyl's views are therefore better learned from these later publications. Suffice it, then, to make one comment. The endpoint of Geyl's *Stam* is the year 1798, when radical revolutionaries in the Batavian Republic forcefully introduced a constitution that resulted in the political unification of the Netherlands. For historians of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era Geyl's choice of 1798 as an endpoint is an unsatisfying one because the era did not end until the definitive defeat of Napoleon in 1815. For the historian of the Low Countries, indeed, 1798 is an unsatisfactory endpoint too. In the first decades of the nineteenth century the history of the northern and southern Low Countries became more closely intertwined than in the preceding two centuries. Ever since France conquered both the southern Low Countries and the Dutch Republic, the historical experience of both north and south had run broadly in parallel. In 1810, when the northern Low Countries were incorporated into the Napoleonic empire, this parallel historical experience becomes a

<sup>7</sup> H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl', *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (1972), 127–8; N. van Sas, 'Pieter Geyl: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam, 1930/1959', *NRC Handelsblad*, 4 June 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from H. H. Rowen, 'The historical work of Pieter Geyl', *Journal of Modern History*, xxxvii (March 1965), 39.

shared historical experience. This shared experience outlasts Napoleon, the north and south being merged into a United Kingdom of the Netherlands, before breaking up in 1830, with bilateral affairs definitively settled in 1839. So from the perspective of Low Countries history, a later endpoint, such as 1830, or 1839, would have been more appropriate. In Geyl's defence, he did consider his *Stam* as unfinished and intended to expand it.<sup>9</sup> Even so, it is a shame that in the quarter-century after the publication of the last volume Geyl did not find the time to finish what is perhaps his most important piece of scholarship.

One of the first topics that Geyl touched on was the revolutionary turmoil that plagued the Netherlands in the 1780s – the Patriot Uprising. For historians of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era this uprising is important because it was one of a number of revolutionary movements that swept the Atlantic World in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. To understand these Atlantic Revolutions requires an understanding of the origins of the Dutch Patriot Uprising and how it related to broader Atlantic trends.

Geyl published a considerable amount on the Patriot Uprising. The first publication is a monograph entitled *De Patriottenbeweging* ('The Patriot Movement'), of 1947.<sup>10</sup> The monograph is not based on archival research but is an analysis of secondary literature, principally the *Patriottentijd* ('The Patriot Era') by Herman Colenbrander, the renowned professor of, initially, Dutch colonial history, and later Dutch history, at the University of Leiden.<sup>11</sup> Colenbrander considered the latter decades of the eighteenth century some of the darkest pages of Dutch history, predominantly because of the growing foreign influence – Prussian, French and British – in Dutch domestic affairs. This view is reflected in his treatment of the Patriot turmoil of the 1780s. Colenbrander argued that the Dutch Patriots were not revolutionaries but rather a collection of dilettantes nostalgic for a bygone era: their aims were illusory, they lacked a proper programme of reform, and the execution of their revolution was pathetic. The Dutch Patriots became revolutionary only after they were defeated in 1787, forcing them to seek exile in France, where they were educated in revolutionary politics by their French brethren. The conclusion to be drawn from Colenbrander's work was that the revolutionary turmoil that plagued the Netherlands in the 1780s was essentially un-Dutch and should therefore not be considered

<sup>9</sup> Geyl to Godechot, Utrecht, 8 Jan. 1966, NL-AUU, Geyl, xv, French and Italian Correspondence; Von der Dunk, 'Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl', 128; Van Sas, 'Pieter Geyl'; Toynbee, 'Pieter Geyl', 3.

<sup>10</sup> P. Geyl, *De Patriottenbeweging, 1780–1787* (Amsterdam, 1947).

<sup>11</sup> H. T. Colenbrander, *De patriottentijd: Hoofdzakelijk naar buitenlandsche bescheiden* (3 vols, The Hague, 1897–9); Geyl, *De Patriottenbeweging*, pp. 15–16.



part of Dutch history. Colenbrander's views remained dominant for the better part of half a century, in part because his work was based on extensive archival research but also because, in the years after the publication of the *Patriottentijd*, Colenbrander expanded his study of the Netherlands in a series of monographs and an associated publication of primary sources, the *Gedenkstukken*, which presented a daunting deterrent to any contender.<sup>12</sup>

Geyl took a radically different view. He argued that the Patriot movement had its roots in the oligarchic opposition to the stadholderate that ran as a continuous thread through Dutch history. Traditionally, in this conflict the stadholder relied on the support of the lower classes in society, but in the 1780s, in part as the result of defeat in the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the lower classes switched their allegiance to the anti-stadholderate opposition. Initially, the opposition embraced popular anti-Orangist sentiment, but when the oligarchs failed to satisfy popular demands a struggle ensued between the oligarchic opposition and the popular opposition over the direction of the uprising. Fearing an uprising from below, the oligarchic opposition and the Orangists concluded a conservative alliance. In 1787 the conservative alliance called on Prussian arms and British diplomatic support to quell the popular uprising. The conservative alliance managed to restore order, but the popular opposition was not defeated entirely. Many Patriots sought exile in the southern Low Countries and later in France, where they formulated an ideology that was both anti-Orangist and anti-oligarchic. The Patriots indeed adopted ideas from the French revolutionaries, but the Patriot movement was a response to Dutch domestic affairs. In 1795, many of these Patriots returned to the Netherlands to collaborate with French revolutionaries to overthrow the old regime. So, in Geyl's perception, the Patriot Uprising was an intrinsically Dutch affair and the Patriot era was an essential link in Dutch history connecting the old regime of the eighteenth century to the Batavian Republic and the subsequent modern Netherlands, making it a critical episode of Dutch history that is important to understand.

In a second publication, a review article entitled 'A detailed critique of Colenbrander's *Patriottentijd*', Geyl brought out his opposition to the dominant paradigm, as formulated by Colenbrander, even more forcefully. In many ways, this publication is the classic Geyl piece, and Geyl himself seems to have been particularly fond of it, because he included it in an edited volume that was published for him upon his retirement: *Studies en*

<sup>12</sup> The principal among which are H. T. Colenbrander, *De Bataafsche Republiek* (Amsterdam, 1908); H. T. Colenbrander, *Schimmelpenninck en Koning Lodewijk* (Amsterdam, 1911); H. T. Colenbrander, *Inlijving en Opstand* (Amsterdam, 1913); H. T. Colenbrander, *Vestiging van het Koninkrijk (1813–1815)* (Amsterdam, 1927); H. T. Colenbrander, *Gedenkstukken der algemeene geschiedenis van Nederland van 1795 tot 1840* (10 vols, The Hague, 1905–22).

*Strijdschriften*.<sup>13</sup> The publication zoomed in on about a dozen aspects of Colenbrander's research on the Patriots, which Geyl then proceeded to examine in depth by deconstructing the narrative, isolating statements and retracing them back to the source in order to point out how Colenbrander had blundered, before putting forward corrections and his own, needless to say, superior interpretations. Much of Geyl's criticism of Colenbrander had merit. For instance, Geyl exposed Colenbrander's selective reading, his bias, his overinterpretation of some primary sources and his deliberate misreading – or even exclusion – of others. It is widely known that Colenbrander tended to make use of primary sources only insofar as they confirmed his views. For example, he viewed the Patriot turmoil predominantly as the result of foreign meddling in Dutch domestic affairs. This preconceived understanding of the Patriot Uprising is reflected in his selection of primary source material. Colenbrander consulted German, French and British archival sources but mostly ignored Dutch archival collections. Naturally, this approach could not but affirm his hypothesis. The detailed critique of Colenbrander did much to promote Geyl's views on the Patriot Uprising over those of Colenbrander, but one cannot fail to observe that Geyl's criticism was harsh – perhaps too harsh. In history, there is room for differing interpretations, albeit with the proviso that one is expected always to be willing to revisit earlier findings. Colenbrander's ideas never seemed fixed. And so, to openly bring into doubt Colenbrander's academic professionalism and his reputation in 1950, when, having passed away in 1945, he was no longer in a position to defend himself, smacks of vindictiveness. Of course, this attack by Geyl cannot be seen in isolation. It fits into the broader feud between Geyl and Colenbrander, the most memorable episode of which was not the aforementioned publication but an earlier instance in which Geyl and P. N. van Eyck, the London correspondent of the Dutch newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (NRC), discovered that Colenbrander had committed plagiarism in an article on William of Orange<sup>14</sup> and were determined to pursue the affair until Colenbrander was berated publicly.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> P. Geyl, 'Staatjes van detail-kritiek en Colenbrander's "Patriottentijd"', *Bijdragen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, iv (1950), 161–76; P. Geyl, 'Staatjes van detail-kritiek en Colenbrander's *Patriottentijd* (1950)', in *Studies en Strijdschriften* (Groningen, 1958), pp. 203–18.

<sup>14</sup> H. T. Colenbrander, 'Willem van Oranje', *De Gids*, xcvi (1933), 3–130.

<sup>15</sup> For the affair: L. J. Rogier, 'Herdenking van P. Geyl (15 december 1887–31 december 1966)', *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, New Series, xxx (Amsterdam, 1967), 14–15; Von der Dunk, 'Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl', 130; P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940* (Amsterdam, 2009).

A third publication, which has attracted much attention, is Geyl's historical parallel of the Patriots and the Dutch Nazi collaborators (*Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging*, NSB) in the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> Geyl was not the first to draw this parallel, nor did he mean to imply that history repeats itself. The publication was a response to NSB sympathizers who drew the parallel to justify collaboration with the Nazis. Geyl felt compelled to challenge this parallel for two reasons. The first was personal and political. In 1943, when Geyl drafted the piece, he was in Nazi captivity, and this strongly coloured his opinions of the NSB. He felt that the collaboration of his fellow countrymen was unjustifiable and needed to be challenged. The second was historical. Were the parallel accepted, the judgement future academics would undoubtedly pass on the NSB would also reflect on the Dutch Patriots, which Geyl felt unfair. In a well-argued exposé, he acknowledged that, like the NSB, the Patriots were guilty of treason for collaborating with the enemy, but an important difference lay in the fact that where the Nazis and their collaborators overthrew a stable and vibrant regime, the Dutch revolutionaries challenged a regime that was in decay and in dire need of reform. Furthermore, Nazism was foreign to the Netherlands, while the Dutch revolutionary ideology was indigenous and broadly held. Finally, Nazism was incompatible with Dutch political culture, but Dutch revolutionary ideology was not, proof of which lay in the political reconciliations of 1801 and 1813. With this piece Geyl successfully dashed any hope of casting the NSB in the mould of the Dutch eighteenth-century revolutionaries. More importantly, he hammered down his argument that the Patriots were not foreign-backed radicals but domestic revolutionaries.

The publication for which Geyl is possibly best known internationally is his monograph *La Révolution Batave, 1783–1798*, in which he extended his thesis on the Patriot Uprising to include the Batavian Revolution of 1795 and its immediate aftermath.<sup>17</sup> The monograph does not contain original research. It was the product of Geyl accepting a request by Jacques Godechot, the prominent historian of France and pioneer of the Atlantic thesis, to translate and publish those parts of his *Stam* that dealt with the revolutionary turmoil in the Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> The research is not groundbreaking. Essentially, Geyl synthesized available resources to produce a narrative that introduces the principal historical actors and explores the major events of a tumultuous period of Dutch history. Geyl's portrayal of the Batavian Revolution of 1795 as a continuation of the Patriot Uprising

<sup>16</sup> P. Geyl, *Patriotten en N. S. B.-ers: Een historische parallel* (Amsterdam, 1946); P. Geyl, 'Patriotten en N. S. B.-ers: Een historische parallel', *Studies en Strijdschriften*, pp. 393–429.

<sup>17</sup> P. Geyl, *La Révolution Batave, 1783–1798*, trans. J. Godard (Paris, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Godechot to Geyl, Toulouse, 23 Dec. 1965, NL-AUU, Geyl, xv.

makes sense. Both the Patriots and the Batavians aimed to overthrow the Orangist regime and replace it with a system of government more suited to the nineteenth century, and there was a great continuity in the historical actors too. Many of the revolutionaries of the 1780s played a prominent role in the Batavian Revolution. However, one could argue that perhaps Geyl overemphasized the continuity and dismissed the differences all too easily. In the years between the defeat of the Patriots in 1787 and the Batavian Revolution a fundamental change in revolutionary principle and outlook had occurred. In short, one could say that the Patriots were backward-looking, hoping to revolutionize Dutch politics and society by reviving and reconstructing the Dutch Golden Age, while the Batavians became forward-looking, aiming to revolutionize Dutch politics and society by constructing an entirely new order based on new principles akin to those voiced in France – though not necessarily because of their exile in France, as Colenbrander argued. A further point of critique could be that *La Révolution Batave* conflicts with Geyl's work as a whole and reveals a conceptual inconsistency on the part of Geyl. The monograph deals exclusively with the revolutionary turmoil in the Netherlands, and Geyl's correspondence shows that he had no qualms about editing out the parts of the *Stam* that dealt with the revolutionary upheaval in the southern Low Countries, which, one could argue, undercut his 'Greater Netherlands' conception of a history of the Dutch-speaking people.<sup>19</sup> Those parts of the *Stam* dealing with the southern Low Countries have not been published as a stand-alone monograph.

Geyl also published an article on the exile of the House of Orange during the revolutionary and Napoleonic era.<sup>20</sup> We need not dwell on this publication too long. Unsurprisingly, the piece is a response to a study by Colenbrander, whom he accuses of overemphasizing the divisions within the family and failing to penetrate the mindset of William V.<sup>21</sup> It is a narrative that explores the historical experience of the House of Orange from its departure from the Netherlands in 1795 until its return in 1813. It is a good piece, but not ground-breaking. In fact, it could be argued that Geyl falls into the historiographical trap that so many Dutch historians fall into, namely to superimpose the history of the Netherlands onto the history of the House of Orange, leading to the preconceived idea that it

<sup>19</sup> Geyl to Godechot, Utrecht, 8 Jan. 1966, NL-AUU, Geyl, xv.

<sup>20</sup> From a lecture given to the *Utrechtse Historische Kring* in 1949, published as P. Geyl, 'Oranje in Ballingschap', *De Gids*, cxii (1949), ii, 180–205; P. Geyl, 'Oranje in Ballingschap', *Studies en Strijdschriften*, pp. 257–85; P. Geyl, 'Oranje in Ballingschap', in *Verzamelde opstellen*, ed. P. van Hees (4 vols, Utrecht/Antwerp, 1978), ii, pp. 164–91.

