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Benno Barnard et al. *How Can One Not Be Interested in Belgian History: War, Language and Consensus in Belgium Since 1830.* Gent: Academia Press, 2005. 152 pp. EUR 15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-382-0816-9.

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This slim volume results from the symposium "Belgium Revealed," held in April 2005 at Trinity College, Dublin, with the support of the Dutch and Belgian embassies in Dublin. It was produced to coincide with the 175th anniversary of Belgium and the 25th anniversary of the federal state. The ambassadors contributed an introduction delineating the themes of federalism, nationalism, consensus, and Belgitude. The biographies of the contributors show the immediate relevance of this debate as they are all cosmopolitan: mediating between various languages and cultures. All contributions were in English. Unfortunately a few mistakes still litter the book which should have been spotted by the editors such as "in" for "into," "is" for "has been" and "en" in a footnote for "and." These are minor errors but they should have been noticed and corrected.

The first essay is an overview by Tony Judt, "Is There a Belgium?" originally published in *The New York Review of Books* (1999). The Belgium described is artificial: a corrupt and weak state divided by linguistic and political pillars, federalized with no real identity. This artificiality and lack of identity is key to Sophie de Schaepdrijver's interesting and solid article on the image of Belgium during the First World War. As she makes clear, the uncertain identity of Belgium and its creation was crucial to wartime rhetoric. While Germany saw Belgium as an artifact, part of an international conspiracy to encircle Germany, and exploited linguistic divisions with its *Flamenpolitik*, Britain saw Belgium as part and parcel of the system of international law that it was bound to uphold.

Economic development and collaboration in both world wars further increased division leading to the current situation of three regions, three language communities and ten provinces. Judt calls this an uneven quilt of authorities, the impact of which is clearest in Brussels as shown by Geert van Istendael. In his paper, "In Brussels the Word Language has No Singular," van Istendael describes the anomalous position of Brussels within Belgium as a bilingual independent civic region with a multicultural immigrant society. Brussels's problems are elucidated: the integration of francophone North Africans, the chaos of civic planning, and the linguistic barrier preventing civic expansion.

While Flemish prosperity has removed linguistic resentment and the pillars have faded as politics, religion, and language become less entwined, there is less sense of community between Flemings and Walloons. Judt's observation is backed up by Martine van Berlo's own contribution of her family history set against the backdrop of Belgian history: from a mix of Walloon and Fleming to a bilingual generation, involved in both World Wars and the Flemish movement, to a current generation, divided

between Wallonia and Flanders. When Judt concludes finally that, "If Belgium disappeared, many Belgians might not even notice," it is unclear even to him what precisely this means. Is Belgium thus a model of postnationalism or a stateless society racked by scandal and globalization?

The last and perhaps the most intriguing comment is that of Marc Reynebeau, editor of the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* and Belgium's answer to media historians such as Simon Schama or David Starkey. His analysis of Belgian historiography, "Belgian Quixotry, Historiography and Society in the Quest for Consensus," shows how Belgian historians have avoided controversy by ignoring topics such as the Congo, collaboration in World War II, the misery of the 1840s in rural Flanders, or the Brabant Revolution of the 1780s. Losers and outsiders are both ignored. His explanation for this rests on the notion of serenity; Belgium as a divided nation survives by ignoring its internal conflicts. From this viewpoint, Belgian politics and culture are marked by consensus and compromise to ensure strength in unity. However, in practice, this has led to elitist politics without accountability or transparency and a lack of will to tackle contentious problems.

This booklet contains many incisive and trenchant observations on Belgian society, politics, culture and identity which are pertinent for the wider field of Belgian history but there are some startling lacunae. For a book on Belgitude, it is bizarre that no Walloon perspective is included. All the contributors take a distinctly Dutch speaking perspective. Furthermore, for a book purporting to show the importance of Belgian history, it is startling that only one professional academic historian of Belgium has contributed. The historical context given is broadbrush and aimed more at an interested general reading public than at scholars. Despite the critical tone of the essays, no one queries the starting point of 1830 which is surprising as beginning in 1830 automatically assumes the artificiality of the project of Belgium, whereas if one looks back into the eighteenth century, there are clear attempts to write national Belgian histories as shown by T. Verschaffel's *De hoed en de hond* (1998) as well the ephemeral United Belgian States of 1790. A little perspective works wonders.

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