

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON

Two Poems

Introduction: *Watersnood*

In the night of January 31st – February 1st 1953 a spring tide combined with a severe storm from the North West resulted in massive flooding of large tracts of land below sea level in the Dutch provinces of Zeeland, Noord-Brabant and Zuid-Holland, when the dikes were unable to withstand the rapidly rising sea water. The results were catastrophic: more than 1800 people and numerous farm animals died, and more than 100,000 people lost their homes, farmland and belongings. The event is known in Dutch as the *Watersnoodramp*, also known as the *Beatrixvloed* or *Sint Ignatiusvloed*.

Living in a small country partly below sea level, Dutch culture is marked by the never-ending struggle against the sea. Successive governments had been well aware of weaknesses in the defense systems, mainly consisting of dunes and dikes, long before the *Watersnoodramp*, but other areas had been prioritized in the years immediately before and after World War II. The *Afsluitdijk*, which protected the coastal areas of the large sea inlet known as the *Zuiderzee*, had been finished in 1932, creating a new lake called the *IJsselmeer*. After the War, various projects were initiated in the vulnerable South-Western areas of Zeeland, Noord-Brabant and Zuid-Holland, but the sea arms *Grevelingen* and *Oosterschelde* were still entirely open to the sea, and the land was protected only by dikes that proved too low and too weak to withstand the storm.

The *Watersnoodramp* of 1953 is a seminal event in Dutch history. The event is commemorated every year on February 1st. It has created many iconic images, including the famous one of Queen Juliana in wading boots inspecting the damage. It has inspired many literary, scholarly and other creative works, including novels, poetry, musicals, songs, dissertations, essays and memoirs. Perhaps most importantly, it was the impetus for a new version of the ambitious Delta Plan, intended to decrease the amount of coastal area open to the sea by closing off a number of the sea arms in the South-Western part of the country. The immense project was finally finished in 1997.

These two original poems by Christopher Levenson commemorate the important events of 1953 and their immediate aftermath, making them very real for an English-speaking audience.

Inge Genee,

Associate Editor.

ANNIVERSARY

Strapped into Calvinist certainties, winter returns
to Over-Flakkee, Schouwen-Duiveland:
despite causeways and dykes
the contours of sea and land are constantly
re-inventing themselves, perspectives never stand still.
Greenhouses, church spires, barns, a line of poplars --
there's always something breaking up the horizon
into manageable lots. Today every farmhouse strains
with flags for the Queen's visit,
where fifty years ago her mother waded in thigh boots
through the mud of flooded villages.

Beyond, in the open fields, those memories
are embedded in water, long channels scooped by the sea
where the dykes broke. Otherwise
in Bruinisse, Oude Tonge, Oosterland
tranquil suburbia, as though it had never happened.
With the polders clean, their furrows etched in snow,
all is in order again.

REMEMBERING THE FLOOD

That first day in '53,
on the ferry from Hellevoetsluis,
cramped against hammering metal, hot diesel fumes,
we watched one horizon swaying and another
emerge out of the mist, and slowly grew accustomed
to a new world of grey water as the almost sunken island
of Overflakkee floated alongside. We clambered on trucks
and were driven in the half-dark along dykes
through Middelharnis to Oude Tonge. Even two months after
the sea's bombardment, it was a war zone:
roofspars of houses exposed to the looting wind,
the polders awash with debris
of absent families, smashed farms. At the relief camp
we cleaned bricks, rebuilt pigsties.
November that year
with the last breach repaired, the pumps beginning,
I returned to other villages, Dreischor, Nieuwerkerk,--
the names blur -- cleaning out homes
that reeked from nine months under salt water, disinterring
from under the bed stone bottles of Dutch gin
next to the family Bible, scraping the walls free of sea-pox,
scouring wells until the winter made the sand
too hard for digging. And in the village
only the mayor and a handful of labourers remained,
and the police, working all hours to bring us fresh water.
There were times we escaped
to Zierikzee or the dunes but for the most part
where now wide causeways run we were marooned behind sandbags,
abiding the onset of winter.
I was nineteen and this my first close look
at human misery, my total immersion.



Queen Juliana visiting the flooded area



Horse and wagon amid the floods