<sup>21</sup> H. T. Colenbrander, *Willem I, Koning der Nederlanden* (2 vols, Amsterdam, 1931–5).

was inevitable that the House of Orange would return to the Netherlands after the defeat of Napoleon. In the opinion of this author, the return of the House of Orange to the Netherlands was not inevitable but due to fortunate dynastic connections and luck.<sup>22</sup> Geyl's other publications on Low Countries history in the revolutionary and Napoleonic era include several pieces on the liberation of the Netherlands in 1813, but these are either review articles that serve to emphasize Geyl's own research or they use the year 1813 as a starting point for reflecting on the commemoration of the liberation of the Netherlands, in which case they fall outside the – arguably arbitrary – scope of this chapter.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Geyl and comparative revolutionary studies***

In addition to publishing on the revolutionary movements in the Netherlands, Geyl published several comparative revolutionary studies. In a first piece, *De Noordnederlandse patriottenbeweging en Brabantse Revolutie* ('The North-Nederlandish Patriot Movement and the Brabant Revolution'), Geyl embedded the Dutch Patriot movement and the revolutionary upheaval in the Austrian Netherlands, the so-called Brabant Revolution of the late 1780s and early 1790s, in the broader context of the revolutionary upheaval of the latter decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Geyl showed that the Dutch Patriot Uprising was similar to the French Revolution in that an enlightened revolutionary elite challenged a conservative establishment. In the Brabant Revolution, it was the establishment – Vienna, as well as Brussels and other provincial centres, that pushed for enlightened reform,

<sup>22</sup> M. E. Hay, 'The Légion hollandaise d'Orange: Dynastic networks, coalition warfare and the formation of the modern Netherlands, 1813–14', *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxxix (March 2015), 26–53; M. E. Hay, 'The House of Nassau between France and independence, 1795–1814: Lesser powers, strategies of conflict resolution, dynastic networks', *International History Review*, xxxviii (June 2016), 482–504; M. E. Hay, 'Nassau, the Netherlands and the dichotomy of Dutch historical agency, 1812–1815', in *Der Wiener Kongress und seine Folgen / The Congress of Vienna and its Aftermaths: Großbritannien, Europa und der Friede im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert / Great Britain, Europe and Peace in the 19th and 20th Century, Prinz-Albert-Studien*, xxxii, ed. F. L. Kroll (Berlin, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> P. Geyl, '1813 in 1863 herdacht', *De Gids*, cxvii (1954), 14–51; P. Geyl, 'De oorsprong van het conflict tussen Willem I en de Belgische Katholieken', in *Studies en Strijdschriften*, pp. 286–303; P. Geyl, '1813 in 1863 herdacht', in P. Geyl, *Pennestrijd over Staat en Historie: Opstellen over de vaderlandse geschiedenis aangevuld met Geyl's Levensverhaal (tot 1945)* (Groningen, 1971), pp. 274–311; P. Geyl, 'Gerritson over "het Volk" in November 1813', *Verzamelde opstellen*, ii, pp. 195–9.

<sup>24</sup> P. Geyl, 'De Noordnederlandse patriottenbeweging en Brabantse Revolutie', *Nieuw Vlaams Tijdschrift*, vii (1953), 624–42; P. Geyl, 'De Noordnederlandse patriottenbeweging en Brabantse Revolutie', *Studies en Strijdschriften*, pp. 219–34; P. Geyl, 'De Noordnederlandse patriottenbeweging en Brabantse Revolutie', *Verzamelde opstellen*, ii, pp. 148–63.

while the revolutionaries resisted change. In two other aspects, however, the Dutch Patriot movement stood apart from the Brabant Revolution and the French Revolution. First was the role played by ‘the people’ in the revolution. In France the people played a significant role in overthrowing the regime. In the Austrian Netherlands, the people also played a significant role, though in this case they successfully halted the regime’s drive for reform. In the Dutch republic, the people were mostly sidelined. They played a role only in the latter stages of the Patriot Uprising but were defeated by an alliance of the oligarchic opposition and the Orangists, as mentioned above. Second was the institutional character of the state and its relationship to the revolutionary challenge. Both France and the Austrian Netherlands were centralized states. In revolution, this proved advantageous to revolutionaries because it meant they could direct their revolutionary action towards a single point – the central authority. If the central authority could be overcome, the revolution had a great chance of succeeding. The Dutch republic, however, was a decentralized state with a weak central authority. Therefore, in the Netherlands, the revolutionaries were forced to overthrow the regime at a local level and subsequently to merge these separate revolutions into a national revolution. This was immensely more difficult and it significantly reduced the chances of success. Proof of the importance of the institutional character of a state could be found in the success of the revolutions: in France and the Austrian Netherlands they resulted in change; in the Dutch republic the Patriots failed to bring about meaningful change.

According to Geyl, it was because of the prominent role played by the people in the Brabant Revolution, and because this revolution resulted in more change, that historians tended to place it in the same category as the French Revolution and oppose it to the Patriot Uprising. Geyl contested this. In his view, the Patriot Uprising and the Brabant Revolution were akin to one another as both movements sprang from similar societies and both were united in their aim of changing a system of government and a society which they felt was no longer fit for the late eighteenth century – and both were quite distinct from the French Revolution. The differences in the way the revolutions in the northern and southern Low Countries panned out were, according to Geyl, the result of local conditions rather than deeper-lying causes. Geyl’s comparison of the Patriot, Brabant and French revolutions is pioneering and insightful, but any historian will find it difficult to be convinced by Geyl’s final conclusion – the historiographical alignment of the Patriot Uprising and the Brabant Revolution – for it seems based more on his desire to produce a coherent narrative of the history of the Low Countries than on historical fact.

In a second study, Geyl applied the methodology of his comparative study to the Batavian Revolution of 1795. The study was originally prepared for a lecture given in 1956, but it was subsequently published several times, including in English.<sup>25</sup> In it Geyl criticized historians for their apparent unwillingness to investigate objectively the historical agency of the Batavians. Unsurprisingly, Geyl reserved special criticism for Colenbrander, though Colenbrander was of course the authority on the Batavian Revolution at that time. According to Geyl, a flaw in Colenbrander's research was that he viewed the Batavian Revolution in the shadow of the French Revolution. And, compared to the French revolutionaries, the Batavians appeared indecisive and incompetent. Geyl further criticized Colenbrander for judging the Batavians by the outcome of history rather than with an open and objective mind, by which he meant that Colenbrander had taken for granted the unification of the Netherlands and had not sufficiently recognized the efforts of the Batavians in achieving it.

Geyl argued that any comparison between the Batavian Revolution and the French Revolution was unfair because they were different in two critical aspects. First, the institutional character of France and the Netherlands meant that the chances of a successful revolution in the decentralized Dutch republic were considerably smaller than in France. Second, whereas the people played a major role in the French Revolution, in the Batavian Revolution (and, for the same reason, in the Patriot Uprising), the people played a minimal role.<sup>26</sup> The only period in which the people exerted any real influence was after January 1798, when radical Batavians seized power through a *coup d'état* and ruled in the name of the people. Radical Batavian rule lasted for only six months but, crucially, it was the radical Batavians who granted the Dutch their first constitution, which allowed for the political unification of the Netherlands and contributed greatly to building the Dutch nation state. The conclusion to be drawn from Geyl's study is that the Batavians had played a crucial role in the establishment of the modern Netherlands, and that therefore the Batavian Revolution deserved to be studied objectively and in its own right.

<sup>25</sup> Lecture held in March 1956 at the conference of the *Organisatie voor Geschiedenisstudenten in Nederland*, published as P. Geyl, 'De Bataafse Revolutie', *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xi (1956), 117–200; P. Geyl, 'De Bataafse Revolutie', *Studies en Strijdschriften*, pp. 235–56; P. Geyl, 'The Batavian Revolution: 1795–1798', *Encounters in History* (London/New York, 1961), pp. 226–41; P. Geyl, 'The Batavian Revolution, 1795–1798' (1956), in *History of the Low Countries: Episodes and Problems* (London, 1964), pp. 173–92; P. Geyl, 'De Bataafse Revolutie', in *Vaderlands Verleden in Veelvoud*, ed. G. A. M. Beekelaar (The Hague, 1976), pp. 416–34; P. Geyl, 'De Bataafse Revolutie', *Verzamelde opstellen*, ii, pp. 106–27.

<sup>26</sup> Geyl published a separate piece on 'the people' in the Batavian Revolution: P. Geyl, "'Het volk'" in de Bataafse Revolutie', *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xiv (1959), 197–217; P. Geyl, "'Het volk'" in de Bataafse Revolutie', *Verzamelde opstellen*, ii, pp. 128–47.

***The impact of Geyl's research on the historiography of revolutionary and Napoleonic studies***

Geyl's research on revolution in the Low Countries is highly relevant for revolutionary and Napoleonic studies. His work on the Patriots successfully challenged the old narrative, espoused most prominently by Colenbrander, replacing it with his own views, which rehabilitated the Dutch Patriots and presented the Patriot era as an essential transitional period in Dutch history. As such it marks a turning point in the historiography to this day.<sup>27</sup> Geyl's work on the Batavian Revolution is a corollary to his study of the Patriot Uprising. In it he takes a similar approach by focusing on the institutional character of the Netherlands and on the role of the people. His conclusion that the Batavian Revolution deserves to be studied in its own right remains undisputed to this day. Another of his conclusions, that the Batavians played a crucial role in the state building and nation formation of the Netherlands, however, has in recent times been questioned. The influential Amsterdam school of thought, including historians such as Frans Grijzenhout, Niek van Sas and Wyger Velema, maintains that the Batavians played a crucial role in the establishment of the modern Netherlands.<sup>28</sup> Others, such as Henk te Velde from the University of Leiden and Ido de Haan from the University of Utrecht, argue that the more important role was played by the post-1813 Dutch regime, through maintaining the best elements of the previous regimes, including the various Batavian regimes.<sup>29</sup> Geyl's comparative revolutionary studies highlight the uniqueness of revolution in the Low Countries, and have helped historians to gain a better understanding of the complex revolutionary movements in the region. From a historiographical point of view, Geyl's comparative studies are interesting because, at the time

<sup>27</sup> For example N. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland: Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750–1900* (Amsterdam, 2004), p. 20; F. Grijzenhout, N. van Sas and W. Velema, 'Inleiding', in *Het Bataafse experiment: Politiek en cultuur rond 1800*, ed. F. Grijzenhout, N. van Sas and W. Velema (Nijmegen, 2013), p. 14; A. E. M. Janssen, 'Over Nederlandse Patriotten en hun historie: Enige historiografische kanttekeningen', in *De Droom van de revolutie: Nieuwe benaderingen van het Patriotisme*, ed. H. Bots and W. W. Mijnhardt (Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 12–14; E. H. Kossmann, 'Nabeschouwing', *De Droom van de revolutie*, pp. 136–8; E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier, 'De geschiedschrijving over de Patriottentijd en de Bataafse Tijd', in *Kantelend geschiedbeeld: Nederlandse historiografie sinds 1945*, ed. W. W. Mijnhardt (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1983), pp. 210–13; J. Rosendaal, *Bataven! Nederlandse vluchtelingen in Frankrijk, 1787–1795* (Nijmegen, 2003), pp. 18–19; S. Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780–1813* (London, 2005), p. 20; I. L. Leeb, *The Ideological Origins of the Batavian Revolution: History and Politics in the Dutch Republic, 1747–1800* (The Hague, 1973), pp. 7–8.

<sup>28</sup> Grijzenhout, Van Sas and Velema, *Het Bataafse experiment*.

<sup>29</sup> I. de Haan, P. den Hoed and H. te Velde, *Een nieuwe staat: Het begin van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam, 2013).



they were published, comparativism was uncommon, so it is reasonable to see in Geyl a pioneer of comparativism, or of transnational approaches to history in revolutionary and Napoleonic studies. Where Geyl frequently published on revolutionary movements in the northern Netherlands, he did so only rarely on revolutionary movements in the southern Netherlands, which might betray a bias towards events in the Netherlands in his broader conception of the history of the Dutch-speaking people, though perhaps understandably, as he was based at a Dutch university.

Even though Geyl's research was highly relevant for revolutionary and Napoleonic studies, its impact on the historiography is not immediately visible. Partly this was because of a limited interest in the Low Countries in international revolutionary and Napoleonic studies, partly because only some of Geyl's research was published in languages accessible to a broad audience. It would take a historian with a broad historical interest and a willingness to learn Dutch to fully appreciate Geyl's contribution to the historiography of revolutionary and Napoleonic studies. It was not until the 1950s that such a historian emerged: Robert Roswell Palmer (1909–2002).

It is not known how Geyl and Palmer met. Quite possibly, they became acquainted in 1949 when Geyl visited Princeton, where Palmer worked.<sup>30</sup> What is certain is that in late 1950 the two men started a correspondence that lasted until Geyl's passing in 1966 and evolved into a close personal friendship, the two men hosting each other and their families during research visits and holidays. The Geyl–Palmer correspondence touched on a range of historical topics, but the one interest both men shared was revolutionary history. In 1950, Geyl was fifty-three years old and had published extensively, including most of the studies mentioned above. Palmer was twelve years Geyl's junior and had started off as a historian of France, thereafter exploring European history on the *longue durée*. The publication of his acclaimed *A History of the Modern World*, however, signified a return to revolutionary history.<sup>31</sup>

In 1952, Palmer confessed to Geyl his desire to embark on a broad study of revolutionary turmoil in Europe and America:

What I should like to do some day in a general survey of the revolutionary era, is to have an early chapter on the movements before 1789 – in Holland, or Geneva in Switzerland, in Belgium (granting that that was initially a 'privileged'

<sup>30</sup> Geyl to Palmer, Utrecht, 24 Aug. 1951, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 1.

<sup>31</sup> I. Woloch, 'Robert R. Palmer', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, cxlviii (Sept. 2004), 394–5; R. R. Palmer, 'The French idea of American independence on the eve of the French Revolution' (Cornell University PhD thesis, 1934); R. R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-century France* (Princeton, 1939); R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: the Committee of Public Safety during the Terror* (Princeton, 1941); R. R. Palmer, *A History of the Modern World* (New York, 1950).

revolt), in Ireland, and of course America. Then it could be shown how all this merged into the agitation of the 1790s under the future and decisive stimulus of the revolution in France.<sup>32</sup>

The research Palmer speaks of is of course the research that would lead to his acclaimed two-volume *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*.<sup>33</sup> In it, Palmer drew together the various revolutionary movements of Europe, including those in the UK and the Americas, into one coherent, overarching 'Revolution of the West'. Palmer's innovative thesis, which came to be known as 'the Atlantic thesis', is a watershed moment in revolutionary studies first because it meant that the field broke free from the narrow confines of national historiography, facilitating international collaboration and transfer of knowledge, and second because it allowed for transnational comparison on an Atlantic scale, greatly enhancing the understanding of individual revolutionary movements as well as trends in Western history more broadly.<sup>34</sup>

The Geyl–Palmer correspondence demonstrates that while Palmer was developing his Atlantic thesis, Geyl exerted considerable influence on his thinking. In the pre-digital age, when bibliographical research on the history of small, faraway countries was difficult, it was challenging to gain insight into national historiographical debates. What Palmer needed was, as he stated, 'a study that takes me into Holland [...] and other countries whose history I do not know well'.<sup>35</sup> Geyl was the right person to ask for such assistance. He recommended various works on revolution in the Low Countries to Palmer and provided him with several of his own studies and reviews.<sup>36</sup> The most valuable to Palmer were Geyl's comparative study of the Patriot Uprising and the Brabant Revolution, his historical parallel of the Dutch Patriots and the NSB, his work on the Batavian Revolution and his critique of Colenbrander's *Patriottentijd*, which 'help[ed] to give me [Palmer] that sense of sophistication and critical consciousness that are so difficult to acquire in a new field'.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 15 April 1952, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 5.

<sup>33</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (2 vols, Princeton, 1959; 1964).

