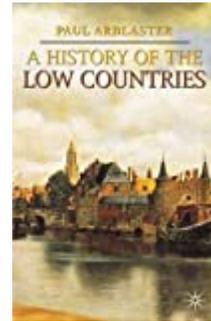




Paul Arblaster. *A History of the Low Countries.* Palgrave Essential Histories Series
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xiv + 298 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4039-4828-1; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-4827-4.



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A Vision of the Golden Delta

This book is described as the first historical survey written in English of the Benelux countries, a claim which rings true. This “blindspot” (p. ix) indicates, as the author states, an unjustified neglect of the Low Countries in Anglophone literature. Its competitors as general textbooks either cover a smaller field such as Jonathan Israel’s *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (1995) and B. A. Cook’s *Belgium: A History* (2002), or are translations from Dutch such as *The Low Countries: History of the Northern and Southern Netherlands* (1987) by J. A. Kossmann-Putto and E. H. Kossmann and *History of the Low Countries* (1999) edited by J. C. H. Blom and E. Lamberts. Paul Arblaster’s remit was to write a brief yet readable monograph for a general audience and here his status as a non-historian working in a related academic field seems to have stood him in good stead—his Oxford doctorate was on the press in the seventeenth-century Habsburg Netherlands.

The first sentence characterizes the Low Countries as “‘artificial’ countries” (p. 1). Indeed, the issue of nations is a thorny subject in the Low Countries, especially given their shared past, justifying the decision to

focus on Benelux as a whole. However, given the exclusion of Luxembourg by Kossmann-Putto and Kossmann as well as by Blom and Lamberts, its inclusion here deserves more comment. It may seem inconsistent to ignore it as the Duchy was held in personal union with the Netherlands until 1890, but singling Luxembourg out for special attention raises the question of why the same should not be done for the Duchy of Limburg, which similarly has a minority language. If the reason is the division of Limburg between the modern states of Belgium and the Netherlands, as Luxembourg also was for a long time, this implies a political teleology which should be analyzed. Taking a cue from Blom and Lamberts, part of Arblaster’s theme is that of unity and diversity. The advantage of his work over their lengthier tome is that in a single-authored monograph there is the opportunity to provide a coherent interpretation of Netherlandic history. The Low Countries, in his view, are a place for the appearance of western European trends and foreign intervention. In one paragraph, Arblaster uses the words “exchange,” “interchange,” “marketplace,” “intersection,” “microcosm,” and “crossroads” to distinguish the role of Benelux in western Europe (p. 9).

After a brief but incisive introduction, the book is divided into six chapters of roughly equal length: “From Pagans to Crusaders, 57 BC to AD 1100,” “Patterns of Power and Piety, 1100-1384,” “The Low Countries United and Divided, 1384-1609,” “From Delftware to Porcelain, 1609-1780,” “The Rise and Fall of the Liberal Order, 1776-1914,” and “World Wars and World Peace, 1914-2002.” This division is slightly unusual: whilst the Romans and Franks are often bundled together, the merger of the Burgundian period with the Revolt of the Netherlands offers an interesting perspective where the violent formation of the Burgundian realm is mirrored by the sudden divisions in the later sixteenth century. Similarly, the compression of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries avoids the usual temptation to linger over the glories of the Dutch *Gouden Eeuw*. This organization is a rejoinder to trends favoring the postwar era over the vibrant earlier periods (p. ix), but sadly deprives us of his thoughts upon the recent era. The period from the 1970s to 2002 is dispatched within three pages, with little said about recent political developments or the interest of modern Dutch-language literature.

There are no real errors of interpretation, an impressive feat given the amount of material and the complexity of some of the issues discussed. One mistake, which I would urge correcting in a later edition, occurs in the first map (p. xi). The map includes shading in Friesland, presumably to indicate the extent of Frisian, which the key informs us is the “Approx. language area of Belgium.” Otherwise, the minor mistakes that have slipped through the net do not materially affect the overall picture: it is generally thought that the University of Leuven was founded in 1425 and not 1426 (p. 106), and not all the provinces of the Austrian Netherlands, excepting the always exceptional Luxembourg, had joined the United States of Belgium by the end of January 1790; Limburg did not accede to the union until March 8, 1790 (p. 170).

Arblaster’s writing is fluent and enjoyable. The clarity with which he explains quite complex issues such as Arminianism is enviable, but sometimes the tone is rather breathless due to the density of the material being covered, as during the account of the medieval principalities or nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics. In the former case, the list of rulers at the back is a splendid aid. He spans a wide field from material culture under the Romans; to medieval piety; the glories of Flemish art, literature and music; and Dutch modern popular culture without the political narrative faltering. He has a lively style allowing him to handle traditional accounts and modern preoccupations with subtle flair: the familiar figures of

Desiderius Erasmus, Andreas Vesalius, Gerardus Mercator and Christophe Plantin appear alongside Philip II, the Duke of Alva and Cardinal de Granvelle in the sixteenth century but Arblaster also throws in observations drawn from a Frisian farmer’s journal (pp. 122-123). This juggling trick is deftly done on many levels; thus, whilst discussing the manifold achievements of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, he does not forget the existence of the independent princely bishopric of Liege. His use of contemporary material is sparse, given the need for it to be readily accessible for an Anglophone audience, but judicious. The targeted audience is clearly British given the selection of quotes from Geoffrey Chaucer, William Caxton, William Shakespeare, John Mundy and William Temple among others. Arblaster also has a keen wit which is woven throughout the narrative: from his comment that “the eleventh century saw a great demand for poverty” (p. 44), to the note that the Meir (the scene of inflammatory sixteenth-century preaching in Antwerp) is now an expensive square in Belgian “Monopoly” (p. 118), to the observation that Isabella’s promise not to change her underwear until Ostend was taken resulted in a shade of yellow being christened in her honor (p. 130).

One possible problem is the attention paid to the international dimension. Occasionally this felt more like a history of international movements and diplomacy as they affected the Low Countries. For instance, the Roman era is marked by an extensive discussion of Rome’s policy based on Caesar and Tacitus. The analysis of the coming of Christianity or the Viking raids characterizes the Low Countries as responding to outside waves of influence, whereas the medieval period is remarkable for the constant meddling of France, the Holy Roman Empire and England. This sensitivity to external influence permeates the book and might explain the questionable characterization of Henri van der Noot as an Anglo-American Dutch Patriot, rather than as a Brabantine lawyer (p. 169). Yet this same international awareness clearly is a key feature of this book, which covers the often scantily treated topics of emigration from the Low Countries, the creation of the colonial empires and their dissolution, as well as more recent immigration into the Low Countries.

For the available space and the ambitious scale, Arblaster has pulled off a hat-trick. My sole regret is that, given the sharpness of his observatory powers, he did not write more. Certainly as an introductory text to the general history of the Low Countries, it is far more extensive and nuanced than Kossmann-Putto and Kossmann and livelier and more coherent than Blom and Lamberts. The

suggestions for further reading are up-to-date, should be readily available in a good university library, and are all accessible works in English. This will be a valuable addition to reading lists for students and worthy of recommendation to those general readers who wish to learn more about the rich heritage of the Low Countries and its impact on modern Benelux.

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