<sup>34</sup> In the 1990s a historiographical turn in similar vein, the 'European Turn', took place in Napoleonic studies: S. J. Woolf, *Napoleon's Integration of Europe* (London, 1991); M. Broers, *Europe under Napoleon, 1799–1815* (London, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 13 July 1953, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 23 Oct. 1951, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 10 Jan. 1952, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 5; Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 13 July 1953, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 6; Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 6 Feb. 1957, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 10. Quote from Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 23 Oct. 1951, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 1.

Geyl also offered valuable feedback on Palmer's evolving research. For instance, on an early article in which Palmer clearly floated a rudimentary conception of an Atlantic Revolution,<sup>38</sup> Geyl commented:

Two remarks. You missed a point that might have strengthened your argument, when in mentioning the Revolution in Holland you did not point out that it had had a crisis even before 1789 in the Patriots' Movement of the middle eighties. The great principle of the sovereignty of the people was proclaimed quite emphatically by the leading 'democratic' Patriots. Their use of the *word* 'democratic', too, in contradiction to 'aristocratic', is significant.

At the same time I do not think that classical-Christian tradition, to which you allude can be brushed aside so cavalierly, nor do I think that the medieval idea that government rose out and represented the community is irrelevant, although undoubtedly it is not 'the same'.<sup>39</sup>

The critique is revealing, and it was not a one-off. On a second publication of Palmer's, 'Much in little',<sup>40</sup> which is often referred to in the Netherlands as the moment when the significance of the revolutionary turmoil in the Netherlands became known to a broader international public, Geyl remarked:

Of course the Dutch historian will notice little points which show a certain lack of familiarity with our history. Hogendorp never was a burgomaster (he was pensionary of R[otter]dam); he 'came forward' in 1813; de Witt was murdered by a Hague mob.

In the main part of the article I question your saying that Gogel as 'a man of the 18th century' 'lacked national feeling': I don't think his attitude was as typical as all that. In the story of the endless delays in the coming into existence of the first constitution you ought, I think, to have mentioned the *reglement* of 1796 [the regulations for the convening of the First Dutch National Convention]. Also, I think, and this is of more importance, the traditional suspicion of the overwhelming power of France cannot be altogether omitted when the negative policy of the Prince of Orange is addressed, this hidebound conservatism which prevented an active co-operation with 'democratic' elements in his party is a point which, I think, will deserve much fuller treatment, and it has, of course, a long history. The religious question, too, seems to me to have been of greater importance than you make out.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> R. R. Palmer, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Political Science Quarterly*, lxxvii (March 1952), 64–80.

<sup>39</sup> Geyl to Palmer, Northampton, Mass., 10 April 1952, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 5.

<sup>40</sup> R. R. Palmer, 'Much in little: the Dutch Revolution of 1795', *Journal of Modern History*, xxvi (March 1954), 15–35. The study was originally drafted for a speech at the American Historical Association in Dec. 1953; Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 1 July 1954, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Geyl to Palmer, Utrecht, 2 May 1954, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 7.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint with precision how much and where Geyl influenced Palmer, certain parts of Palmer's *Age of the Democratic Revolution* clearly reflect Geyl's views, and those amendments suggested by Geyl were taken on board. And after finalizing the manuscript that was to be published as the first volume, Palmer admitted: 'My own book, which in one chapter rests so heavily on this little book of yours [Geyl's *De Patriottenbeweging*], is now completed, and will I hope be published by the Princeton University Press in 1959.'<sup>42</sup> The greatest acknowledgement of Geyl's influence, perhaps, is that Palmer gained such an understanding of affairs in the Netherlands that he considered the Dutch case most suitable for explaining the origins of the revolutionary turmoil, and the reaction to it, that swept the Atlantic World in the late eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, it is fair to say that, through his personal contact with Palmer in the formative period of his ground-breaking study, Geyl had a greater impact on the historiography of revolutionary and Napoleonic studies than hitherto thought. That said, one must also take care not to exaggerate Geyl's influence on Palmer. Despite Geyl's severe criticism of Colenbrander's interpretation of the revolutionary turmoil in the Netherlands, Palmer still regularly made use of Colenbrander's studies. Nor should it be assumed that Geyl was the sole person revealing the potential and importance of transnational approaches to revolutionary studies. Kramer has shown that Palmer's supervisor at Cornell University, Professor Carl Becker, encouraged his students to examine historical issues from a transatlantic perspective.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Palmer was not the only historian who argued for taking a transatlantic approach to revolutionary studies. A second historian who pioneered the Atlantic thesis was Jacques Godechot (1907–89).<sup>45</sup> Godechot has already been referred to in relation to the translation of Geyl's research on revolution in the Netherlands. However, Jacques Godechot's writing was no reason for Geyl to engage in a debate on transnational revolutionary studies, though perhaps Geyl's old age and failing health simply did not permit it.

<sup>42</sup> Palmer to Geyl, Princeton, NJ, 30 July 1958, NL-AUU, Geyl, xii, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Palmer, 'Much in little', 35.

<sup>44</sup> L. Kramer, 'Robert R. Palmer and the history of big questions', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, xxxvii (2011), 103.

<sup>45</sup> J. Godechot, *La Grande Nation: l'expansion révolutionnaire de la France dans le monde, 1789–1799* (2 vols, Paris, 1956). In 1955 Palmer and Godechot collaborated, resulting in 'Le problème de l'Atlantique du XVIII<sup>ème</sup> au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle', *Relazioni del X congresso internazionale di scienze storiche*, v (Florence, 1955), pp. 173–239.

### *The French Revolution and Napoleon*

Geyl also explored French history of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era. As usual, among his publications there are short, opinionated pieces from which his views can be deduced. However, Geyl's forays into the French Revolution are best studied through a lecture he was invited to give at Oxford in 1956 entitled 'French historians for and against the Revolution', which he delivered elsewhere on subsequent occasions and which was published widely, including in English.<sup>46</sup> The paper was a historiographical exploration of the study of the French Revolution in France. The study is informative but its relevance is limited. More significant perhaps was Geyl's reasons for choosing the French Revolution as a topic for this lecture. He firmly believed that the French Revolution was a major turning point in western history, and with his lecture he tried to redirect academic attention, which he felt was waning, towards this turning point. Considering the steady stream of high-quality research on the French Revolution, a positivist could argue that Geyl was wholly successful in his aim, but anyone else would concede that it is impossible to assess Geyl's influence in this matter. However, at least he mounted a stout defence of revolutionary studies and, in giving the paper at the University of Oxford, he did find the right forum. With historiographical studies, one does hope that more in-depth research of the topic will follow, but this did not happen for Geyl in this case. He did publish a lengthy review article of Jules Michelet's seven-volume *Histoire de la Révolution française*, but its impact was not great.<sup>47</sup>

Geyl's most important contribution to the French history of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era is his monograph *Napoleon: For and Against*.<sup>48</sup> Initially, he had no intention of studying Napoleon, but it was a welcome distraction from finishing off more pressing work. Soon Geyl found himself immersed in his topic, mainly because, from the books in his library, it proved difficult to gain an understanding of the man. By mid-1940 he had drafted an article, but it was rejected for publication because

<sup>46</sup> Delivered as a public lecture in Leiden in 1964 and published as: P. Geyl, 'De Franse Revolutie', in *Zeven Revoluties*, ed. I. Schöffer (Amsterdam, 1964), pp. 77–101; P. Geyl, *Encounters in History* (London, 1967), pp. 115–87; P. Geyl, 'De Franse Revolutie', *Verzamelde opstellen*, iii, pp. 62–79.

<sup>47</sup> J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française* (7 vols, Paris, 1847–53), published as P. Geyl, 'Michelet and zijn Franse Revolutie', *De Gids*, cxviii (1955), ii, 238–250, 294–313; P. Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (Groningen, 1955), pp. 56–90; P. Geyl, 'Michelet and zijn Franse Revolutie', *Geschiedenis als medespeler* (Utrecht, 1959), pp. 60–92; P. Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (New York, 1960), pp. 70–108; P. Geyl, 'Michelet and zijn Franse Revolutie', *Verzamelde opstellen*, iv, pp. 1–37.

<sup>48</sup> P. Geyl, *Napoleon voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving* (Utrecht, 1946); P. Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against*, trans. Olive Renier (London, 1949).

the editors felt that the public might draw a comparison between Napoleon and Hitler, something that was undesirable at that point as the Netherlands was under Nazi control. On several occasions when Geyl presented his paper in Rotterdam he noticed that the link between Napoleon and Hitler was indeed readily made. It had not, however, been Geyl's intention to imply such a comparison. In fact, he was quite adamant that no comparison was possible, since Napoleon, despite all his flaws and faults, came nowhere near to being as bad as Hitler. Anyway, he then left the topic until 1944, when he started writing up the article into a monograph.<sup>49</sup>

Napoleon is a controversial figure and has always drawn a huge amount of interest. As of 1997, it was estimated that 400,000 books and articles had been written on him.<sup>50</sup> In such a field it is difficult to stand out, let alone contribute to the historiography, but Geyl did just that by studying not so much Napoleon himself and his impact on the course of history but rather the representation of Napoleon as deduced from the French historiography.

Geyl showed that Napoleon was a controversial figure even in his own time. He was admired but he also drew heavy criticism, most notably of course from the formidable woman of letters Madame de Staël. Under the restoration regime Napoleon was admired as the pragmatist who had tamed the revolution and restored order to France. Opposition against the French Second Empire, a Bonapartist regime, reverberated in the perception of Napoleon. No longer was he portrayed as having subdued a revolution that was spiralling out of control but instead as having betrayed its principles, suppressing freedoms and resorting to violence and in so doing bringing France nothing but misery. In the polarized political climate of the Third Republic, adoration for Napoleon was taken to new heights. He was depicted as the embodiment of the will of the people, as a politician who challenged the established elites and drew admiration for his no-nonsense style of government with an emphasis on a strong executive. This near-godlike figure was defeated only because of his betrayal by his peers. In this context, it is interesting to mention that Geyl initially intended to include a chapter in his monograph on the historiographical representation of Charles-Maurice Talleyrand, whom Geyl considered the principal betrayer of Napoleon. However, he decided against it, presumably to retain the main focus of the monograph.<sup>51</sup> Around the turn of the nineteenth century there was room for

<sup>49</sup> Geyl, *Napoleon voor en tegen*, xiii–xvii.

<sup>50</sup> Ben Weider, 'The assassination of Napoleon', *Napoleonic Scholarship: The Journal of the International Napoleonic Society*, i (1997).

<sup>51</sup> The study was written up in 1944 and presented to the *Verenigde Vergaderingen van de Afdelingen van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie* and published as P. Geyl, 'Het probleem Talleyrand', *Jaarboek der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen* (1949–50);

a diversity of opinions, mainly because a shift in the study of Napoleon had occurred, from studying the Napoleonic legacy in general towards studying just one aspect of his legacy. By the mid-twentieth century, where Geyl's book ends, the debate continued to evolve, but generally academic historians were shown to hold negative or mixed views of Napoleon, while among intellectuals more broadly the opinion was more positive.

So, what was the historiographical relevance of Geyl's monograph on Napoleon? Before Geyl, the debate was polarized. Historians took a teleological approach to studying Napoleon. They were either for him or against him, and they rearranged their facts accordingly. Geyl rejected this approach. He viewed history as a debate without end.<sup>52</sup> The aim of the historian was not to pass judgement but to present facts. And the fact was that Napoleon was a complex character and his influence on history was diverse and at times contradictory, so it was only natural that the representation of Napoleon reflected this complex historical agency. By moving away from studying Napoleon's impact on history as deduced from his actions and instead studying the way in which he was represented, Geyl avoided the teleological pitfall of coming down on one side of the argument or the other. As such, *Napoleon: For and Against* marks a turning point in the historiography.

The impact of Geyl's study is more challenging to assess. If one goes by some recent biographies on Napoleon, one must conclude that he continues to divide historians and that the debate is as polarized as ever. Philip Dwyer's monumental study presents the man as a product of his age, and not one who had a particularly good influence on his time.<sup>53</sup> Michael Broers' groundbreaking work, of which the first two volumes have so far been published, presents Napoleon as 'the force of destiny' who did much to usher Europe into the modern age.<sup>54</sup> Alan Forrest's biography portrays the man behind the myth, though by focusing mostly on his achievements, a rather positive picture emerges.<sup>55</sup> Andrew Roberts, finally, has no qualms in starting his study of Napoleon from the perception that he was a great ruler of men.<sup>56</sup> Thus one could argue that Geyl's attempt to push the historiographical

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P. Geyl, *From Ranke to Toynbee: Five Lectures on Historians and Historiographical Problems* (Northampton, 1952), pp. 55–64; Geyl, *Debates with Historians*, pp. 225–37; P. Geyl, 'Staatsman of verrader? Talleyrand', in *Historicus in de tijd* (Utrecht, 1954), pp. 125–34.

<sup>52</sup> Geyl, *Napoleon voor en tegen*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>53</sup> P. Dwyer, *Napoleon: the Path to Power, 1769–1799* (London, 2007); P. Dwyer, *Citizen Emperor: Napoleon in Power* (London, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> M. Broers, *Napoleon: Soldier of Destiny* (London, 2014), M. Broers, *Napoleon: the Spirit of the Age, 1805–1810* (London, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> A. Forrest, *Napoleon* (London, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> A. Roberts, *Napoleon the Great* (London, 2015).

debate beyond a bifurcated portrayal has failed. That said, almost without exception Geyl's monograph is referred to in studies on Napoleon, usually in reference to the prejudiced ways of portraying him in the past, only for historians to subsequently present their own representation. Perhaps a better way to understand the impact of Geyl's study is to view it as disclaimer that permits historians to continue the uninhibited study of Napoleon. So even if historians have not followed Geyl's methodology, then at least they adhere to his conception of history as a debate without end.

### ***Conclusion***

In sum, it is fair to conclude that Geyl's impact on revolutionary and Napoleonic studies was great. He re-evaluated the revolutionary era of Dutch history and restored both the Patriots and the Batavians to their rightful place in the history of the Netherlands. He was at the forefront of historiographical development within the field through his comparative revolutionary studies and his influence on Palmer. His study on the House of Orange and on the French Revolution had a limited contribution to the historiography, but he did shine a light on these topics, which is what one would hope for from one of the brightest minds in Dutch academia of the age. Geyl's monograph on Napoleon is unique in the study of Napoleon and it has kept its relevance to this day. One point of criticism of Geyl's work could be said to be the relationship between his constructive historical work and the polemical work for which he became known internationally. The primary source basis of Geyl's work in revolutionary and Napoleonic studies is quite narrow; historiographical research aside, only the *Stam* is based on primary sources. Many of Geyl's publications were polemics for which the research was drawn from the *Stam*, updated so as to emphasize his opposition to a particular historiographical development or the views of a particular historian. In revolutionary and Napoleonic studies, it was Colenbrander who frequently found himself at the sharp end of Geyl's pen.

In reflecting on Geyl's legacy, Lodewijk Rogier, Geyl's contemporary and a professor at the University of Nijmegen, suggested that all polemical work, Geyl's included, loses its value sooner or later for the simple reason that over time the ideas that are contested either end up being rejected entirely or become commonplace.<sup>57</sup> The viewpoint of this chapter is not, however, that Geyl's polemical work has served only to amplify the significance of his contribution to revolutionary and Napoleonic studies. First, Geyl's polemical work ensured a lively interest in his historical research, and deservedly, as it was of good quality. Second, Geyl's polemics allowed him to continually

<sup>57</sup> Rogier, 'Herdenking', 35.



revisit and refine his research conclusions and ideas. For that reason, Geyl's polemical work not only offers the best insights we have into his views and opinions, it also means that his research has withstood the test of time admirably. Third, Geyl's polemical work raised his profile as an academic and public intellectual, which contributed to his fame and in turn facilitated the dissemination of his research and ideas. That said, Toynbee's assessment that 'Geyl's most valuable contribution to the world's stock of intellectual capital was his constructive work' is beyond debate, and Toynbee's regret, and that of many subsequent historians, that Geyl did not 'find time to finish the writing of his epoch-making history of the Dutch-Flemish-speaking peoples' must be shared.<sup>58</sup> A final volume, which would have taken the history of the Low Countries beyond 1815, would have been of particular value to historians of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era and would possibly have rectified some of the bias towards Dutch affairs in the *Stam* and thus also enhanced Geyl's legacy for the history of the Low Countries.

<sup>58</sup> Toynbee, 'Pieter Geyl', 4.

## 10. Pieter Geyl and his entanglement with German *Westforschung*

*Alisa van Kleef*

This chapter explores the extent of Pieter Geyl's contacts with the ethno-nationalist scholarship of German *Westforschung*. In the interwar period, this strand of German academia became particularly inspired by Geyl's involvement in the Flemish movement and his 'Greater Netherlands' history. His historical narrative lent itself well to the *völkisch* approach in German historiography, as both narratives understood language as the founding element of nations and both believed in the Germanic origins of the Netherlands and Flanders.

The Belgian historian Lode Wils was the first scholar to argue that Geyl was a collaborator of the irredentist *Westforschung* and that Geyl's view of history was in line with the historical propaganda of the German Flemish policy of the First World War.<sup>1</sup> In a separate work, Wils maintained that 'at least from 1927 to 1932 Geyl was a kindred spirit of the bourgeois German nationalists whose revanchism hoped for the disappearance of Belgium and the incorporation of Flanders into the Netherlands'.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on newly available archival materials, this chapter reconsiders the extent to which Geyl, from his position as professor of Dutch history at the University of London, got involved with German *Westforschung* from 1927 to 1934. His connections included publications in German scholarly journals, presentations of his research at academic congresses in Germany and correspondence with prominent German *Westforschers* such as Franz Petri and Robert Paul Oszwald. The extent of Geyl's impact on their historiographical narratives of Low Countries history will also be considered.

*Westforschung*, literally translated 'research on the West', is generally understood to have begun with the effort by German scholars to use historical arguments against the French occupation of the Rhineland in the aftermath of the First World War, to prove that the region belonged to the

<sup>1</sup> For example L. Wils, 'Die Großniederländische Bewegung', *Nationale Bewegung in Belgien: Ein historischer Überblick*, ed. J. Koll (Münster/New York, 2005), pp. 148–9.

<sup>2</sup> L. Wils, 'Geyl en Pirenne', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* (March 2001), 173.

German nation. It gradually expanded into research of territories adjacent to the Rhineland in neighbouring countries, where it tried to substantiate German historical influences and as such would become instrumental to Germany's later expansion to the west. In the early 2000s, historiography on the interwar *Westforschung* was particularly critical, claiming that already in 1918, long before the Nazis' accession to power, German historians had hastened to the aid of the German state and offered their academic work to build the basis for an eventual legitimization of the incorporation of the Low Countries and large parts of France into a Greater Germany. The relationship between historical discourse and political interests of the German state of course became even more problematic after Hitler's accession to power in 1933, and especially after 1940, when not a few *Westforschers*, including Geyl's closest contacts, would also become directly implicated in the occupation policies and practices of the Second World War, with all this entails.

For much of the period of the Weimar Republic, however, many *Westforschers* did not argue for annexation but recognized that the Netherlands was and should remain an independent nation, separate from Germany, whereas standpoints on Belgium were a little more ambivalent.<sup>3</sup> In the early interwar period, the Netherlands was thought to be a particularly important ally for the German cause against the French occupation of the Rhineland, and historical narratives highlighted the 'Germanic' character of the Dutch people, seen as a mixture of Frisian, Frankish and Saxon ethnicities. *Westforschung* scholarship also emphasized the shared cultural and economic traits between the Netherlands, Flanders and Germany.

To draw on the words of historian Ton Nijhuis, the fact 'that academics were committed to political purposes and their research was used to defend or legitimise political actions does not necessarily mean that the starting point for these specific research undertakings, such as *Westforschung*, was inherently linked to the specific political starting points'.<sup>4</sup> The result may have been German historians' legitimation for the eventual incorporation of the Netherlands and Belgium into a Greater Germany; the starting point, however, was far from that. German research on the Low Countries during the Weimar Republic largely understood itself to be in service of the emancipation of the Flemish *volk* in Belgium and was directed against what was perceived as French influence in the 'Germanic' lands in north-western Europe.

<sup>3</sup> T. Nijhuis, 'Het debat over de Westforschung in Duitsland en Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, cxviii (2005), 148–57, at p. 151; P. Schöttler, 'Die historische "Westforschung" zwischen "Abwehrkampf" und territorialer Offensive', P. Schöttler, *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft, 1918–1945* (Frankfurt, 1998), pp. 204–61.

<sup>4</sup> Nijhuis, 'Het debat over de Westforschung in Duitsland en Nederland', p. 154.

The same can be said of Pieter Geyl's entanglement with German *Westforschung*. His interactions with German historians in the late Weimar period and their fascination with his 'Greater Netherlands' history do not automatically implicate Geyl in the future crimes of Nazi Germany, nor can one make the argument that Geyl *intentionally* helped to legitimize the National Socialist occupation of the Netherlands in 1940. Still, the question needs to be asked whether he did so *in effect*.

### ***Geyl's association with Westforschung***

The first time Pieter Geyl associated himself with German *Westforschung* was in December 1927, when he published an article in *Volk und Reich: Politische Monatshefte* entitled 'Die mißlungene Vereinigung Belgiens und Hollands von 1814–1830' ('The failed union of Belgium and Holland from 1814 to 1830').<sup>5</sup> In the interwar years, *Volk und Reich* was a highly popular neoconservative periodical, in print from 1925 to 1944, with a special focus on German minorities outside the Weimar borders. Adopting a *völkisch*-nationalist outlook, the political journal employed racial and spatial concepts such as *Volksboden* and *Kulturboden* ('ethnic' and 'cultural soil') alongside then novel cartographic methods of research to demonstrate that the territories separated from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles (1919) should once again become part of Germany. What is more, it promoted the vision of a European order centred around a Greater Germany ('Mitteleuropa'). In December 1927, *Volk und Reich* published a special issue on Flanders. Its contributors, among whom Geyl, were united in supporting national independence and freedom for the Flemish *volk*.<sup>6</sup> In his article, Geyl wrote about the alleged suppression of the Flemish people by francophone Belgium and the awakening of its nationality during the previous century, when the Flemish movement started to no longer passively permit the demise of their language and culture. According to Geyl, it was not primarily a political movement; rather, the Flemish people had gradually become aware of its Netherlands character. Geyl was emphatic that there was no Belgian nationality and that in recent years, feelings of kinship had grown between Holland and Flanders.<sup>7</sup>

In April 1928, the Leipzig-based *Stiftung für Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung* ('Foundation for Research on German Ethnic and Cultural Soil') organized a conference in the West German bordertown of Cleves (Kleve/Kleef), bringing together scholars from Germany, the Netherlands and

<sup>5</sup> P. Geyl, 'Die mißlungene Vereinigung Belgiens und Hollands von 1814–1830', *Volk und Reich* (Dec. 1927), 563–8.

<sup>6</sup> 'Zu diesem und zu anderen Heften', *Volk und Reich* (July/Aug. 1928), 555.

<sup>7</sup> Geyl, 'Die mißlungene Vereinigung Belgiens und Hollands von 1814–1830', 563–8.

Belgium. The secretary of the Leipzig Foundation, Friedrich Metz, had asked Geyl whether he would speak about the Flemish question and had reminded him that the lectures in Cleves were not public and that neither his name nor the title of his lecture would be printed in the agenda. In fact, some official German authorities had misgivings about inviting Geyl, but Metz believed he had been able to alleviate their concerns. The Cleves congress was supposedly not political in nature but purely scholarly. Metz hoped that Geyl would describe the contemporary Flemish problem (the specific topic was his choice), but insisted that the talk should avoid politics, at least in the sense of party politics. Germany knew far too little about the social structure of the Flemish *volk*.<sup>8</sup> Geyl accepted the invitation.

The president of the Leipzig Foundation, Dr Albrecht Penck, opened the conference in Cleves by saying:

The present Kingdom of the Netherlands does not coincide with the greater Netherlands. On this soil, three German tribes meet: the Frisians, the Franks and the Saxons. It is necessary to distinguish between the tribe and the *volk*, the dialect and the language. There is no doubt that we are in a subsidence area at the coast, but the land is one with a particular *Kulturboden* ('cultural soil'). The area of the Rhine estuary had a peculiar cultural-historical development. In a friendly and confidential manner, the conference hoped to allow for a scholarly discussion of these problems. Differences in scholarly conceptions of these questions should not be kept secret, but rather it should be attempted in this environment to clarify any differences and to construct a kind of public scientific opinion.<sup>9</sup>

The Leipzig Foundation believed Geyl's talk on the historical foundations of the Greater Netherlands idea had shown that 'the forces in the north-west' were alive and that they revealed important aspects for *Kulturboden* research.<sup>10</sup>

Geyl's lecture on the Greater Netherlands idea stirred more discussions than all the other contributions. He spoke about the flawed historical premise of the prevailing narratives of state formation in the Low Countries, both in the traditional state-driven history of the Netherlands and in the dominant national history in Belgium as set out by Henri Pirenne in his 11-volume *Histoire de Belgique* (1900–32). These historians, in Geyl's view, regarded

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Metz to Pieter Geyl, 29 March 1928, University Utrecht Archive, Collectie Geyl [UUA, CG].

<sup>9</sup> W. Volz, *Stiftung für deutsche Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung Leipzig, die Tagungen der Jahre 1923–1929* (Langensalza, 1930), p. 409.

<sup>10</sup> Volz, *Stiftung für deutsche Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung Leipzig*, p. 407; Correspondence Stiftung für Deutsche Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung to the Reichsministerium für die besetzten Gebiete, Ministerialrat Mayerl, Berlin, April 1928, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R 1603, no. 2467.

the present as the final and logical endpoint of historical development ('endgültige Ewigkeit') and in their historical accounts incorrectly projected concepts and sentiments of their own time back into the past. The partition of the Low Countries in the sixteenth century was presented as a natural consequence of a deeply rooted difference in character between the north and the south, whereas Geyl hoped to show that the separation of the north and the south was primarily a consequence of the dynamics of military campaigns in the Eighty Years' War and the geographic configuration of the region, with the great rivers featuring as a major obstacle.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, Geyl's main point was political after all. At the end of his talk, he explained how the First World War had brought an end to a period of quiet and feelings of contentment in the Netherlands. The annexationist demands on Dutch territories in Belgian politics after the ceasefire had shown that the Dutch needed to keep an eye on Belgium. For Geyl, it was imperative not to overlook the Netherlands' perilous position in present-day Europe. Later that same year, his talk was published in the *Historische Zeitschrift*, the flagship journal of the historical profession in Germany, under the title 'Einheit und Entzweiung in den Niederlanden' ('Union and division in the Low Countries'), and in it Geyl expanded on what he perceived to be the problem of Belgian nationality.<sup>12</sup> According to him,

it was a normal development that a movement that aimed to bring together two parts of a tribe [*Stammesteile*] derived its inspiration from sources of tribal awareness [*Stammesbewußtsein*] as well as through the traditions of foreign policy. Now, since the idea of a Greater Netherlands had been linked with the political interests of the state, the movement in Holland had become noticeably more powerful.

Geyl believed that the history of the Low Countries would be enriched when the historian considered the common past of Holland and Flanders together: 'The hollowness of invalid conventional representations would come to light and long-forgotten truths emerge with surprising sharpness.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Volz, *Stiftung für deutsche Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung Leipzig*, p. 441.

<sup>12</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940* (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 207; P. Geyl, *De Groot-Nederlandsche Gedachte: Historische en politieke beschouwingen* (Haarlem, 1925 and 1930).

<sup>13</sup> P. Geyl, 'Einheit und Entzweiung in den Niederlanden', *Historische Zeitschrift*, cxxxix, (1929), 61. It should be noted that the German term *Stamm* with its biological connotations and the Dutch term *stam* as employed by Geyl in a purely linguistic-cultural sense overlap but are not the same. See Geyl's definition at the outset of his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (1930), p. 7: 'Onder de Nederlandse stam versta ik alle volken en volksgroepen voor wie het Nederlands de moedertaal is.'

Reflecting on his time at the conference, Geyl wrote: 'In Cleves, I had a couple of exceptional, interesting and pleasant days. Not entirely unproductive, I hope. It was my first contact with German scholars and I was very impressed with it.'<sup>14</sup> Geyl mentioned that the Germans did 'these sorts of things well'. There was an agreeable tone to the event, he admitted, but he had very little contact with German scholars, because he felt inhibited by his poor command of the German language. Still, he had presented his lecture in German and felt confident that it had gone well. He was aware of the fact that his historical standpoint with its strong nationalist tendencies had earned him some notoriety in Germany,<sup>15</sup> where, Geyl thought, there was a far better understanding of the historical problems of the Low Countries than there had been in England at any time during his stay there. Some in his German audience, he felt, had been strongly encouraged by his historical research. However, this interest by German historians had not been without ulterior motives, as Geyl wrote in his memoirs of 1942, when he knew better than he did in 1928.<sup>16</sup> In the following year, Geyl even considered leaving his post in London to accept a professorship in Cologne, where he believed the public would be less indifferent about such historical topics.<sup>17</sup>

The Cleves congress was far more concerned with contemporary than with historical issues, and particularly with the Flemish question, the Greater Netherlands idea, and the perceived French threat to western Germany. It was in Cleves that Geyl met Oszwald (1883–1945), archivist at the German Reichsarchiv in Potsdam. Oszwald had been a leading proponent of German Flemish policy during the First World War and after the war became the central figure coordinating contacts between German and Flemish nationalists.<sup>18</sup> In the closing remarks of the Cleves congress, Oszwald appealed to the Leipzig Foundation to encourage more interest in the study of the history of what he called the 'north-western corner of central Europe' ('Nordwestecke Mitteleuropas'), so that Germany would be equipped with the scholarly tools for present and future conflicts.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he asserted that the poor support in Holland for the Greater Netherlands idea was due to the fear of its confessional strain, but that in fact the war had been favourable to the Greater Netherlands position for

<sup>14</sup> Pieter Geyl to J. de Groodt-Adant, 20 May 1928, in *Geyl en Vlaanderen, ii: 1928–1932*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (Antwerp, 1974), pp. 16–18 (no. 200).

<sup>15</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> Pieter Geyl to Frederik Carel Gerretson, 7 May 1929, in *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (Baarn, 1980), p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> L. Wils, 'Geyl en Pirenne', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* (March 2001), 167–75.

<sup>19</sup> Volz, *Stiftung für deutsche Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung Leipzig*, p. 444.

two reasons. First, it had made the Flemish movement politically aware and weakened what he called the myth of the *âme belge*, and second, it had made many in Holland attentive to Belgian annexationist desires.<sup>20</sup>

In the months following the Cleves conference, Oszwald became very upset with Geyl for revealing in the Flemish nationalist journal *Vlaanderen* on 19 May 1928 that he and the Flemish nationalist politician Herman Vos had attended. Oszwald insisted that he had made it explicitly clear that details of the event should not be made known to the press, because it would be impossible to rectify false conclusions that might be drawn. Geyl had mentioned Cleves in response to an accusation by Robert van Genechten that Geyl and Vos had been touring conferences in Flanders, the Netherlands and Germany to campaign against a student boycott in connection with the transformation of the University of Ghent into a Dutch-speaking institution. Oszwald considered the remarks to be inappropriate and unpolitical. By responding to Van Genechten's accusations in the way he did, Geyl had caused embarrassment; he should instead have denied any contact with Germany about the boycott by the Ghent students. Oszwald was convinced that Geyl's remarks would be exploited by opponents of the Flemish movement and that there was no way to rectify the situation.<sup>21</sup> Geyl revealing his participation at the Cleves conference in *Vlaanderen* had been detrimental not to Germany but to the Flemish movement, as its opponents could now argue that the Germans had interfered in the matter.<sup>22</sup> The following month Oszwald conceded to Geyl that he had unnecessarily and too harshly rebuked him for making his participation public. Geyl and Oszwald continued to correspond until August 1929 on topics regarding political manoeuvres within the Flemish movement.

A few years later, in July 1932, Geyl was invited to give a lecture at a German–Nordic student convention organized by the *Verband der Vereine Deutscher Studenten* ('Union of German Student Associations', VVDSt) in Rostock on the Baltic coast of Germany. The meeting was meant to strengthen cultural relationships between German university students and their Scandinavian as well as Dutch peers. The VVDSt, also known as the *Kyffhäuserverband*, was an umbrella organization of nationalist student fraternities at various German universities, originally established in 1881 and associated with the Pan-German League. During and after the First World War, they promoted the idea of a 'germanische Schicksalsverbundenheit' ('Germanic community of fate') and aimed to counteract what they

<sup>20</sup> Volz, *Stiftung für deutsche Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung Leipzig*, p. 445.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Paul Oszwald to Pieter Geyl, 13 June 1928 (UUA, CG).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Paul Oszwald to Pieter Geyl, 3 July 1928 (UUA, CG).



saw as French influence in Europe. After the Great War, they separated from the Pan-German League and began to build contacts with other nationalist-oriented student organizations inside Germany as well as in the Netherlands, Flanders, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Sweden. Its members strongly opposed the establishment of the Weimar Republic, were *völkisch*-oriented and ardent proponents of the creation of a Greater Germany and a Greater Netherlands. In the 1920s, Oszwald and the Cologne lawyer Franz Schönberg were deeply involved in VVDSt affairs and helped secure contacts with Flemish nationalist and Greater Netherlands student organisations, such as the *Algemeen Vlaamsch Hoogstudentenverbond* ('General Flemish Students Union', AVHV) and the Leuven branch of the *Katholiek Vlaamsch Hoogstudentenverbond* (Catholic Flemish Students Union, KVHV). From 1927 onward the VVDSt was strongly represented at various Greater Netherlands student conventions in Flanders and Holland, so much so that one could say it possessed a 'lively transnational character'.<sup>23</sup>

Geyl was pleased to be invited to the gathering in Rostock to speak about the Greater Netherlands idea. Shortly before it took place, the VVDSt had, however, fallen into the hands of the National Socialists, and Geyl relates in his autobiography how the convention took place under the auspices of the Nazi party. Geyl remembered that

never in such a short period of time had I heard so much foolishness. How harsh, how wild, how impossible it all was! The antisemitism, the blind worship of the Führer, the fanatical assurance that he would abolish unemployment, it was too crazy to be taken seriously. All the prattle, the entire day, on the Germans! My Greater Netherlands nationalism never really concerned Germandom, and the equation of culture with race was completely incomprehensible [to me].<sup>24</sup>

### ***Geyl and Petri***

In the same year, Geyl corresponded with the young German historian Franz Petri (1900–93), who had written a critique, published in the *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, of Geyl's *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*. In his autobiography, Geyl characterized Petri as follows:

There was a young German historian, Franz Petri, in Brussels, who was preparing a major work on the great Frankish migrations and also studied the

<sup>23</sup> W. Dolderer, *Der flämische Nationalismus und Deutschland zwischen den Weltkriegen*, in *Griff nach dem Westen: die 'Westforschung' der völkisch-nationalen Wissenschaften zum nordwesteuropäischen Raum (1919–1960)*, ed. B. Dietz, H. Gabel and U. Tiedau (2 vols, Münster/New York, 2003), pp. 118 and 121.

<sup>24</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 207f.

Flemish and Greater Netherlands question. I got along well with him. Petri took a truly German, thorough, standpoint [‘hij nam op echt Duits grondige wijze stelling’] towards the conflict between my view and that of Pirenne. Petri had the most comprehensive and interesting reflections, though not in the least uncritical, on part I and II of my *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*.<sup>25</sup>

In the opening paragraph of his review, entitled ‘Staat und Nation in den Niederlanden’ (‘State and nation in the Netherlands’), Petri commented that Geyl’s narrative of Netherlands history represented a novel approach. Geyl had not written a history in which the contemporary Belgian and Dutch states framed the narrative; instead his account of Low Countries history focused on the entire population of the Dutch linguistic and cultural area, without any consideration for the modern states to which they belonged. Geyl depicted the development of the Netherlands *volk* and nation as a natural and organic maturation beginning with the Frankish great migrations and ending with the Netherlands linguistic nation (*Sprachnation*). Petri summed it up thus: ‘to develop from the coexistence of different peoples and tribal elements into a nation, the *Niederländertum* only needed to be made conscious of an actual, or in the very least potential, existing entity and distinctiveness’.<sup>26</sup> A most considerable shortcoming in Geyl’s narrative, according to Petri, was his underestimation of historical forces outside of ethnicity (*Volkstum*). In a region such as the Netherlands both the natural landscape and the cultural region (Petri’s notion of *Kulturraum*) had a significant influence on the development of the state and the nation. Also, although Geyl noted once in his narrative that the position of the Netherlands at the boundary between the Germanic and Romance cultural spheres had fostered the formation of an independent Netherlands, Petri would have preferred Geyl to elaborate more on this idea.<sup>27</sup>

At the close of his critique, Petri stated that Geyl’s research did not have any adverse impact on the present-day Dutch–German relationship. The *volk* and nation were an outcome of history and as such ‘common history unites, its loss estranges’. ‘The 350 years of modern Netherlandic history with the separation of North and South was too great to skip over, so too the thousand years since the origins of an autonomous Netherlands alongside Germandom.’<sup>28</sup> The Dutch *volk* had established itself around the mouth of the Rhine and Meuse rivers and had differentiated itself from

<sup>25</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*, p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> F. Petri, ‘Staat und Nation in den Niederlanden, zu P. Geyl: *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam*’, *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, ii (1932), 222.

<sup>27</sup> Petri, ‘Staat und Nation in den Niederlanden’, 223.

<sup>28</sup> Petri, ‘Staat und Nation in den Niederlanden’, 227.

‘continental Germanism’ (‘Festlandgermanentum’) in the course of a long and turbulent history that had led to a unique political and cultural development (*Sonderentwicklung*). The existence of an independent Dutch nationality could not be questioned in the modern era.<sup>29</sup> The discipline of German *Volksforschung* sought to resolve the compelling question of the present-day independence of the Dutch nationality. The historical reasons explaining why the Netherlands was separate and independent from Germany formed an integral component, according to Petri, not only of Low Countries but also of German history. Geyl had not done enough to explain the gradual moving apart of the German and Dutch nations, and the division remained purely a backdrop for Geyl.<sup>30</sup>

In the following year, Geyl’s response to Petri was published in the *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*. On the whole, Geyl was pleased with Petri’s critique of his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, writing that ‘all things considered, I can only delight’.<sup>31</sup> However, he wished to reply to one particular comment made by Petri, namely that his preliminary studies had not always adhered to the boundaries of truly scholarly evidence and moderation in judgement, and that his views were becoming more and more polemical and even personally aggressive; the Belgian historical community must feel hurt. From reading Petri’s critique, Geyl assumed that the reader would be under the impression that he was driven by nationalist passion and scholarly intolerance that would sharply attack different nationalities and different perspectives. In these essays about Belgian historiography, Geyl claimed, he had discovered a number of astonishing mistakes, incorrect quotations, misunderstandings of sources, and so on. These historical errors had bolstered the thesis on the solidarity of the Flemish and the Walloon and strengthened the notion of heterogeneity between the Dutch and the Flemish. For Geyl, Belgian historians’ reaction to his way of thinking was not scholarly but purely politically motivated. It was rooted in their conviction that there was no Belgian nationality problem. In closing, he wrote that, on the contrary, he was pleased to note that such a thorough critique as Petri’s, which primarily concerned only interpretation or emphasis, did not find any factual inaccuracies, distortion of quotations or any methodological error to remark on.

<sup>29</sup> F. Petri, ‘Die Volksgeschichte der Niederlande als Germanisch-Deutsche Forschungsaufgabe’, *Deutsches Archiv für Landes- und Volksforschung*, ii (1938), 310–25, at pp. 313 and 325.

<sup>30</sup> Petri, ‘Die Volksgeschichte der Niederlande als Germanisch-Deutsche Forschungsaufgabe’, 325.

<sup>31</sup> P. Geyl, ‘Erwiderung’, *Rheinische Heimblätter*, iii (1933), 152.

### ***Geyl's disassociation from Westforschung***

Deeply anguished by the National Socialist rise to power in early 1933, Geyl's stance towards German *Westforschung* changed abruptly and he was no longer interested in entangling himself in the affairs of German historians. On 6 December 1933 Geyl wrote to Petri that he was upset and wanted to speak honestly about what was happening in Germany:

First I want you to know that I am doing my best to view the things happening in Germany as quietly and reasonably as possible. There are some things happening in Germany that I loathe from the depths of my heart, the suppression of the freedom of expression by a central power to proscribe certain values and insights, the power as a result thereof, the decline of intellectual individualism, often by fear that leads to being dishonest. All this is offensive to me. You speak about great expectations and of a 'neue Volksverbundenheit' and you appeal to my own nationalism. But if the Greater Netherlands nationalism should lead to a flattening and an erasing of all in the historically rooted diversity then I would be one of the first to end up in a concentration camp. I do not understand nationalism that way. (...) I ask you urgently to believe me, that my aversion does not include the German people or the German civilization. I believe this is an unfortunate coming together of circumstances that the German people at this moment are subjected to such rough violence and the German civilization is threatened by such immense dangers. I hope that the old, great and beautiful traditions that have currently disappeared under the surface will rise again and have not lost their power. It is the great task of the intellectuals who these days are able to maintain their independence.<sup>32</sup>

Petri responded to Geyl on 3 February 1934:

Your letter has interested me greatly. I thank you for your words. I wish we could have spoken in person about it all. I understand your concerns and feel with you. I want to write you openly, that I myself am in a constant conflict between anxiety and hope. I have met some people who are close to me and share this opinion.<sup>33</sup>

Six months later, on 5 June 1934, Geyl wrote to Petri once more:

I am sorry that I did not interact with you much at the conference, I would have liked to sit down and quietly have talked about everything. The development of circumstances in Germany are worrying me and saddening me. Almost all over in England and the Netherlands one feels that the German culture has cut itself off from the European community and is in danger of drying out and choking.

<sup>32</sup> Pieter Geyl to Franz Petri, 6 Dec. 1933 (UUA, CG).

<sup>33</sup> Franz Petri to Pieter Geyl, 3 Feb. 1934 (UUA, CG).

Most probably, I will be in Flanders in the second half of July and first half of August. Would I find you there still?<sup>34</sup>

After 1934, there is no evidence of any correspondence between Geyl and Petri until several years after the end of the Second World War.

In another example of unabashed criticism of the National Socialist influence on German scholarship of Low Countries history, Geyl wrote a jarring critique of Oszwald's 1937 edited work *Die Deutsch-Niederländische Symphonie*.<sup>35</sup> Geyl strongly disapproved of Oszwald's view that the same 'race' lived on both sides of the Dutch–German border and insisted that 'the real creative forces in history were not blood-racial ties ('Blutsverbundenheit') but cultural tradition, such as could be cultivated and maintained within a linguistic community. There you have something uniting the Flemish and the Dutch, never mind all temporary misunderstandings and whether they want it or not.'<sup>36</sup> In contrast, in *Die Deutsch-Niederländische Symphonie* the opinion was that the Germans and the Dutch had a deep connection of blood and soil ('Blut und Boden'), but Geyl insisted that far more important to understanding the relationship between the Netherlands and Germany was the diverging historical development that had led to the estrangement between the neighbours.<sup>37</sup> Geyl warned forcefully against the instrumentalization of history to serve a specific German propaganda.

In the Weimar Republic, Geyl's Greater Netherlands history did have a great impact on German *Westforschung* scholarship, but mainly because these German historians were already protagonists of such ideas. One need only peruse the numerous writings by Oszwald and other *völkisch*-nationalist historians in connection with the neoconservative movement and the *Kyffhäuserverband*. Another example of this impact can be seen in the 1931 article 'Staat und Nation an der Westgrenze' ('State and nation on the Western border') by historian Hermann Aubin. Aubin was an ardent supporter of the Flemish movement and his article devoted much attention to the topic of what measures could and ought to be taken to foster the development of a Flemish national identity. He was inspired by August Borms and his arduous campaign for an autonomous Flanders within Belgium and the inevitable union of Flanders with Holland. The German state had let go of the Netherlands in the early medieval period and the separation of

<sup>34</sup> Pieter Geyl to Franz Petri, 5 June 1934 (UUA, CG).

<sup>35</sup> S. Laux, 'Flandern im Spiegel der "wirklichen Volksgeschichte"', in *Griff nach dem Westen*, pp. 247–90, at p. 287. *Die Deutsch-Niederländische Symphonie* went largely unregarded in learned circles but it did catch the attention of Pieter Geyl.

<sup>36</sup> P. Geyl, 'Duits en Diets', in *Historicus in de Tijd* (Utrecht, 1954), pp. 55–63, originally published in *Nederlandsche Historiebladen*, i (1938), pp. 190–200.

<sup>37</sup> Geyl, 'Duits en Diets', p. 57.

the Netherlands from the German nation began with the linguistic rupture when the regional dialect of the Netherlands became the standard written language of the newly formed state. In closing, Aubin referred the reader to the publications by Oszwald and Geyl in the 1927 Flanders issue of *Volk und Reich*. As for Geyl's influence in historical narratives of the Rhineland school of regional studies, namely Franz Petri and others, it was not so much the appeal of his Greater Netherlands history but more an interest in his *völkisch* approach to understanding Low Countries history, namely the primacy of the linguistic (cultural) boundary for the development of the nation and their shared disbelief in Pirenne's notion of an inherent Belgian unity. While Geyl had been primarily concerned with the relationship between the north and the south of the Low Countries, Petri was more interested in learning which historical circumstances had led to the west-east separation of the Netherlands from Germany.

### **Conclusion**

Pieter Geyl's entanglement with German *Westforschung* in the Weimar Republic was largely a one-sided affair. Geyl was never too concerned with what German historians were saying about the Netherlands. Quite the contrary, German scholars of Low Countries history were immensely intrigued by Geyl's polemical approach and his blurring of the lines between historical scholarship and political activism. Geyl did not really 'collaborate' with German scholars, he simply circulated in Germany his belief in a shared cultural and linguistic community between Flanders and the Netherlands and was himself a strong protagonist for the eventual creation of a Greater Netherlands state. His publications in German journals and his lectures at various conferences in Germany were a platform to disseminate his ideas abroad, an opportunity to inform and persuade German intellectuals and politicians of what he saw as the historical and contemporary political and cultural need to resolve the Flemish question and to keep the Dutch linguistic area free of francophone encroachment. During the Weimar Republic, neoconservative and *Westforschung* scholars were united in their support for the emancipation of the Flemish *volk*, the division of Belgium and the creation of a Greater Netherlands joining together Flanders and Holland. In his every interaction with German scholars, Geyl maintained his distance and, although he appreciated German *völkisch* research on the Netherlands, he was even more steadfastly opposed to the National Socialist movement.



## II. Between Leuven and Utrecht: the afterlife of Pieter Geyl and the ‘Greater Netherlands idea’

*Fons Meijer\**

In the preface to *Napoleon: Voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving* (1946), published in English as *Napoleon: For and Against* (1949), Pieter Geyl declared that history was a ‘discussion without end’, by which he qualified historical truth-finding as an unceasing war of words, an infinite verbal battle between conflicting interpretations of the historical past.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays historians may consider this observation to be something of a truism, but during the first half of the twentieth century, Geyl was one of the first historians to introduce to the Dutch (and wider European) historical profession a debating culture that was grounded on the principles of contestation and even polemics. In the interwar period his broadsides were aimed at the followers of Robert Fruin and Henri Pirenne and their, in Geyl’s view, myopic ‘Orangist’ and ‘Belgicist’ narratives of the history of the Low Countries. After the Second World War he threw himself into great debates with macro-historians such as Arnold Toynbee and Jan Romein on the nature and theory of history.<sup>2</sup> If anything, he was the embodiment of his own principle.

It is ironic, to say the least, that in the decades after his passing on New Year’s Eve 1966, Geyl himself stood at the centre of a *Historikerstreit*. In the 1970s and 1980s, against the backdrop of a growing historiography on the Flemish national movement and the publication of two editions of his correspondence, Geyl’s political involvement in the Flemish movement was discussed intensely and controversially by Dutch and Belgian historians.

\* This chapter is based in part on the author’s bachelor thesis, written at Radboud University Nijmegen during the spring semester of 2014/15 and entitled ‘*Umwertung aller Werte: Pieter Geyl’s Groot-Nederlands stamnarratief in historisch perspectief*’. The author is grateful to Joost Rosendaal, the thesis supervisor, as well as to Wim Berkelaar and Harm Kaal for their comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> P. Geyl, *Napoleon: Voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving* (Utrecht, 1946), pp. 3–5.

<sup>2</sup> J. Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin: Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 334–41 and 355–8; see also the chapters by Pieter van Hees and Remco Ensel in this volume.



Was Geyl, as he repeatedly proclaimed himself, a moderate voice within the Flemish movement that consistently opposed extremist factions, or did he have a hidden agenda and work secretly towards the dissolution of the Belgian state? Two main groups of participants can be discerned within this debate: the 'Utrecht' group of historians, which mainly consisted of former students of Geyl's and upheld his self-conception of moderation, and the 'Leuven' group, centred around the professor of modern history Lode Wils, who aimed at debunking Geyl's self-image. One can indeed wonder whether this discussion was 'without end': although no consensual conclusion was reached in the debate, the smoke cleared in the 1990s and the participants shifted their attention to other historical issues.

To understand history is to understand how it has been discussed; Geyl knew this, and it is the premise this chapter is built upon. Whereas in many studies on Geyl, the debate between 'Utrecht' and 'Leuven' is reduced to a historiographical prelude or introduction,<sup>3</sup> this chapter recognizes that the debate *as such* is interesting enough to analyse, for it shows in which contexts and by which means historical knowledge develops. What were the impetuses that fuelled the debate? Who were the main participants? Why did they take certain positions? What were their arguments and how did they respond to one another? By putting the debate centre-stage and scrutinizing its internal dynamics, this chapter will argue that current understandings of Pieter Geyl's 'Greater Netherlands idea' are not shaped by a balanced exchange of ideas between like-minded historians but instead are the product of a collision of different interests. While the 'Utrecht' historians were mainly defending their late mentor against (what they believed were) false allegations, for the 'Leuven' historians the study of Geyl was only one facet of a larger historiographical project, namely the debunking of the traditional narrative of Flemish nationalism.

This chapter will first offer a brief overview of Geyl's affiliation with the Flemish movement, with the focus being on the image Geyl himself presented of his political motivation and how this image was perpetuated by most historical observers. It will go on to demonstrate that the publication of the first series of Geyl's correspondence in the mid-1970s inspired Leuven historian Louis Vos to write an article critical of Geyl's political integrity and how this publication sparked a short but fierce debate. Finally, this chapter will look at how the publication of the second series of Geyl's correspondence in the late 1970s and early 1980s offered Leuven historian Lode Wils the possibility to revive and even intensify the debate. It will also

<sup>3</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, pp. 327–8; J. Tollebeek, 'Historiografie', in *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. R. de Schryver (Tielt, 1998), pp. 117–71, at p. 135.

analyse why the debate petered out in the 1990s and assess to what extent the debate has influenced our current understanding of Pieter Geyl.

### *A battle on two fronts*

Geyl's Greater Netherlands affiliation does not have one single origin.<sup>4</sup> Early expressions of his political engagement can be found in writings from his days as a student of Dutch literature and history at Leiden University. Historian Jo Tollebeek has shown that he was a keen reader of non-conformist literature (Multatuli, Willem Kloos, Lodewijk van Deyssel) and for a short period of time even developed socialist views, opposing the disciplining forces of bourgeois society.<sup>5</sup>

His commitment would intensify under the influence of various encounters with the Flemish national movement in the 1910s. He visited Jan Derk Domela Nieuwenhuis Nyegaard, a second cousin of his mother's, who strongly supported the Flemish national cause, in Ghent in 1910.<sup>6</sup> A year later, Geyl returned to Belgium to take part in a Flemish student conference at Ghent University that was entirely dedicated to the 'Dutchification' of the institution (1911). This was a key demand of the Flemish movement, which opposed the fact that Belgian universities were still exclusively using French as the language of instruction. At this conference Geyl met many prominent representatives of the Flemish movement, with whom he would later associate.<sup>7</sup>

The 'Flemish question' (concerning the position of Flanders within the Belgian state) left a deep impression on the young historian, as evidenced by an article that Geyl published on his return to the Netherlands, in which he described his eye-opening experience in Ghent in a romanticized way: 'This will be a sweet memory for the rest of my life. It was beautiful to see a people awaking [...] The enthusiasm that arose and which I encountered does not lie.'<sup>8</sup> Geyl ended the article with an appeal to his fellow Dutch countrymen not to ignore what was happening in Belgium: 'Our future

<sup>4</sup> P. B. M. Blaas, 'De visie van de Grootnederlandse historiografen: aanleiding tot een nieuwe historiografie?', in P. B. M. Blaas, *Geschiedenis en nostalgie: De historiografie van een kleine natie met een groot verleden* (Hilversum, 2000), pp. 155–69, at pp. 156–60.

<sup>5</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, pp. 323–4.

<sup>6</sup> L. Buning and P. van Hees, 'Domela Nieuwenhuis Nyegaard, Jan D.', *Nieuwe encyclopedie*, pp. 937–57.

<sup>7</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 325.

<sup>8</sup> 'Wat ik in Gent heb meegemaakt, zal een schone herinnering voor mijn leven blijven. Het is een heerlijk gezicht een volk tot nieuw leven zich te zien wakker schudden [...] De geestdrift, die ik heb bijgewoond en die zich aan me heeft meegedeeld, liegt niet': P. Geyl, 'Vlaamse indrukken en beschouwingen (1911)', in Pieter Geyl, *Noord en zuid: Eenheid en tweedheid in de Lage Landen* (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1960), pp. 15–26, at p. 22.

bears great and glorious opportunities. The revival of Flanders presents us with broad horizons.’<sup>9</sup>

After defending his doctoral thesis in 1913, Geyl moved to London to become British correspondent for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* before, in 1919, changing career by accepting the position of professor of Dutch studies at the University of London. In the years that followed, his sympathy for the Flemish national cause translated into political activism for the Greater Netherlands idea. First and foremost, he expressed this ideological affiliation in a series of books and essays in which he targeted both the traditional narrative of Dutch history, as heralded by the liberal historian Robert Fruin during the second half of the nineteenth century, and Henri Pirenne’s master narrative of the history of Belgium, set out in his eleven-volume *Histoire de Belgique* (1894–1932).<sup>10</sup> Geyl frequently argued that most of his historical colleagues failed to recognize that the contemporary states of the Netherlands and Belgium were not primordial entities but the result of a turbulent history that could have been very different. He juxtaposed what he saw as their ‘myopic’ narratives with his own ‘Greater Netherlands’ account in which he emphasized the historical and cultural interconnectedness of the Dutch linguistic area encompassing both the Netherlands and Flanders. This ‘Greater Netherlands’ conceptualization of Low Countries history would culminate in his magnum opus *De Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam* (‘The History of the Dutch-speaking Peoples’), a three-volume work published between 1930 and 1959, but left uncompleted.

While working in London, Geyl became increasingly involved with the Flemish national movement in Belgium on a political level. In 1919 he re-established contact with Antoon Jacob, a militant Flamant whom he had met in Ghent eight years earlier.<sup>11</sup> Through Jacob he became acquainted

<sup>9</sup> ‘Grootse en schone mogelijkheden bewaart ons de toekomst: De herleving van Vlaanderen stelt ons een wijder gezichtseinder’: Geyl, ‘Vlaamse indrukken’, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> P. Geyl, *Holland and Belgium: Their Common History and Their Relations* (Leiden, 1920); notable examples of Geyl’s Greater Netherlands essays are collected in P. Geyl, *De Groot-Nederlandsche gedachte: Historische en politieke beschouwingen* (Haarlem/Antwerp, 1925); P. Geyl, *De Groot-Nederlandsche gedachte: Tweede bundel historische beschouwingen, polemieken en kritieken* (Haarlem/Antwerp, 1930); Geyl, *Noord en zuid*. For an analysis of Robert Fruin’s traditional narrative of Dutch history see P. B. M. Blaas, ‘De prikkelbaarheid van een kleine natie met een groot verleden: Fruin en Bloks nationale geschiedschrijving’, in Blaas, *Geschiedenis en nostalgie*, pp. 15–41, at pp. 25–8; for Henri Pirenne’s narrative see A. van der Lem, ‘Het nationale epos: Geschiedenis in één greep’, in *De palimpsest: Geschiedschrijving in de Nederlanden, 1500–2000*, ed. J. Tollebeek, T. Verschaffel and L. H. M. Wessels (Hilversum, 2002), pp. 177–96, at p. 186; see also N. van Sas, ‘The Great Netherlands controversy: a clash of great historians’, in *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts: Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, ed. T. Frank and F. Hadler (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 152–74.

<sup>11</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, pp. 325–6.

with many other key figures of the Flemish movement (Hendrik Borginon, Leo Picard, Herman Vos), and together with the Dutchmen Carel Gerretson, a historian from Utrecht, and Pieter van Eyck, a poet and literary scholar whom he knew from his school years, attempted to steer discussions within the Flemish movement in the direction of a Greater Netherlands solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

Already at this time, questions were being raised about Geyl's political motivation. In 1920 his former mentor Petrus J. Blok advised Geyl in a letter to waive his 'deceptive' ideas, in which Blok perceived irredentist tendencies.<sup>13</sup> That Blok was not the only one to suspect Geyl of radical ambitions became apparent fifteen years later, when Geyl applied for the university chair of general and Dutch history in Utrecht. Several officials at the Dutch Foreign Office intervened in the appointment process, voicing their concerns about landing the university with a subversive political troublemaker by appointing Geyl.<sup>14</sup>

This fear was not wholly unjustified, for the Flemish movement was plagued by internal disputes. A significant minority within the movement were radical figures centred around the journal *Vlaanderen*, led by Josué de Decker and Robrecht de Smet. This extremist faction propagated nothing less than the dissolution of Belgium and the attachment of Flanders to the Netherlands; in the 1930s, it increasingly leaned towards the antidemocratic doctrines of fascism and national socialism.<sup>15</sup> In an article of 1934, Geyl had been critical of these doctrinaire hardliners within the Flemish movement.<sup>16</sup> While fostering Greater Netherlands as an ideal, he argued that the political realization of this ideal was out of question. A year later, in a memorandum that he sent to the Foreign Office in reply to questions that were being raised about his political affiliations, Geyl once more emphasized that he had always belonged to the moderate wing of the Flemish movement.<sup>17</sup>

His attempts to demonstrate that he had never been and would not be a subversive influence were successful, as his appointment was eventually approved and he became professor at Utrecht University. In various later publications too, Geyl would insist that he had always been a voice of

<sup>12</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, pp. 326–7.

<sup>13</sup> Blaas, 'Prikkelbaarheid', 40.

<sup>14</sup> See W. Berkelaar, 'Boosheid om een benoeming: Het Utrechtse professoraat van Pieter Geyl in 1935', *De Republikein: Tijdschrift voor de ware democraat*, iii (2007), 54–9.

<sup>15</sup> L. Vandeweyer, 'De hoop op een Duitse revanche-oorlog: De voorbereiding van de kollaboratie door de Vlaams-nationalisten rond het weekblad *Vlaanderen*', *Bijdragen Navorsings- en Studiecencentrum voor de Geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, xii (1989), 207–28; Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 331.

<sup>16</sup> P. Geyl, 'De Vlaamse kwestie: Jongste ontwikkeling en vooruitzichten (1934)', Geyl, *Noord en zuid*, pp. 40–46, at p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 331.

moderation. In his inaugural lecture in 1936, for example, he criticized the anti-democratic and racist state nationalism that could be witnessed in Germany and Italy,<sup>18</sup> and in his autobiography, penned during his wartime captivity, he stated of the *Vlaanderen* faction:

I have learned to understand and – to a certain extent – sympathise with that [extremist] state of mind [...] but from a personal point of view, I would have none of it, and I always have seen, very clearly, the dangers of it for cultural and public life, and for the movement itself.<sup>19</sup>

If anything, his Greater Netherlands battle in the interwar period was a conflict on two fronts, on the one hand arguing against the traditional Dutch and Belgian politicians who did not share his Greater Netherlands ideal, and on the other opposing the extremist and anti-democratic factions within the Flemish movement itself.<sup>20</sup>

After the Second World War and until his retirement in 1958, Geyl's Greater Netherlands commitment became less apparent, his attention shifting to other historiographical subjects.<sup>21</sup> At this time, observers readily accepted his self-image of moderation during the interwar period. The historiography on the Flemish national movement was only slowly getting off the ground, and early studies did not critically question Geyl's position within the movement. Partly, this had to do with their scholarly proximity to Geyl: one of the first studies on the history of the Flemish movement was written by one of his doctoral students, Arie W. Willemsen, who in his thesis confirmed what his mentor had always proclaimed himself.<sup>22</sup> That Willemsen was very much inspired by Geyl's works and activism was reflected in the fact that in the decades to follow he took a keen interest in contemporary Belgian politics himself and would often side with the Flemish nationalists.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, as we will see, Willemsen later

<sup>18</sup> P. Geyl, 'Vaderlandse gemeenschap in historisch perspectief', in P. Geyl, *Verzamelde opstellen* (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1978), i. pp. 170–86.

<sup>19</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. P. van Hees, L. Dorsman and W. Berkelaar (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 160: 'Ik heb die geesteshouding leren verstaan, er tot op zekere hoogte meer kunnen sympathiseren [...] maar ik moest er voor mezelf niets van hebben en heb er de gevaren voor cultuur en openbaar leven, voor de beweging zelf, steeds helder van ingezien.'

<sup>20</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 328.

<sup>21</sup> This did not mean, however, that Geyl's engagement with the Flemish question had vanished: eg in 1962 he gave a passionate but very controversial speech on, among other things, Belgian's treatment of its collaborators from the Second World War: J. Soenen, 'Prof. Geyl en de IJzerbedevaart', *Neerlandia*, lxvi (1962), 144–5.

<sup>22</sup> A. W. Willemsen, *Het Vlaams-nationalisme, 1914–1940* (Groningen, 1958), pp. 162–4.

<sup>23</sup> J. Dedeurwaerder, 'Willemsen, Arie W.', *Nieuwe encyclopedie*, p. 3753.

frequently acted as a passionate defender of his former mentor's honour and integrity.

In the years immediately after his death, the traditional perception of Geyl's political activism was still not being queried. Only the Nijmegen historian Lodewijk Rogier dropped some notable hints, in an obituary for the *Koninklijke Academie van Wetenschappen*. While writing that in the polarized atmosphere of the 1930s, Geyl had explicitly engaged with the democratic rather than the extremist factions, Rogier also acknowledged that in the decade before Geyl had confessed that the 'break-up of Belgium' and an alignment of Flanders with the Netherlands had been a desirable prospect to him.<sup>24</sup> Little attention, however, was paid to these hints, and ten years later the Groningen historian Ernst Kossmann would still argue that Geyl had been one of the 'moderate' and 'pragmatic' voices within the Flemish movement.<sup>25</sup> However, as Kossmann, previously one of Geyl's successors to the London chair (1957–66), probably knew, this notion was, by then, no longer unchallenged.

### ***The publication of Geyl en Vlaanderen (1973–5)***

Soon after Geyl's death, the university committee supervising his archive argued that it was in the late professor's interest that parts of this archive (letters, memoirs, and other autobiographical writings) be published – after all, Geyl had always been a very public figure. Two of his former students were recruited to plough through his papers and select documents suitable for publication. These two students were Willemsen, by then working at the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, the national library of the Netherlands in The Hague, and Pieter van Hees, who was affiliated with the historical department of Utrecht University and in his student years had worked as Geyl's academic assistant during the latter's retirement.<sup>26</sup> A bibliography of Geyl was published in 1972,<sup>27</sup> but the first really substantive output of their work was a three-volume edition of a selection of Geyl's correspondence, published between 1973 and 1975. Since his Greater Netherlands activism had been one of the most prominent aspects of Geyl's career – he himself had stated this at the time of his retirement<sup>28</sup> – the editors decided that the

<sup>24</sup> L. J. Rogier, 'Herdenking van P. Geyl (15 december 1997–31 december 1966)', *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, afd. Letterkunde*, xxx (1967), 379–412, at pp. 392–3.

<sup>25</sup> E. H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen, 1780–1940* (Amsterdam/Brussels, 1976), p. 499.

<sup>26</sup> W. Berkelaar and J. Palm, *Ik wil wekken en waarschuwen: Gesprekken over Nederlandse historici en hun eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 49f.

<sup>27</sup> P. van Hees, *Bibliografie van P. Geyl* (Groningen, 1972).

<sup>28</sup> P. Geyl, 'Terugblik', in P. Geyl, *Studies en strijdschriften: Bundel aangeboden aan de*

series would consist of an anthology of letters and notes concerning the Flemish movement and Greater Netherlands and thus called the series *Geyl en Vlaanderen* ('Geyl and Flanders').<sup>29</sup>

As Jo Tollebeek has argued, by the beginning of the 1970s, cracks were starting to appear in the image of Geyl as a mostly cultural, politically moderate proponent of the Greater Netherlands idea.<sup>30</sup> In 1972 Hermann W. von der Dunk, professor of contemporary history at Utrecht and a former student of Geyl's, wrote a biographical entry for the yearbook of the *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde*, raising questions about his former mentor's political affiliation:

[Geyl] always remained rather vague when it came to the future of Belgium and when he fiercely fought the Greater Netherlands fundamentalism of the magazine *Vlaanderen*, he mostly did so because he considered such positions unrealistic, ergo dogmatic, ergo harmful for the Flemish movement. His fight was thus not a fundamental rejection of such ideas, but rather a pragmatic decision.<sup>31</sup>

However, documents to substantiate Von der Dunk's assessment were missing, a situation that changed a year later with the publication of the first volume of *Geyl en Vlaanderen*.

The first scholar to critically evaluate Geyl's self-image based on his published correspondence was Louis Vos, a historian at the University of Leuven. In an article of 1975 published in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (BMGN, today also known by its international title *Low Countries Historical Review*), he committed himself to investigating Geyl's vague and contradictory positions regarding the political future of Belgium that Rogier and Von der Dunk had already hinted at.<sup>32</sup>

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*schrijver bij zijn aftreden als hoogleraar aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht* (Groningen, 1958), p. 495.

<sup>29</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen: Uit het archief van prof. dr. Pieter Geyl, brieven en notities*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (3 vols, Antwerp/Utrecht, 1973–5).

<sup>30</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 328.

<sup>31</sup> H. W. von der Dunk, 'Pieter Catharinus Arie Geyl, Dordrecht 15 december 1887–Utrecht 31 december 1966', *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (1972), pp. 123–35, at pp. 125f.: 'Niettemin bleef hij op dit punt wat vaag en wanneer hij zeer fel het Grootnederlands integralisme van het weekblad *Vlaanderen* bestreed, dan deed hij dat toch vooral omdat hij deze richting onrealistisch, ergo dogmatisch, ergo schadelijk voor de Vlaamse beweging vond. Het was dus een bestrijding uit mentale en praktische overwegingen, meer dan een principieel-theoretische verwerping.'

<sup>32</sup> L. Vos, 'De eierdans van P. Geyl: Zijn grootnederlandse politiek in de jaren twintig', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xc (1975), 444–57, at p. 444.

To understand why Vos got involved in the discussion about Geyl's position within the Flemish movement, it is vital to comprehend how the historiographical debate on the Flemish movement had been developing since the 1950s, and Vos's position within it. When, in 1958, Willemsen published the first study on the movement during the interwar-period, the topic had still been somewhat taboo among Belgian historians, since the collaborationist reputation it had acquired in the Second World War was still fresh in memory.<sup>33</sup> This changed during the late 1950s and 1960s, when many individual historians, against the backdrop of a growing culture of remembrance, started publishing studies on a wide range of aspects of the Flemish movement. By the beginning of the 1980s, the subject was being tackled more systematically, emphasized by the publication of a two-volume encyclopaedia of the Flemish movement between 1973 and 1975.<sup>34</sup> The narrative put forward in this work, one that was also increasingly becoming an important part of the Flemish collective identity, proclaimed that, step by step, the Flemish movement (and especially the nationalists within it) had emancipated the Flemish people from their francophone oppressors and led them to a future of freedom and autonomy.<sup>35</sup>

Vos did not endorse this narrative, for he was part of a revisionist group of historians around his academic mentor Lode Wils in Leuven, one of the first historians to take it upon himself to debunk this 'Whig narrative' of Flemish liberation. In numerous books and articles, Wils showed, among other things, that there was no such thing as an enduring Flemish self-awareness in history and that many of the Flemish movement's victories had been achieved due to the commitment of moderate individuals within traditional political parties, not because of actions by radical Flemish nationalists.<sup>36</sup> His interpretation of Belgian political history also prompted Wils to revise the interwar history of the Flemish movement, arguing that, while many Flemish nationalists fell victim to and were lastingly influenced by German *Flamenpolitik* propaganda during the First World War, which aimed at convincing them to endorse German expansionist claims, the real progress had been made, again, by moderate sympathizers

<sup>33</sup> Tollebeek, 'Historiografie', pp. 117, 129.

<sup>34</sup> *Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. J. H. M. Deleu et al. (2 vols, Tielt/Utrecht, 1973–5).

<sup>35</sup> J. Tollebeek, 'Het essay: Geschiedschrijving zonder vanzelfsprekendheid', J. Tollebeek, T. Verschaffel and L. H. M. Wessels, *De palimpsest*, pp. 259–80, at p. 268; L. Wils, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie: Een geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging* (Leuven, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Tollebeek, 'Historiografie', 122; B. de Wever, 'Wils, Lode', *Nieuwe encyclopedie*, pp. 3758–9.



to the Flemish cause in the Catholic and socialist political parties.<sup>37</sup> Within this new framework, Wils interpreted the Greater Netherlands movement, with its connections to Germany and the Netherlands, as a foreign, radical, imperialist and even fascist force within the Flemish movement. In 1977, Wils would argue that:

most Greater Netherlands activists were Dutch nationalists, who hoped, during the First World War, that a German victory [...] would make it possible that Flanders, one way or other, would be connected to the Netherlands [...] [After the First World War] their incentives and financial support were of crucial significance for the spreading of anti-Belgian ideology within the Flemish nationalist movement.<sup>38</sup>

The publication of *Geyl en Vlaanderen* offered the 'Leuven' historians the opportunity to scrutinize the motivations of one of the most prominent Greater Netherlands figures within the Flemish movement and test their framework. Even though Wils eventually became the primary advocate of the idea that Geyl was one of the key figures of Dutch annexationism, it was his former student Vos who was the first one to include Geyl in the Wilsian demythologization of the Flemish movement.

In his 1975 article, Vos put forward the thesis that Geyl's political opinions had not been as moderate as he had always proclaimed and argued that Geyl, in the 1920s, had been a Dutch nationalist and an anti-Belgian agitator. According to Vos, various remarks by Geyl that emphasized his alleged moderation were smokescreens put up to disguise his real political objective, the break-up of Belgium. Vos argued that Geyl obviously knew that if he had openly presented his 'real' irredentist position, it would work against him. Instead, Geyl would have taken a roundabout approach, in which he openly advocated for Flemish autonomy within the existing Belgian framework as a transitional solution while secretly hoping that this compromise would fuel political crisis, which would eventually make it easier to mould public opinion towards a Greater Netherlands solution.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Tollebeek, 'Historiografie', 130; L. Wils, 'Bormsverkiezing en "Compromis des Belges": Het aandeel van regerings- en oppositiepartijen in de taalwetgeving tussen beide wereldoorlogen', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, iii (1973), 265–330; L. Wils, *Flamenpolitiek en aktivisme: Vlaanderen tegenover België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Leuven, 1974).

<sup>38</sup> L. Wils, *De Vlaamse beweging in het kader van de nationale bewegingen* (Leuven, 1977), p. 17: '... het merendeel waren Hollandse nationalisten die in de eerste wereldoorlog hoopten dat dankzij een Duitse overwinning [...] Vlaanderen op één of andere manier zou worden verbonden met Nederland [...] Hun aanmoediging en hun financiële steun waren van essentiële betekenis voor de verspreiding van de anti-belgische strekkingen binnen het Vlaams nationalisme [tijdens het interbellum].'

<sup>39</sup> Vos, 'Eierdans', 455–6.

Borrowing an expression from Geyl himself, Vos qualified Geyl's political activity in the 1920s as 'walking on eggshells' ('eierdans') since he was constantly consciously trying not to offend anyone *en route* to achieving his ultimate political aim.

Vos also pointed to various passages in *Geyl en Vlaanderen* that he viewed as supporting his interpretation that Geyl had shown ill will towards the Flemish national cause, for example by opposing the Belgian–Dutch Treaty, which was rejected in the Dutch Senate in 1927. Quoting a letter by Geyl, Vos argued that Geyl had known the treaty would have been beneficial for Flanders' material prosperity, but still actively opposed it.<sup>40</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the editors of Geyl's correspondence perceived this article as an attack on the integrity of their former mentor. In the same issue of *BMGN*, Willemsen therefore published a critical response to Vos's allegations. Qualifying the image that the Leuven historian had painted of Geyl's political activism in the 1920s as a caricature and reproaching Vos for not grasping Geyl's personality and ideas,<sup>41</sup> he acknowledged – and this had not been done before – that there were indeed passages in Geyl's correspondence that demonstrated that Geyl had fostered the Greater Netherlands idea as a *political* ideal, but suggested Vos had not taken into account the various contexts in which these remarks were made.<sup>42</sup> Geyl was not an extremist, Willemsen argued, but on the contrary denounced dogmatism and political stubbornness. Yes, his affiliation with the Flemish movement was motivated by his Greater Netherlands ideal, but no, he did not consider the political achievement of this ideal realizable politically anytime soon. In that sense, Willemsen continued to argue, no tactical considerations or 'image-building' were involved in Geyl's writings.

Willemsen also criticized what he saw as Vos's eclectic use of the letters published in *Geyl en Vlaanderen*. He argued that Vos had merely gathered random quotes instead of considering the whole picture. When it came to Geyl's opposition to the 1927 Dutch–Belgian treaty for example, Willemsen argued that Vos could have known, and possibly even had known, that Geyl had frequently made the case for a new treaty.<sup>43</sup> All in all, Willemsen, in this author's view, quite convincingly refuted the picture of Geyl as an extremist in disguise and showed how his point of departure that generalized the role of Greater Netherlands activists within the Flemish movement, prompted his reading of Geyl's letters.

<sup>40</sup> Vos, 'Eierdans', 449.

<sup>41</sup> A. W. Willemsen, 'Geyl als grootnederlander in de jaren twintig', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xc (1975), 458–73, at p. 472.

<sup>42</sup> Willemsen, 'Geyl als grootnederlander in de jaren twintig', 472.

<sup>43</sup> Willemsen, 'Geyl als grootnederlander in de jaren twintig', 467–8.

Vos's attempt to justify his conclusions in a short response to Willemsen notwithstanding, the majority of scholars contributing to the debate did not follow his line of argumentation.<sup>44</sup> Ludo Simons, a literary scholar, librarian and conservator in Antwerp, argued that Vos had written his article out of a 'dogmatic apriorism', and historian Eric Defoort even deemed Vos's article an example of how *not* to conduct historical research.<sup>45</sup> Hendrik Borginon, who had been one of Geyl's contacts in the Flemish movement, also sided with Willemsen's interpretation of the correspondence, as became apparent in an article he published in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* on 23 March 1977.<sup>46</sup> The only scholar to side with Vos in his judgement was – not surprisingly – Lode Wils, who, in a televised debate about Pieter Geyl, endorsed Vos's claims.<sup>47</sup>

This first episode of the Utrecht–Leuven debate reveals the different agendas at play: while Vos used Geyl's correspondence to implicitly make a more substantial claim about the nature of the Flemish movement, this appropriation of Geyl's letters and notes was opposed by authors who had known Geyl personally. They cared less for the larger historiographical debates in which Vos participated, their primary concern was debunking the simplified interpretation that the Leuven historian produced of the versatile man who had initiated and enriched their professional careers. The fact that most other scholars backed their arguments seems to indicate that they had the stronger case. Because of this specific dynamic of the debate, however, a consensus was not reached; on the contrary, when Wils revived the debate in the 1980s, his verdict of Geyl became even more critical.

### ***The publication of Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl (1979–81) and afterwards***

The *Historikerstreit* over Pieter Geyl got a second impetus when, between 1979 and 1981, a new edition of Geyl's correspondence was published. This time, the series consisted of five volumes of correspondence between Geyl and the Utrecht historian Carel Gerretson (1884–1958), who throughout his lifetime had been one of Geyl's closest associates. The correspondence

<sup>44</sup> L. Vos, 'Weerwoord', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xci (1976), 80–81.

<sup>45</sup> L. Simons, 'Pieter Geyl en het Vlaams-Nationalisme, 1920–1940', *Handelingen der Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*, xxx (1976), 189–210; E. Defoort, 'Pieter Geyl en Vlaanderen: pro en kontra', *Ons Erfdeel*, xx (1977), 677–84.

<sup>46</sup> Defoort, 'Pieter Geyl en Vlaanderen', 679.

<sup>47</sup> This debate was broadcast in Aug. 1976 by Belgian Radio and Television Broadcast Company (*Belgische Radio en Televisieomroep*, BRT).

was edited by Pieter van Hees, who was gaining prestige as an expert on Geyl's archive, and George Puchinger, a Protestant historian who had been a student of Gerretson's. In the introduction to the first volume of the correspondence, entitled *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl* (*Correspondence Gerretson–Geyl*, 1979–81), Van Hees and Puchinger argued that an anthology of their exchanges would 'offer a unique insight into Dutch historiography during the more than forty years that Geyl and Gerretson were both active [as historians]'.<sup>48</sup> The correspondence received critical acclaim – Ernst Kossmann, for example, wrote a very positive review for the *BMGN*.<sup>49</sup>

Geyl and Gerretson had first met in 1911 at a Flemish student conference in Ghent and would, from then on, build a strong personal relationship around their shared leanings towards the Greater Netherlands idea. Along with Van Eyck, they tried to promote the Greater Netherlands idea within the Flemish movement, among other things by launching a cultural journal, although it was short-lived (*Leiding*, from 1930 to 1931).<sup>50</sup> Even when Geyl left London for Utrecht in 1936 (where Gerretson had been professor of colonial history and anthropology since 1925), their correspondence continued.

Ideologically, however, the two historians shared only their belief in the Greater Netherlands idea. Politically, Geyl was a left-wing liberal and, after the Second World War, became affiliated with the *Partij van de Arbeid* ('Party of Labour', PvdA), whereas Gerretson was very much shaped by his Christian upbringing and developed into an advocate of right-wing, nationalist policies. Even within his political party, the *Christenlijk Historische Unie* (Christian Historical Union, CHU), he was somewhat of a conservative outsider – in particular, his fierce opposition to the post-war decolonization of Indonesia was not appreciated by many of his party colleagues. In the 1930s he had even gravitated towards fascism, although for a brief period only, which resulted in a temporary cooling of his friendship with Geyl.<sup>51</sup>

For Lode Wils, who was increasingly working on the revision of the interwar history of the Flemish movement, this correspondence offered new material to, once and for all, show the world who Geyl had really been.

<sup>48</sup> '... zo verschaft ons de briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl een heel bijzondere blik in de geschiedbeoefening in Nederland gedurende de meer dan veertig jaren dat Gerretson en Geyl gezamenlijk actief waren'; *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger (5 vols, Baarn, 1979–81), i, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> E. H. Kossmann, 'De geschiedenis van een vriendschap', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, xcvi (1982), 216–24.

<sup>50</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, p. 324; G. Puchinger, 'Gerretson, Frederik Carel (1884–1958)', in *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, 3, ed. J. Charité et al. (The Hague, 1989), pp. 193–6.

<sup>51</sup> H. Langeveld, *Schipper naast God: Hendrikus Colijn, 1869–1944*, iii, 1933–1944 (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 27–30.

Without referring to the controversy Vos's 'walking on eggshells' article had triggered in the second half of the 1970s, Wils revived the position his former doctoral candidate had taken. In *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, a scholarly journal dedicated to the history of the Flemish movement, Wils argued that the publication of Geyl's correspondence with Gerretson proved that Geyl's real political motivation went even beyond the thesis Vos had formulated.<sup>52</sup> According to Wils, Geyl and Gerretson were Dutch imperialist agents, who, affected by the German expansionist *Flamenpolitik* propaganda and the imperialist tendencies of the Belgian department of the Dutch Foreign Office, had worked towards the disintegration of the Belgian state. Through his opposition to the Belgian–Dutch Treaty and the support of the extremist magazine *Vlaanderen*, Geyl had acted like a foreign, malevolent influence that sought to disrupt the internal structure of the Flemish movement and thus weaken the position of Flanders. Wils even went so far as arguing that Geyl did not mind that the Flemish movement had drifted towards fascism in the 1930s; only when he was taken hostage by the Germans in 1940 and recognized the demise of the Greater Netherlands idea would Geyl have switched his imperialist for (social-)democratic political positions.

This article was a sharply written, posthumous verdict on Geyl's political affiliations during the interwar period and it was only a matter of time before the Utrecht historians published a critical response. In a contribution to the same journal a year later, Van Hees and Willemsen angrily replied to Wils's 'conspiracy theories'.<sup>53</sup> As Willemsen had already done half a decade earlier in his reply to Vos, Van Hees and Willemsen criticized the eclectic treatment of Geyl's correspondence and showed how, in their view, Wils's impression of the Flemish and Greater Netherlands movements did not withstand scrutiny. Unlike Gerretson, Geyl had for example not been involved in the Flemish movement at the time of the First World War and could therefore not have been influenced by German *Flamenpolitik* propaganda. Wils, according to Van Hees and Willemsen, would also have deliberately ignored the internal divisions of the Flemish movement and the Belgian roots of the Greater Netherlands idea to paint the picture of a parasitic, exclusively foreign, Greater Netherlands movement. The two men argued that Geyl had indeed had a strong desire to intervene in Flanders and had in fact been advocating for unity within the Flemish movement (with the

<sup>52</sup> L. Wils, 'Gerretson, Geyl en Vos: Spanningen tussen de Grootnederlandse Beweging en de Vlaams-Nationalistische', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xli (1982), 95–120, at p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen, 'Leuvens recidivisme: Het gebruik door prof. dr. L. Wils van de briefwisselingen Geyl en Vlaanderen en Gerretson-Geyl', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xlii (1983), 44–58.

consequence that his pleas could sometimes be grasped as contradictory), yet he had never envisaged a weakened or disintegrated Flanders.<sup>54</sup>

In a brief response in the same volume of *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, Wils did not engage in a full refutation of his opponents' arguments, believing that his previous article had encompassed everything he wanted to say about Pieter Geyl. As mentioned earlier, the study of Geyl was only a small part of his revision of Flemish history – tellingly, the Utrecht–Leuven debate was only one of the many polemics Wils would become involved in during his academic career.<sup>55</sup> It is for this reason that he concluded the article with the announcement that he 'would prefer to dedicate [his] time to more constructive projects than such articles'.<sup>56</sup>

In the wake of this scholarly dispute two more articles were published on the matter. In a contribution to the Dutch historical journal *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, the Rotterdam historian and theorist of history Piet B. M. Blaas reflected upon the correspondence between Gerretson and Geyl and came to the conclusion that Wils's impression of Geyl was 'totally unfounded'.<sup>57</sup> In an article in the same journal that aimed at giving nuance to some of Blaas's impressions of Geyl, Hermann von der Dunk argued that the 'breakaway tendencies' that Wils perceived within the Greater Netherlands movement were of Belgian, not Dutch, origin, and that Geyl could come across as a radical because of his sharp style of conducting polemics, but that this certainly had not been the case when it came to his political motivation.<sup>58</sup> Von der Dunk also replied to other recent articles by Wils and Vos, in which the two had argued that Geyl's historiography concerning Belgium was prompted by political (that is, anti-Belgian) motives and was therefore unscholarly.<sup>59</sup> Von der Dunk argued that, apart from the fact that it would be rather difficult to distinguish between 'scholarly' and 'unscholarly'

<sup>54</sup> They borrow this interpretation from Ludo Simons: Simons, 'Pieter Geyl en het Vlaams-Nationalisme', 193.

<sup>55</sup> Wils, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie*, pp. 11–12; L. Grevers and L. Vos, 'Lode Wils: Historicus en hoogleraar', in L. Wils, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland: mythe en geschiedenis* (Leuven, 1994), pp. 28–35.

<sup>56</sup> 'Wat mij betreft, ik zou mijn tijd liever aan konstruktiever werk besteden dan aan artikels als dit': L. Wils, 'Nog eens: Gerretson, Geyl en Vos', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xlii (1983), 59–63, at p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> P. B. M. Blaas, 'Gerretson en Geyl: De doolhof der Grootnederlandse gedachte', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, xcvi (1983), 37–51.

<sup>58</sup> H. W. Von der Dunk, 'De Grootnederlandse gedachte geen tic van excentrieke heren', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, xcvi (1983), 207–13.

<sup>59</sup> L. Wils, 'De Grootnederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, lxi (1983), 322–66; L. Vos, 'Een kritische analyse van de Groot-Nederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xlii (1983), 176–92.

historiography, Wils's and Vos's representation of Geyl's historical works was strongly influenced by their conception that the Greater Netherlands idea was the offspring of Dutch Calvinist imperialism, a frame into which – even with the best will in the world – the agnostic Geyl could never fit.

Just as it did in the 1970s, the debate petered out after the 'Leuven' historians went under in a flood of critical responses. This time, however, the debate did not resurface. This was largely due to lack of new input: in the next three decades no new source material about Geyl was published. This changed only in 2009 when Geyl's autobiography was edited by Pieter van Hees, Leen Dorsman and Wim Berkelaar.<sup>60</sup> By then, however, the most prominent protagonists of the original polemic had either (almost) entered retirement (Lode Wils was eighty years old, Pieter van Hees seventy-two and Louis Vos sixty-four) or had passed away (Arie Willemsem in 2003).<sup>61</sup> The next generation of historians cared less about discussing Geyl's political motivations, for they were moving towards new research questions. Under the influence of the cultural and linguistic turns and constructivist concepts such as 'imagined communities', 'invention of tradition' and '*lieux de mémoire*' (sites of memory), historians of Flemish nationalism started to look at the more cultural and discursive aspects of the Flemish movement – this can be witnessed for example in the works of the historian Marnix Beyen.<sup>62</sup> Historians specifically concerned with Pieter Geyl have also shown less interest in his affiliation with the Flemish movement. The most prominent exception is Leuven historian Jo Tollebeek, whose writings on Geyl's affiliation with the Flemish movement to some extent echo the arguments of his former mentor Lode Wils.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef*.

<sup>61</sup> In a review of Geyl's autobiography, Wils made clear he had not changed his mind about Geyl's political affiliation during the interwar period: Lode Wils, 'De autobiografie van Pieter Geyl. Zelfbevestiging en openhartigheid', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, xlix (2010), 7–32.

<sup>62</sup> H. van Velthoven, 'Historiografie over de Vlaamse beweging: ideeëngeschiedenis, machtsstrijd, natievorming', in *De Tuin van Heden: Dertig jaar wetenschappelijk onderzoek over de hedendaagse Belgische samenleving*, ed. G. Vanthemse, M. De Metsenaere and J.-C. Burgelman (Brussels, 2007), 233–64, at pp. 250–54; Tollebeek, 'Het essay', 269; M. Beyen, *Held voor alle werk: De vele gedaanten van Tjil Uilenspiegel* (Antwerp/Baarn, 1998); M. Beyen, *Oorlog & Verleden: Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938–1947* (Amsterdam, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> This is most clear in his dissertation entry on Geyl: Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, pp. 321–71; see also J. Tollebeek, 'Begreep Geyl de Vlamingen?' *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (2010–11), pp. 67–80; J. Tollebeek, 'The use of history in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1945–65: Presentism and historicism in the work of Jan Romein, Pieter Geyl, and Leopold Flam', *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, xxxix (2015), 54–73, at p. 63.

Even though the two camps of historians have never reached a compromise, the debate has still affected our current understanding of Pieter Geyl in a positive way, simply due to the efforts the participants on all sides had to put in to substantiate their claims. And even though the 'Utrecht' historians, in this author's viewpoint, were arguing the stronger case, the 'Leuven' historians have justifiably drawn attention to the often contradictory and sometimes even suspicious positions Geyl took during the interwar period. This has even led to a significant concession by the 'Utrecht' historians, who have admitted that Geyl's Greater Netherlands idea was not solely cultural, but also fuelled by political ideas about the future of Belgium.<sup>64</sup> Leaving us with a less hagiographic and more realistic image of Pieter Geyl, the importance of this debate should therefore not be underestimated.

### ***Geyl between Utrecht and Leuven: concluding remarks***

When Pieter Geyl deemed history a discussion without end, he had in mind a rational, uncorrupted discussion: in their quest for finding the truth, historians should not be driven by dogma or doctrines but only by their motivation to show, as Leopold von Ranke put it, 'how things actually were.'<sup>65</sup> That this conception of the historical debate cannot be applied to the Utrecht–Leuven debates of the 1970s and 1980s has been argued in this chapter. Pieter Geyl's Greater Netherlands activism was not debated in an open and unbiased way by like-minded historians; on the contrary, Geyl's legacy was torn apart by two diverging agendas. On the one hand, the 'Utrecht' historians were driven by a very close relation to their late mentor: Willemsen and Von der Dunk had been students of Geyl's and Pieter van Hees had worked for him after Geyl's retirement. On the other hand, Vos and Wils were participating in their own *Historikerstreit*, namely that about the Flemish movement, and attempted to support their claims by means of analysing Geyl's correspondence. That a nuanced interpretation of Geyl's letters was being overshadowed by this bigger historiographical project perturbed them less than it did the Utrecht historians. Only when a new generation of historians entered the stage did the pressure ease.

Is the Utrecht–Leuven debate an exception to the rule that historical knowledge is being produced by historians who are free from any form of prejudice? It is the position of this author that it is not, for history is not only about impartial truth finding but also about signification and emancipation. History, namely, is not only about 'how things actually were'

<sup>64</sup> As was recognized by the Leuven historians themselves: Wils, 'Nog eens: Gerretson, Geyl en Vos', 62–3; Vos, 'Een kritische analyse', 177.

<sup>65</sup> Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin*, pp. 352–3.



but also about its appropriation: who owns history?<sup>66</sup> The Utrecht–Leuven debate, therefore, shows how, in modern democracies, history is not the reserve of a like-minded elite of liberal historians but should be a public good; it also demonstrates how the rules of the historical debate, therefore, will never be well defined. As a result, the historical debate can be intense, sometimes even painful, yet above all extremely relevant.

<sup>66</sup> This observation is borrowed from R. Ensels, 'Slag of stoot: Over het strijdtoneel van het historisch debat', *Ex Tempore*, xxxiv (2015), 87–95, at pp. 93–4.

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